

Blake Steidler

KILL List
Jamaal ✓
Tyrone
Wiggles
Guard
Tony

Fire
Booby
Trap

Tyrone
Guard

**When
Nightmares
Become
Dreams**

When Nightmares Become Dreams

By Blake Steidler

Prologue

Thirty Nine year old Vincent Young finally got to see his true self in the mirror. Everything looked so different to him because the mirrors in prison he was used to seeing were scratched and opaque. What he saw looked nothing like what he imagined.

It was 1:30 pm and business was slow at the truck stop where Vincent was staring at himself in the mirror while all alone in the mens restroom. Only ninety minutes had passed since his release from federal prison where he had just spent 10 years of his life. Vincent pulled his face closer to the mirror to examine the scars on his face he had acquired during the duration of his prison sentence. The voice was with him now and he began to laugh hysterically. His life was ruined now and they had just made a big mistake of letting him out. Big mistake.

Just as Vincent turned on the hot water to wash his hands an elderly man dressed in a white Polo shirt and white golfer's cap walked in the restroom and over to the urinal. Vincent remained oblivious to the old man and continued laughing hysterically into the mirror. His eye patch over his left eye and the hideous scars on his face truly made him

look like a monster. He had no idea the old timer at the urinal was staring right at him. Curiosity struck the golfer and he could take it no more. He felt compelled to speak his mind.

" Freak!" Hissed the old man from the urinal.

Vincent pretended not to hear him and calmly shut off the water then walked over to the automated paper towel dispenser. While the old man continued urinating he decided to holler out once more. He was one of those guys that was so old he often got away with obnoxious comments. When you get that old you just can't help yourself but push your luck.

" Freak!" He shouted a little bit louder this time.

Vincent didn't so much as turn his head and began waving his hand in front of sensor of the paper towel dispenser. He immediately became infatuated with the paper towel dispenser and waved his hand continuously while hoarding up paper towels and wadding them into a ball.

The old man zipped up his fly then walked over to the sink. Vincent nonchalantly approached the old man and stood with him face to face.

" Excuse me sir, I couldn't hear what you were saying earlier."

The old man twitched his eyes then grinned wryly.

" I said you're a fre-"

Suddenly, abruptly, Vincent grasped the golfer's throat firmly with his left hand and pinned him up against the wall.

The sudden movement caused the white cap to fall to the floor and the old timer went cross eyed as he tried to shout for help. Before he could wail, the freak's right hand was cramming wadded up paper towels into the golfer's mouth until his gums bled. The old man tried to pull the hand off of his throat but the grip got tighter than he could ever grip a Lynx golf club. More wads of paper towels got shoved into his throat until all movement from the golfer ceased and his eyes reached tranquility.

Finally all movement from the golfer ceased and his eyes became tranquil. Vincent let go and the doted old chap fell straight to the floor. He scurried to pick him off the ground then drug him into an empty toilet stall and propped him up on the toilet seat. Quickly he locked the door to the stall then slid out from underneath it. He then washed the little bit of blood off his hands then returned to the paper towel dispenser.

He punched the dispenser until the nickle sized pyro sensor dangled from the machine. The pyro sensor got ripped away from the machine and placed into his right pocket. Vincent smiled as he thought of all the evil things he could do with the sensor. Perhaps it would be the perfect piece he needed to build his bomb. The freak chortled with excitement and then left the restroom remembering to stifle his smile on his way out.

" What took you so long? Look, I got you your favorite, Boardwalk fries." Said a lady in a long dark brown dress holding fries in a paper cup.

It was his very own mother. Too many years had passed for her to comprehend her oldest son's odd behavior.

" Oh, I had to do a number two." He replied without a tremor in his voice.

He was getting good at hiding things and lying was becoming easy. Theresa was Vincent's mother and a devout Christian. She had sandy blond curly hair and looked good for her age of sixty. She had gone her entire life without ever once touching alcohol or even a cigarette. Nothing other than wrinkle-free smiles would ever permeate her face. Her pretty blue eyes radiated true happiness.

" The apple cider vinegar is over there with the condiments so help yourself." She said handing over the fries.

Vincent swiped the fries from his mother and went straight for the vinegar at the counter when he noticed his hands shaking incessantly. He quickly realized that his hands weren't shaking because he just killed a man, his hands always shook when he was extremely famished.

The bottle of vinegar was empty by the time he was finished dousing his fries. He immediately began shoving large handfuls of fries into his mouth without ever chewing them. He could feel the eyes of the people watching him with utmost fascination. they'd never seen anybody eat so fast.

" Oh, you have to excuse him." Said Theresa, " He's just been released from prison." She whispered softly while cupping her mouth.

Within a minute the entire bucket of fries was gone. Vincent tossed the empty bucket onto the floor and beckoned his mother to follow him out the door. Theresa picked up the bucket, threw it in the trash, and followed after

him while apologizing on her way out. She didn't criticize him for littering because she knew he had problems. After all, he had just lost 10 years of his life for a crime he didn't even commit.

It started to rain as they walked out to Theresa's 92 Geo Prism. Prison had dramatically changed Vincent. It had changed him so much that he had already forgotten what he had done in the Men's room. His thoughts were of killing, and only killing. He was going to see to it that the whole world would pay for his unrighteous incarceration. Vincent hunkered into his mother's little brown car and was greeted by a strange odor. It didn't take him long to figure out what he was smelling was the spoor of Lilly, the family dog.

" I know you hate to wear your seat belt but can you please do it for me?" Asked Theresa.

Vincent pretended not to hear his mother and stared at the glove box as if he was stuck in some kind of trance. She turned her head to look at him but all she could see was his left eye patch. There was no way she could try to determine what was really bothering him. She reluctantly started up the car and put it in gear. They were off like a herd of turtles.

Vincent really hated the way she drove the car. She constantly shifted before the RPM gage could even reach 1000 RPMs. She had always insisted it was a great way to save gas and had been shifting that way for years. Even though they were only 45 minutes away from home, nothing seemed to look familiar to Vincent. What used to be farmland was now covered with gas stations and restaurants. There seemed to be new houses and neighborhoods everywhere. The freak reveled in the silent moment. The sound of silence was something he hadn't

experienced in 10 long years.

The freak's glorious moment of solace came to an abrupt end when his mother broke the silence.

" You know your sister can't wait to see you."

" I'll bet." He replied sarcastically.

" No seriously, she thinks about you all the time. She just never found the time to write."

" Yeah, whatever."

Vincent wasn't really paying attention to his mother. Instead he had his eyes fixated on an oncoming tractor trailer still looming in the distance.

" Just wait until you see how cute her kids turned out." She said while resting her hand on the bottom of the steering wheel.

Is this lady ever going to shut up? Vincent thought to himself while clenching his teeth. The tractor trailer was getting closer now and still had his attention. Theresa droned on.

" Yeah, the oldest one is already playing softball." She continued.

The freak's nerves were shot. He had just gotten out of jail and all he craved was a little silence. Was that too much to ask? The big rig was looking bigger as it moved towards them. An idea popped into his mind. A head on collision with a truck that size would surely put both him and his mother

out of their misery. A quick jerk of the wheel would give him the perpetual silence he yearned for. The big rig was only 500 ft. in front of them now. Vincent ever so slowly lifted his left hand from his knee and shifted his eye towards the steering wheel. Theresa remained oblivious.

" And you know that your brother is doing really well with law enforcement."

The freak had 4 seconds to decide whether or not he wanted to jerk the wheel and kill them both. He inched his left hand closer to the steering wheel and smiled. Theresa continued to babble.

" The dog will be really happy to see..... What are you doing!?"

Vincent quickly removed his hand from the steering wheel.

" Oh, I just wanted to pet this fuzzy steering wheel cover, where did you get this at?"

" Your uncle got it for me for Christmas. Doesn't it feel neat?"

" I guess so."

The big rig sped past them splashing a big splurt of dirty,oily, rain. Even though he wanted to kill himself he just couldn't do it. After all, he had people to kill, lots of people.

The only thing that looked the same in his parents

neighborhood was the house itself. The thirty year old two story rancher stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the rest of the neighborhood. Other houses had renovated and built all sorts of additions onto their homes. But his parents house looked exactly the same from when it was built 30 years ago. The only new addition to the house was lots of bird excrement decorating the whole outside of the home. The white droppings caused the rickety black shutters and mailbox to resemble something looking like a zebra.

Vincent was the first to go inside where Lilly awaited him at the top of the steps. She was wagging her brown and black tail as if she had the power to shake it off if she wanted to. The family dog wasted no time pouncing Vincent and licking his disfigured face. The freak couldn't really discern whether or not Lilly remembered him because she always did this to everybody that walked through the door.

Despite the exterior of the house deteriorating, everything on the inside of the house looked almost new. Theresa never had a job growing up so she had all the time in the world to keep the place clean.

" You can put your release papers on the kitchen table and your father will take a look at them when he gets home from work." Said his mother.

Vincent placed the manila packet on the kitchen table then walked over to the living room adjacent to the kitchen. The dog jumped up beside him while he sat on the sofa then nestled her snout into his lap. Theresa remained in the kitchen and began making eggnog, one of Vincent's favorite beverages.

With just the two of them there the freak could once

more revel in the peace and quiet while he kicked back and petted the dog. It felt good to sit on a sofa, too good perhaps. No jail in the world had sofas for inmates to roost on. With only the sound of the distant stirring of eggnog, Vincent found he could finally relax, but that lasted all of thirty seconds.

" Our God is an awesome God..... He reins from heaven above...."

Vincent felt his heart rate get jacked up almost immediately. *No way! This couldn't possibly be so. Was Theresa singing? How dare she have the audacity to ruin his solace!*

" Our God is an awesome God He reins from heaven above....."

Sure enough Theresa was singing while she stirred eggnog and that was enough to push Vincent over the edge. He rose up from the sofa and tip toed into the kitchen undetected. Theresa had her back to him while she hunched over the stove and stirred.

On the counter was a paring knife that just seemed to be crying out to him.

" Over here buddy, try using me, I'll shut the old lady up." Said the knife.

Vincent truly believed the knife was talking to him until he recognized the voice. It was the same Italian voice he remembered from the time he was placed in solitary confinement for the first time.

Vincent grabbed the knife and held it behind his back as he tip-toed up behind his mother. Theresa was completely oblivious to what he was doing and continued to stir the eggnog.

" Our God is an awesome God..... He reins from heaven above...."

The freak was now standing directly behind his mother. He firmly held the knife in his right hand just inches from her throat without her knowing. She continued to sing completely unaware.

" With wisdom power and lo.... What the?"

Theresa jumped like she'd just seen a mouse. Her jumpiness almost caused the blade to puncture the side of her neck. Before she could catch a glimpse of the blade, Vincent quickly retreated the knife behind his back and out of her site.

" Vince! You scared the buggars out of me!"

" Sorry mom, I just wanted to see what you were doing."

" I'm stirring eggnog honey."

The freak carefully walked backward and placed the knife back on the counter without her noticing.

" This eggnog takes 20 minutes to stir, do you want to pitch in?"

" Sure, why not?"

Vincent grabbed the ladle and began to stir in perfect rhythm. Prison had blemished his mental stability and when the freak looked down he was in shock.

He wasn't stirring eggnog, he was stirring blood.

CHAPTER 1

10 YEARS AGO

The long beautiful mahogany table looked to be the only thing of value in the room. Of course that was only if you overlooked the coffee stains put there by the careless members of the school board. They all had their eyes fixated on Vincent with utmost curiosity. Nobody fully understood why he was here. The head chairman was the first to break the silence without ever looking up from the table.

" This is an impressive resume Mr.Young."

The portly chairman kept his gaze on the resume lying before him as he talked to Vincent. It appeared he had no interest in taking his eyes off of the resume. The resume vaunted relentlessly of Vincent's crowning achievements.

"We all just don't seem to understand Mr.Young, you really have it made over there at St.Mary's. Why do you wish to take a pay cut to come teach at our school?"

There were snickers throughout the room as if it was time for Vince to answer the million dollar question. He had everything over at St.Mary's Catholic Middle School and his students loved him dearly. Why should he take a pay cut to come teach kids from Baltimore city that were probably going to amount to nothing?

Vincent remained steadfast in his chair and admired the view from the window of Inner Harbor. It seemed to be the only thing nice about the school. He cleared his throat before he could answer.

" I know this sounds a bit ludicrous but life has been very good to me, heck, that's why I served in the Marines. I want to make a difference in this world and in these kids lives."

The school board committee looked astonished. School teachers were constantly going on strike all the time asking for more money and here was Vincent, a well respected school teacher from St.Mary's, wanting to come teach at their cruddy school.

Vincent's sincere answer to their question quieted the giggly crowd. It was now their turn to talk. Mr.Thomas, the middle school principal, loosened up his checkered tie, leaned forward, and placed his rigid hands on the table.

" Mr.Young, let me tell you something. I have been a principal at this school for 8 years and do not know of one teacher here that is content. These kids are from the inner city and can be a real handful."

Vincent straightened up in his chair.

" Well, I don't have any kids of my own but my wife and I are planning to have some soon. I just seem to have a way with kids."

Snickers quickly erupted throughout the room and the lady in the pink dress nearly choked on her cup of water. The portly chairman raised his hand signaling them to stop laughing. He quickly took over the conversation.

" We're not trying to intimidate you Mr.Young. A lot of our teachers have had bad experiences with the children. In fact, we would love to take you on board. What do you guys think?"

Everybody nodded with approval and the wiry man in the corner even gave a thumbs up. That ended the interview and everyone got up from their seats to shake Vincent's hand. He was now officially a teacher at a middle school that would change his life forever.

CHAPTER 2

He could feel the sun beating down on the nape of his neck as he walked through the Terrance Middle School parking lot out to his 93 dark green Saturn. He knew he made the right choice by taking a pay cut to influence the lives of the Baltimore city kids. Everything felt right but it wasn't. Vincent had no idea what these kids that he thought were so innocent had in store for him. He would be the best math teacher those 7th graders would ever come across. He got into his car and fastened his seatbelt then briefly mulled about some things of his past. When he was in the 7th grade he found a way to get expelled. His grandmother had given him a radio controlled car which he took apart and figured out how to detonate firecrackers by remote control. He had

hid a circuit board, antenna, and firecrackers under the stair well and then detonated them. It was just a harmless prank but the school was very upset. Fortunately for Vince, Theresa had paid to have his juvenile record sealed. These thoughts from his childhood were quickly forgotten as he pulled out of the parking lot.

When he walked through the threshold of his duplex apartment he could smell the pork roast in the oven. Cindy, his wife, was in the den surfing the internet.

" Honey is that you?"

" Yes babe. I got the job." replied Vinny

Cindy came out to greet her husband.

" You look terrific." She said, " But I think you look better without the glasses."

Vincent removed the thick black framed glasses from his face. He looked like a young sharp cunning lawyer on his very first case. He stood 6ft. 4in. tall, 195 pounds of lean muscle, and sported neatly combed dark brown hair. His eyes were piercing and meaningful and desiring nothing but virtuous success. Cindy caressed his baby smooth face thanks to the shick Quatro, a razor with 4 blades.

" You look pretty good yourself." He said then kissed his wife on the lips.

Cindy had short blond hair and big puckered lips that could suck the life right out of you. Vinny liked women with big lips because they made better kissers. After they were finished smooching Cindy set the plates and they enjoyed

the pork roast dinner. Cindy made a lot of money at being a dentist so they were going to do just fine. They celebrated Vinny's new job with a bottle of Merlot and some chocolate mousse. Life was good to the Young's and it could only get better, or so they thought.

CHAPTER 3

Vincent stood in front of the chalkboard dressed for success. He was wearing his pink tie given to him from his wife as a birthday gift. Something in the classroom seemed way out of kilter. He was told that he would be teaching a full class but he noticed 7 desks were empty. Vinny recounted the class one more time. 12-13-14-15..... Where was the other 7? He patiently waited for the din to settle but it never got quiet. One kid was reading a porn magazine hidden inside a Men's Health magazine. A red headed girl was listening to a personal CD player. To no surprise, the majority of the class was African American. The floor tiles looked drab and in need of repair. The whole entire classroom was a mess. Vincent walked over and snatched the porn magazine out of the student's hands.

" Hey man what gives?" Pouted the boy

" Not in my class." replied Vinny and threw it in the garbage.

He walked back over to the front of the chalkboard and cupped his hands over his mouth.

" Can I have your attention please?" He shouted through his cupped hands.

The noise dropped a little but there were still people

talking.

" Does anyone know where the other seven students are?"

The class just giggled and went about their business.

" Okay fine then, we'll just have to start without them."

He grabbed the roster and called the names out one by one to check who was there. After he finished checking off the names of the 15 students that were there he tossed the roster on his desk and cleared his throat.

" Good afternoon, my name is Mr.Young and I'm your new math teacher. How many of you think you will like this class?"

At first nobody raised their hand. Vinny scanned the room once more and noticed that a short chunky girl wearing purple lipstick had surreptitiously raised her hand.

" So what's your name?" He asked her.

The girl looked around the room for approval before she spoke. The other kids just rolled their eyes at her.

" Natasha."

" So what do you want to be when you grow up Natasha?"

" I'm going to be a lawyer." She replied with confidence.

" Hey that's great. Most of this class might need you

some day. Class, I'm joking, you'll all turn out fine."

But the class didn't think he was so funny. In fact, one student in the back flipped him the finger but Vinny pretended not to notice. Instead he kept his spirits up. This class was going to be challenging but he liked a good challenge.

" So who wants to help me pass out these text books?"

This time nobody raised their hand.

" Okay then."

Vinny took a look at the text books which were covered in dust.

" Did your last teacher ever hand these things out?"

The students just laughed. The red headed girl in the second row removed her headset to watch the funny man in the pink tie try to teach the class. Vinny opened up a text book and skimmed through the pages. Some of the pages were stuck together with chewing gum and the other pages had obscene drawings on them. Vincent passed out the text books anyway.

" Before we get started can anyone tell me what pi equals?"

This time a kid sitting in the back and wearing sunglasses raised his hand.

" Yes,you, what's your name?"

" Jamaal." He quickly replied.

" Nice name Jamaal. Can you tell me what pi equals?"

" Yeah, it equals pumpkin, cherry, or apple."

The class chortled with excitement and Jamaal had a sly grin on his face.

" Oh, I see we have a wise guy in the back. But can anybody tell me the real answer?"

Natasha raised her hand.

" Yes, Natasha?"

" Is it 3.14?"

Whew! What a relief. Vinny thought to himself, *At least one student has half a brain.*

" You are correct. Lets turn to page 10."

The class finally settled down and some of the students were showing him some respect. For the remainder of the class Vinny went over some easy basic stuff. Natasha seemed to be the only one that knew anything. Near the end of class Vinny felt optimistic about his new class. These were good students that lacked an education. But Vinny was wrong, dead wrong. Soon these kids would figure out a way to destroy his entire life.

CHAPTER 4

Felix Roberts wasn't just any ordinary boy. He was

more than your average trouble maker. In fact, Felix Roberts was a sadistic fool without a conscience. But nobody ever called Felix by his real name because everybody liked his nickname " Wiggles". Wiggles sat on a trash can in the alley with his three friends Tony, Jamaal, and Tyrone. All four of them had something in common. They all had Vincent Young for a math teacher. Unfortunately they all seemed to hate him. Especially Wiggles.

These boys were only 12 or 13 years old and already smoking marijuana. They did this every Saturday afternoon in the back alley behind Remo's Pizza shop. Wiggles jumped up from the trash can and ripped off his shirt. He was covered with bruises all over his chest.

" Do you see this homies? I didn't get this from playing ball."

The other three gaped with astonished looks on their faces. Tony walked over to take a closer look.

" Yowsie! Did your old man do that?" Asked Tony.

The knife handle sticking out of Wiggles right pocket glistened in the sun.

" As a matter of fact he did. And we have our math teacher to thank."

This time Jamaal jumped into the conversation.

" What exactly did Mr.Young do?" He asked

" That cracker ratted me out!" Declared Wiggles

" Why? Because you always skip class?"

" Yeah can you believe that? Mr.Jacobs never cared who showed up to class. Why did Mr.Jacobs quit?"

The other three boys just shrugged their shoulders. Tyrone took one more hit from the joint and then passed it to Tony.

" I think we're all getting fed up with this teacher that thinks he can keep confiscating our toys." Said Tyrone before exhaling, " How exactly should we deal with this? I've already lost two personal CD players and Tony has yet to get his game boy back."

Wiggles pulled the hunting knife out of his pocket and proudly brandished it for them all to see.

" I say I cut the cracker to pieces."

All four of them laughed an evil laugh and high fived each other. The marijuana joint was all smoked up. Tyrone pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. He then put his hand on Wiggles' shoulder.

" Look man, you can't kill the teacher or you'll go to jail so you'll have to think of something else."

Something else, something else..... Suddenly Wiggle's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

" I've got it! I think I have a plan!"

Everyone listened intently to hear what he had to say.

" Do you guys remember that cartoon South Park?"

They all nodded their heads.

" Remember the episode where the kids get fed up with their parents and find a way to get rid of them by claiming they've been molested?"

" Yeah, that was a funny episode." Piped up Jamaal, " Soon all of their parents were in jail."

" Do you think that would work in real life?" asked Tyrone.

" Why wouldn't it work? I say we try it on Mr.Young." Laughed Wiggles

They all high fived each other and Wiggles put his shirt back on.

" You can't be serious." Said Tyrone, " You really gonna set that dude up?"

Wiggles waived the knife around one more time.

" I am serious and I keep it gangsta. Terrance Middle School belongs to us and we can't let that cracker interfere with how we do things. If any of you want out of this just walk away now."

The four of them remained huddled together and there was a moment of silence.

" Ah-ight then, let's go get some slushies, it's hot out here."

The four of them left the alley and went their separate ways. It was obvious that Wiggles had it in for Mr. Young. But he hadn't told his friends about everything. His own father really did molest him.

CHAPTER 5

Vincent was making very little progress with the class. Natasha had sat in the very front row just to be able to hear him talk over the din. Vinny often thought about using corporal punishment on the brats that consistently interrupted his class but refrained from it. Vinny tried his best to teach the class despite the disruptions. He couldn't figure out what was up with Felix, Tyrone, Jamaal, and Tony. Usually they were the loudest of the bunch but today they were as quiet as a mouse. They gawked at him with smirks on their faces. They hated their teacher and they hated Natasha because she was always brown nosing. They had heard rumors that Mr. Young had taken Natasha out to lunch a week ago.

Vinny shrugged off the eeriness and continued teaching the class. He was in a good mood today. It was Friday and after class he had plans of taking his wife Cindy out to dinner at an extravagant restaurant overlooking the harbor. Usually he stayed after school for an hour to grade papers but today he would leave at 2:30 pm with the students.

When school finally let out he grabbed his leather satchel and headed out to his car. He whistled on his way out and fished around in his pocket for his keys. He hunkered over his car to unlock the door when it happened. He felt a sharp blow to the head and instantly fell to the ground. His military instincts immediately kicked in and he

pulled the legs out from his assailant then jumped on top of him.

The attacker squirmed like a fish and let out a groan. That's when Vinny received a head butt from the big burly black man he was trying to subdue. He felt himself nearly pass out. All he could see was a big dorky looking Afro shielding him from the sun.

" Nobody touches my boy except for me!" Shouted the man.

He was now on top of Vincent and choking him with all of his might. Vinny used his powerful legs and wrapped them around his attacker using what wrestlers call a scissor hold. He squeezed until the man's hands finally loosened around his neck so he could breathe. They both quickly stood up and began fist fighting. Wiggles' dad threw a left hook but Vinny ducked. Vincent threw a quick jab into his lower abdomen causing the man to hunker over and then a strong upper cut to the jaw. The man teetered back a few steps and fell face down on the ground. Just as Vinny was catching his breath he heard sirens. Then he looked to his left and saw a woman holding a camcorder.

" I caught it all on tape you creep!" Declared the woman.

Vincent turned around and to his dismay saw a throng of people waving their fists.

" You're going to jail you sick bastard!" They chanted.

Vince had no idea what they were talking about but he could hear the sirens getting closer.

The angry mob ran over to his Saturn and began smashing it with lead pipes and tire irons. Vince looked over at Wiggles' dad who remained on the ground unconscious. Amidst the throng of people appeared two police officers with their weapons drawn.

" Get on the ground! Get on the ground right now!"
Commanded the officers.

Vincent did as he was told and laid face down on the ground.

" Hands behind your back!" They shouted.

The very second he placed his hands behind his back he was quickly apprehended.

" I was only defending myself!" He said.

The cop on his right squeezed his fingernails deep into his arm while they had him under duress. Vinny's nose was still bleeding from the fight. The crowd jeered and waved fists in the air. The cops weren't careful when they shoved him in the back of the cruiser and Vincent's head got slammed into the door. When he turned around he noticed his car was on fire.

His thoughts immediately began interspersing. *What was going on? Why did these people call him a sick bastard? Surely there must be a big mistake.* He thought to himself.

But what had happened today was only the beginning. It was about to get a whole lot worse.

CHAPTER 6

" You look like you had a rough night." Said Mr.Felps.

Vincent rubbed his eyes and then slouched in his chair.

" Who are you?" He asked.

" I'm your attorney,Luis Felps. Your wife hired me and she's very concerned."

Luis was extremely short compared to Vinny. His clean shave only made his dark curly hair all the more prominent. The dark brown suit he had on almost looked too big for him.

" What exactly happened? Why am I here?" Asked Vince.

" I was hoping you could tell me that."

" I was just walking out to my car and I was viciously attacked."

" Well, there's a video tape that suggests otherwise. The tape shows you knocking out Mr.Roberts unconscious."

Vinny sat up in his chair and gnashed his teeth. He never thought his life could take a change so suddenly.

" They didn't start recording until the middle of the fight. I never started that fight." He insisted.

Luis crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. There was a brief moment of silence and they both looked

around while wondering if they could trust each other.

" Look Mr.Young. I normally don't check in with my clients on a Saturday afternoon. Quite frankly the fight is the least of our worries."

Vince straightened up in his chair and pinched the end of the table.

" What do you mean?" He asked

" You were accosted by Mr.Roberts because his son claimed you kept him after class and sexually molested him."

Vinny cringed then squeezed the arms of his chair as hard as he could.

" That's absurd! Nobody is going to believe a crazy story like that!"

The lawyer paid no attention to Vincent's theatrics. Instead he looked down at the papers lying in front of him.

" Oh it gets better, there are 3 other students who have corroborated the story."

" My students? Who are they?" He said trying his best to remain calm.

Luis leafed through the stack of papers.

" I don't have their names off hand but the next time we meet I will."

Vincent tried his best to settle himself down. He had

just spent the night in jail and everything still felt so surreal.

" Okay, so what's the next step? Why hasn't my wife bailed me out of jail yet?"

Luis smiled wryly as if he'd just been asked a stupid question.

" That's why I'm here Mr.Young. I'm working on getting you bail but the fight you got into is causing enormous controversy. Believe me, I'm trying my best to mitigate the situation."

" Mitigate my situation?"

" That's right, they're afraid to let you out because they feel you're a danger to others."

Vincent's lawyer continued to babble about possible motions. All Vinny could do was sit there and think about Cindy. Gosh did he miss her. He couldn't wait to explain everything to her. This was all some sort of big mistake and he would find a way to handle all of this. He would handle this no matter what the cost.

CHAPTER 7

Vincent laid on a mattress that was 3 inches thick and stared at the drab dilapidated floor. The width to the window in his cell seemed to be as thick as the mattress. There was very little light shining through the window illuminating the walls that were only 8 feet apart. Vinny had the cell all to himself and he liked it that way. He had heard a lot of stories about jail and was a little nervous about getting a cell mate. It was so cold in his cell that he had to place socks over his

arms. He dreaded knowing that eventually he would have to use the toilet in his cell. The toilet was made of icy cold stainless steel and was missing its toilet seat. Actually it looked as though when it was designed it never was supposed to have a seat.

To make matters worse the guards were already bullying him around. When they would serve him his meals through the door's slot they would push the trays right onto the floor. They wouldn't even give him a styrofoam cup for water like the others got. Vincent had to use an empty milk container to drink his water out of. He yearned for a book but all he found was a King James Bible.

Vincent was nestled up in the corner of the bottom bunk reading the Bible when he heard the clanking of keys outside of his cell door. Was it finally over? Did he make bail? The guard grinned as he motioned him to come to the door and cuff up.

" You're getting a celly." He laughed, " He's a crazy one!"

Oh no! This couldn't be happening! Vinny felt a sudden pang of trepidation surge through his chest.

" I don't want a celly! Take him back!"

Both guards burst out in laughter and opened his cell door. As soon as Vinny saw his cell mate his heart rate went back to normal. The guards were right. He did look crazy but he was certainly not a threat. The guards uncuffed both of them through the door and then walked away whistling like they knew some kind of secret.

Vincent's new cellmate tossed his bed roll onto the top bunk and then extended his right arm for a hand shake.

" The name's Drake but people call me Shaggy."

" Do you mean like from Scooby Doo?" Asked Vinny.

Drake looked exactly like Shaggy from the cartoon Scooby Doo. He was tall, thin, wiry, and had a whole mop of umber hair on his head.

" Yeah, That's how I got the nickname." Replied Drake

Vincent didn't feel threatened at all by Drake but rather it seemed vice versa. Drake's hands often shook and his voice was timid. He often choked on his words when he talked. He definitely didn't look like the type that would end up in jail. His body language made it obvious that he felt inferior to Vinny.

" Is this your first time locked up?" Asked Vinny

" Yeah, you want to know why I'm here?"

" I didn't ask that." Replied Vince.

" Well I may as well tell you. The whole world already seems to know about it."

Vincent really didn't want to know why Shaggy was in jail because then he would probably want to know why he was in jail. It didn't matter because it looked like Shaggy was going to tell him whether he wanted to know or not.

" Well if you insist." He said showing very little interest.

" I tried to blow up the penis doctor."

Now Shaggy did suddenly have his attention.

" You did what?"

" I tried to stop a very bad doctor from ever operating again."

" Why? Did he mess up some kind of circumcision?"

" No, I had a phalloplasty surgery done to me AKA a penile enlargement surgery. He messed me up really bad so I mailed him a bomb."

" Gosh, I can't blame you there. I think I'd do the same thing. Did it go off?"

" No, I called the police just hours after I mailed it and they safely defused it."

" Why didn't you just sue?"

" I can't because before the surgery I signed a waiver."

" Was it a real bomb?"

" Yes, but a very small one. My lawyer says it was equivalent to an M-80 firecracker. Not strong enough to kill, but probably would've damaged his fingers."

" That's a wild story. You must be in a lot of pain."

" Let's just say that I'm very prone to infections. It's

imperative that I shower daily to avoid these infections and this place only lets me shower 3 times a week." He said angrily.

Drake continued to babble for the next hour or so about his women problems while Vinny listened intently. Being stuck in a cell with Shaggy seemed to cheer him up just a little bit. But he missed Cindy and couldn't bare being away from her. It had to end soon, it just had to. Soon everything would go back to normal. Unfortunately for now that wasn't the case.

CHAPTER 8

The tepid 40 oz. bottle of Colt 45 got passed around as the boys grinned at each other.

" We finally did it!" Sneered Wiggles while retying his shoe laces.

The four hoodlums had just finished playing basketball. Jamaal, Tony, Tyrone, and Wiggles sat on the trash cans behind Remo's where they always met. Jamaal was the fatter one of the bunch so he was still out of breath.

" Who do you think is going to be our next math teacher?" Asked Jamaal.

Wiggles stood up from the trash can to address his partners in crime.

" Who cares? What matters is we got rid of Mr. Young. Don't worry guys, we won't waste any time breaking in our next teacher. We run the class, not them." Said Wiggles

The boys threw their fists in the air to concur. Each one of them was wearing a jersey of their favorite NBA player. They all lived in the slums of downtown Baltimore but their parents always saw to it they wore nice clothes and name brand shoes.

Jamaal said, " What happens if they find out we made all of this up? Aren't we going to get in trouble?"

" They're not going to find out." Said Wiggles," That's why we're here to go over the story so we all have the same story."

Tyrone finished the last few swigs of Colt45 then threw the empty bottle against the concrete wall. The bottle smashed into little pieces and scattered all over the ground.

" Okay, we're all listening." Said Tyrone.

" The story goes like this." Said Wiggles," Mr.Young made the four of us stay after class. He made you three watch as he pulled down my pants and stuck a broomstick up my butt."

The three other boys hooted and hollered out with laughter. Jamaal spoke next.

" Hey I'll go along with that story because it's hilarious. At least the broomstick goes up your butt and not ours. What do you guys think?"

They all agreed that it made a great story. Definitely something that they would joke about when they got older. But there was something more to the story that Wiggles would never tell them. He had gotten the idea from his father

because that's something that his father had already done to him.

CHAPTER 9

It was 1AM in the wee hours of the night. The din throughout the prison had finally settled and Vincent was sound asleep on his uncomfortable mattress. He was dreaming of Cindy and the time when they first met at the grocery store. She was short and was having trouble reaching a can of tuna on the top shelf. Cindy reached up on her tippy toes and tugged on a can. All of the cans of tuna fell to the floor and nearly crushed her. Vincent saw what was happening and came to her rescue. That was when they first met and she liked Vinny because he was tall and handsome.

Vincent lay motionless on his back and dreamed of Cindy when he felt something sticky on his face.

" What the heck?" He grumbled.

" Sh-sh-, you'll awake the evil spirit." Said Shaggy.

He was standing before Vinny holding an empty tube of toothpaste. Shaggy's hair was so long that it covered his eyes and Vincent could not read his face. Vincent wiped the toothpaste off of his face and suddenly felt himself feeling hostile towards his intruder. He thought about attacking Shaggy but just couldn't do it. He looked around and noticed that there was toothpaste encompassing the entire room. There was toothpaste all over the walls, the mirror, the door, etc.

" What's going on?" Asked Vinny," Why are we covered

in toothpaste?"

Shaggy kept telling him to hush and be still.

" The voices do not like to be disturbed. This is a special ceremony for the great chief."

No No No! Say it isn't so! thought Vincent to himself. He suddenly remembered the guards laughing at him and telling him he was getting a crazy one.

" Look Drake I'm trying to sleep. You need to go back to bed."

Drake seemed to be stuck in a trance.

" Okay whatever, but the voices are telling me they're ready to enter your body."

Vinny just chuckled. " Okay, whatever buddy. Just go back to sleep."

Shaggy climbed back up on the top bunk and pretended to go to sleep. 20 minutes later he heard the toilet flushing incessantly. There was Shaggy hunched over the toilet and flushing almost anything he could find. Vinny rubbed his eyes and couldn't believe what he was seeing. Everything was getting flushed down the toilet, even his commissary!

Just as Shaggy was about to flush the very last candy bar down the toilet Vinny grabbed his arm.

" Look buddy, you can't be doing this. We need this stuff."

Shaggy looked into his eyes with a puzzled look.

" But the great chief told me to do it."

Vinny was becoming impatient and on the verge of losing his temper. Shaggy had flushed all their belongings down the toilet, even his 3 inch toothbrush. But how could he strike a boy stuck in the middle of a psychotic episode? He had studied once about people with these illnesses. Vince was so tired that he reached the point where he didn't even care.

" Just do what you want kiddo, I'm going back to sleep."

Shaggy sat on the floor in the corner of the cell and spoke quietly to himself the rest of the night while Vinny slept. He tried his best to shut out Shaggy's odd behavior while he slept. He was determined to make it through this. Even if it meant putting up with a nut.

CHAPTER 10

Luis Felps slouched back in his chair with a sullen look on his face. He kept his gaze on the stack of paper work on the table. Vinny sat on the other side of the table in his orange jump suit. It was two sizes too small for him and he could barely move around in it. He patiently waited for his attorney to speak first.

" I've spoken with Natasha. She could be your only advocate. But there's a problem." Said the lawyer.

Natasha was Vinny's best student. She knew what the class was like and how those brats had it in for Vinny. Maybe

she could get him out of this mess. Vincent stuttered a bit before the words came out.

" Wha-what's the problem?" He asked

He braced himself for what would come next.

" Basically she's too scared to come forward and talk. Not to mention her parents won't allow her to testify."

Vincent squeezed the arms of his chair and gnashed his teeth. He always did that when he was stressed out.

" But those kids could say anything! I took their game boys and head sets and told them they could have them back at the end of the school year. Those kids hate me!"

Luis picked up the stack of paper work and leafed through the pages until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a document and handed it to Vinny.

" Oh, it gets worse." He said," Felix Roberts submitted to a physical examination. The tests confirmed that some type of object possibly a broomstick was rammed inside his rectum. They have him seeing a proctologist for the bleeding."

Vincent looked bemused. " The bleeding?"

" That's right, something definitely happened to that boy."

The pieces were finally starting to fall together in Vinny's mind. He had vivid memories of the fight with wiggles dad when suddenly it hit him. He recalled Mr.Roberts' exact

words. *"Nobody touches my boy except for me!"*

Vinny slammed his hands on the table and sat upright in his chair.

"I know what's going on." He said, "Wiggles' dad is the perpetrator. He is the one doing the molesting, I'm sure of it."

There was a moment of silence while Luis mulled this over. Vincent could tell that his pettifogger of a lawyer wasn't buying his story. Was he going to sell him out? Luis pulled out another document from the stack of paper work.

"I've hit this case at all possible angles and this is the best I can do. We're not going to get a better deal than this and I think you should take it."

"How long?" Asked Vinny.

"5 years incarceration plus 3 years supervised release."

Vinny looked him straight in the eye and his face became flush red.

"Absolutely not. We're not taking any deals. This is going to trial."

Luis cringed and tapped his pen on the table.

"If this goes to trial and you lose then you'll be facing ten."

Before he could finish speaking Vinny cut him off.

" We're not going to lose. God won't let that happen."

Luis became agitated." Look Mr.Young, it's them versus you and only you. Natasha can't come forward. Five years is not a long time. These judges are used to shelling out 15 and 20 year sentences every week. You'd be a fool not to take the deal."

Now Vinny was infuriated. He thought about choking Luis right there in his chair. Then stab him in the back of his neck with his own pen.

Vinny raised his voice." Look, who do you work for? Me or them? It sounds like you're working for them."

Luis looked away from Vinny and rolled his eyes. He then raised his right hand to settle down his angry client.

" Alright,alright. We'll tell them we're not taking the deal. I'm going to see what else I can do. In the mean time just keep your cool and don't talk to anyone about your case."

Luis motioned for the guard to come cuff up Vinny so they could take him back to his cell. The meeting was over and it was not a very good one.

When Vinny got back to his cell the shock of what he saw made him throw up all over the floor. Shaggy's feet dangled just 12 inches off the floor. He was hanging from his bed sheets. Drake the little bomber boy was dead.

CHAPTER 11

Theresa sat all the way in the back row next to her husband. He was sitting straight up and as stiff as a board. It

felt odd being the only white people in the courtroom and they were getting dirty looks. She never would've dreamed that something this awful could happen to her child, her middle child.

Vincent sat next to his lawyer with his head bowed down as if he couldn't bare to look at anyone. He had refused to shave with the cheap one bladed razors the prison offered him. His face looked scruffy and abrasive. His orange jump suit was two sizes too small and made him very uncomfortable and he had a hopeless look on his face.

Theresa pulled out a tissue from her purse and wiped away the tears running down her cheeks. A black couple sitting on the other side of the courtroom were pointing fingers at her as they talked. Theresa thought about giving them the finger but it would not be the christian thing to do.

The prosecutor's name was Lisa Jenks. She had long blond hair pulled back in a pony tail and her eyes were blue as the ocean. Her long skinny legs made her look taller than what she really was. It was obvious that she worked out and she only looked about 21 years old. This was her very first case and it was imperative that she make a good first impression.

The judge finally came in the courtroom and took the bench. Vinny and his family were no longer the only white people in the room. The judge and the prosecutor were both white. But that didn't matter, nobody was going to help him.

Vincent was sworn in and the trial began. Wiggles was the first to testify and did a great job of lying through his teeth. It was as if Wiggles was a professional actor and he was careful with the details making his story believable. Luis

Felps did a lot of talking and represented Vincent the best he could.

" Your honor, my client was a well respected teacher over at St.Mary's Catholic Middle School. His students adored him. His students at Terrance Middle School are purposely setting him up to get rid of their teacher. Other teachers at Terrance Middle School have had problems with the students."

Luis sat back down in his chair and whispered into Vinny's ear." We're going to be alright."

Vincent just stared straight ahead pretending to ignore him. Jamaal, Tyrone, and Tony all testified and told their version of the story which matched Wiggles'.

Just then out of nowhere the man with the afro lunged at Vincent causing him to fall out of his chair.

" I said nobody touches my boy!" Shouted Wiggles' dad.

Before Mr.Roberts could throw a punch, guards sprung from every direction and tackled Mr.Roberts to the ground.

" We'll settle this later." Said Mr.Roberts as they escorted him from the courtroom.

Vinny brushed himself off and sat back in his chair. When the din finally settled it was Vinny's turn to take the stand. He took a moment to glare into each and everyone's eyes before he finally spoke.

" I left a very good job to come and teach Baltimore city kids that nobody cares about. Maybe they just don't like me

because I'm too strict, but I swear I'm innocent."

Vinny's speech didn't seem to faze the jury or even the judge. They already had their minds made up that he was guilty. The judge was a man in his early forties and remained calm during the proceedings. His name was Judge Thomas Anderson and he rarely even laughed at a joke. His chiseled chin looked like an ice pick and his short salt and pepper hair was just recently cut. His big ears were very prominent and he had a mole almost the size of a quarter on his neck.

Time was finally running out and it was time to read the verdict. Vinny glanced an evil look to the judge who was denying every single one of his lawyer's motions. A large African American woman with short hair wearing a red dress came out to read the verdict.

" In the case of Felix Roberts versus Vincent Young being charged with child molestation we the jury find Vincent Young guilty of all charges."

The crowd in the courtroom erupted with cheers and applauses. Vincent sat in his chair motionless awaiting what was coming next.

" Vincent Young will spend 10 years at Spottsdale River penitentiary and then serve 5 years supervised release."

Vinny saw his whole world crumpling into a little ball of trash. He looked over at Wiggles. Wiggles was smiling like he was sitting at a poker game with a royal flush in his hand. Theresa burst out in tears while her husband Mark comforted her. Vincent clenched his fists so tight that his finger nails dug into his palms. This was not over. They may have won the battle but they had not won the war. All of

them would pay for this. The 4 brats, the prosecutor, the judge, and maybe even his pettifogger of a lawyer. They would all pay for this when he got out. They were all dead in his mind and he would not forget.

CHAPTER 12

" Don't talk, don't tell these bastards anything."
Threatened the voice in Vinny's head.

Maybe Shaggy was right. Was it possible that after Drake had hung himself the voices left his body and entered his? Vinny didn't know but his hands fidgeted nervously under the table.

" Nobody saw you do it, they can't prove a thing." Said the voice.

FBI agent Max Trowel clicked his pen incessantly and looked Vincent straight in the eye. Max was good at reading people and Vincent had guilty written all over his face. Two days ago Vincent had found a clever way to kill the big burly black guy that had raped him in the shower. Vinny had seen to it that Clyde Smalls die in his sleep and it was easy because Clyde had a cell all to himself. Vincent had poured a 5 gallon bucket full of ammonia under his cell door and the ogre never woke up. The toxic fumes had killed him.

The FBI agent swept his hand across the table knocking papers onto the floor. Vinny stared down at the loose papers lying on the floor.

" Dang it! You good for nothing creep! Why don't you man up to it and confess?"

Vincent remained steadfast in his chair with a sheepish grin.

" I told you, I don't know anything about it." He said.

Max paced back and forth in the interrogation room while sneaking glances at the one way glass window. Vinny slouched down in his chair and nudged his left shoulder to adjust his eye patch. He was handcuffed with his hands behind his back. The cuffs were so tight that he was losing circulation in his hands. His left eye was permanently damaged. Three months ago another inmate had wailed him along side the head with a lock in a sock.

Max sat back down in his chair and pointed a finger at Vinny.

" You had the motive and the resources to kill Clyde. Everybody's saying you did it."

The voices in Vinny's head began to laugh and then told him what to say next.

" That may be true but did anyone actually see me do it?"

Max buried his long index finger in Vinny's chest poking him while he spoke.

" Don't play these games with me! We have the evidence we need!"

Vinny cringed from the excitement and then cracked his own neck. Max's face was crimson red from the neck up. He desperately wanted to punch Vinny's lights out. Vinny took in

a deep breath.

" You don't have nothing on me. This meeting is over. Take me back to my cell."

He was absolutely right. They didn't have enough evidence to convict him. Vincent had just gotten away with murder. His sentence was almost served. They had to let him go in just 3 months. Prison had completely ruined his life. He had lost almost everything, especially his career. They set his car on fire, ruined his name, but most importantly he lost something he could never forgive them for. He lost Cindy.

CHAPTER 13

Tina Anderson pumped her arms and legs at a leisurely pace. There was no need to sprint because she still had a mile to go. Her favorite song " It's Your Birthday" By 50 Cent was playing on her MP3 player that fit snugly around her bicep. The attention she got from the passing motorists gave her the strength to press on. Cars honked and guys waved as her long blond pony tail teetered in the wind.

It was 7:30 pm and it would be dark in just 10 minutes. Tina had on her pink shorts that crawled up her legs too high but she didn't care. She had purchased them at Hooters along with a white tank top. Her father didn't like her jogging so late at night but who was he to tell her what to do? At 19 years old she was sure now that she could make decisions on her own.

She made a right on Elm street which led to a cemetery covered in squirrels. The sun was starting to settle and was turning a dark orange. A streaky ray of sunlight bounced off

the roof tops of the row homes looming in the distance. When Tina entered the cemetery she cranked the music up and picked up her pace. Almost every grave seemed to have flowers on it and she watched 2 squirrels chase each other in the grass.

Beads of sweat poured down her face while she pumped her arms and legs. Tina noticed that something seemed very strange and out of kilter. When she turned around she saw a black van following her. She hadn't seen a van like that since she used to watch the " A-Team" on television. It looked just like the van that " Mr.T" used to drive.

Tina drifted all the way to the side of the pathway so the van could pass her. She began to mull the situation over in her mind. What was a black van doing out here in the cemetery? The black van never passed her but slowly crept behind her. Tina picked up the pace a little and then peered her head back one more time. To her surprise the driver was wearing a black ski mask but she could only see one eye.

Tina knew she was in trouble and veered off the pathway towards the grass. Just then she felt a sharp pain in the back of her neck. Did she just get stung by a bee? She reached her arm back and pulled a tranquilizer dart out from her nape. She screamed for help as loud as she could.

" Somebody help me! I've been shot!"

She pumped her arms and legs vigorously breathing harder with every strut. She was going to make it home, she was going to elude her attacker. Tina pushed on with everything she had but her vision was going blurry but in fact she wasn't going anywhere. She lay on the ground immobile.

Then everything went black.

The black van came to an abrupt stop and Vinny jumped out of the driver's side door. He quickly scooped up Tina into his arms and threw her over his shoulder like she were a sack of potatoes. Concerned neighbors that heard Tina's cry for help trampled onto their front lawns to see what the commotion was about. Before anybody could stop him, Vinny opened the back doors to the van and tossed in Tina's body then slammed the doors shut. He even had the audacity to wave to the onlookers who were already dialing 9-1-1 on their phones.

The back tires squealed as Vinny took off in the sunset. The black van made a sharp right turn into an alley and then merged onto a busier street. Vinny knew if he wanted to pull this off he had to be quick. The police would put out an APB on his vehicle before he would ever get a chance to leave town. And especially since he had just kidnapped the judges daughter!

Vincent pulled into a secluded car wash and immediately went to work. First he checked on Tina. She was still unconscious. As fast as he could he cuffed her hands behind her back and then duct taped her feet together. Before he shut the back doors to the van he carefully looked around to see if anyone was watching. So far the plan was working and he saw no one in sight.

He dug down deep into his pocket and pulled out eight quarters. Placing the quarters into the slot of the power washer was proving to be the hardest part of his mission. The adrenaline rush was so great that his hands shook incessantly as he dropped quarters in one at a time. Vincent knew that he needed to do something about the shaking

because it was really bothering him.

The pressure washer finally turned on and he began spraying the van. As Vinny sprayed the van it turned from black to white. He smiled with admiration as he washed off the washable paint that evidently was peeling off in a matter of seconds of getting wet. Within 60 seconds the van was completely white except for the black lettering on the sides which read " Jake's Plumbing".

When Vinny was finished he raced to the back of the van and yanked off the license plate that was held on by magnets and replaced it with another. Vinny's 4 minute dead line he set for himself was expiring and he could already hear sirens looming in the distance. It was time to go before the cops would show up. He jumped in the van which was still running and took off.

As soon as he left the car wash he removed his ski mask and black sweat shirt. Underneath the sweatshirt he was wearing a blue and white striped collared shirt which had a name tag which read "Jake". Vincent realized it didn't get any better than this. Judge Thomas Anderson's daughter had just been kidnapped. And this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER 14

When Tina awoken she was surrounded by darkness. The floor boards vibrated and tickled her legs as she tried to get her bearings. Where was she and what had just happened? One thing was obvious, she was in the back of a moving van. To her dismay, " Mr.T " and the "A-Team " were not in the van to greet her. Her hands were cuffed behind her back so tight that she could feel her hands losing

circulation.

Tina sat up straight and relaxed her arms to help bring back feeling in her hands. She wondered how long she had been asleep. She took a deep breath and could smell a sulfur stench in the air. That meant gunpowder and she knew she was in trouble. She pushed her left shoulder into the floor and squirmed around like a worm hoping to find something to aid her. Pivoting in every direction, she scoured the dirty floor until she stumbled into a burlap bag. She used her pretty face to poke around inside of the bag. Sure enough she had discovered where the sulfur smell was coming from. She dug her teeth into what felt like a stick of dynamite.

Was it really dynamite or just a road flare? She didn't know but it was time for her to play Mcgyver. Tina neatly combed through every square inch of the van's floor boards hoping to find a lighter or matches.

It was a relentless search and she ended up empty handed. She sat the stick of dynamite onto the floor and wept like a child. This was all a horrible nightmare. Where was Steve? If he were here this never would've happened. Steve was Tina's boyfriend who often went jogging with her. But Steve was out with his feeble-minded friends at the races in Dover.

Tina had given up all hope when something sharp pricked the back of her hand. Ouch! Sticking out of the floor boards was a sharp nail. She felt a sudden rush of exhilaration permeate her body as she placed her duct taped legs over top of the nail. She shimmied her legs vigorously across the nail until it hewed right through the tape. She kicked apart the last few strands of tape and rejoiced in her

accomplishment.

" People with last names like mine don't fail." She told herself.

Her legs were free but her hands were still cuffed behind her back.

" Just one thing at a time" She told herself.

Just then the van came to a complete stop and the engine cut off. It was time to meet her abductor and she had a really big surprise for him. Big surprise.

CHAPTER 15

Vincent sat on the dilapidated picnic table and smoked a Newport. It had been at least 6 months since anybody had sat at the picnic table and it seemed like the squirrels owned the abandoned park. He had not yet checked on Tina but he knew by all the kicking and screaming that she was awake. He laughed excessively because he knew there was no one around for miles.

He rehearsed every move he had made in his head from Tina's abduction. Everything from the take down at the cemetery to the disguising of his van at the car wash. Gosh, he simply had to do something about those shaky hands. It seemed like it took forever to drop those quarters into the slot of the pressure washer. Vincent looked at his stop watch. It was still showing 3 minutes and 50 seconds. Terrific. He had beaten his 4 minute deadline he had set for himself at the car wash with 10 seconds to spare.

" Help me! Somebody please help me!" Cried Tina from

inside the van.

Vinny took one last drag from his cigarette and flicked it in the grass. He watched two squirrels play volleyball with a walnut as he pondered over his situation a bit more. Everything seemed to be going smoothly and he didn't like that. Why was this so easy? Vinny felt a pang of trepidation push into his sternum. If it's anything he learned in life is when things seem to be going good that's when something terrible is about to go wrong. Silence suddenly came from the van and he knew that meant it was time to check on his prey.

Tina lay on her back adjacent to the back doors of the van with her feet cocked and ready. The very second Vinny opened the back doors to the van two Nike sneakers crushed his face and nearly knocked him out. Tina jumped out of the van and ran as fast as she could with her hands still cuffed behind her back. Unfortunately just 30 yards into her escape she tripped and fell flat on her face. When she rolled over and looked up Vincent was standing over her scolding her.

" You stupid little twit! Did you really think you could outrun me?"

Tina tried to catch her breath. Before she could reply Vinny threw her over his shoulder and carried her back to the van.

Tina screamed." Let me go you freak!"

Vincent threw her onto the floor boards so hard she thought she felt something break.

" Nobody calls me a freak! Do you know what happened to the last guy that called me a freak?"

Tina didn't answer. Instead she just sat in the dark corner of the van and curled up into a ball. Vinny pulled out a really thick zip tie and used it to lasso her feet then pulled it tight.

" No more surprises, you hear me?" He said.

Tina gave a subtle nod and Vinny slammed the doors shut. She was back in complete darkness.

Vinny ran to the front of the van and picked up his police scanner off the passenger's seat. When he picked it up he could already hear a woman's voice echoing from the scanner,

" All units respond. GPS is picking up a signal on the UNSUB at the Pine Green Park off I-36."

Vinny's heart skipped a beat and he could not believe what he was hearing. Did they say GPS? Evidently his hunch was right. Something had definitely gone awry. He vamoosed from the passenger's seat, slammed the door, and raced to the back of the van.

This time when he opened the double doors he was not greeted by two Nike sneakers to the face. Tina remained in the back corner of the van curled up in a ball and crying her eyes out.

" I need you to shut up a minute. How are they tracking us? Are you wearing some kind of tracking device?"

Tina just shrugged her shoulders and continued to cry.

" Don't play games with me! I'll rip all your clothes off until I find it!"

A look of fear spread across her face. She kept her gaze on the MP3 player still snugly wrapped around her arm. Vinny took notice.

" Is that it? Is this how they're tracking us?"

Tina nodded her head and then cried more profusely. Vinny grabbed the MP3 and ripped it off her arm so hard that it left a mark.

" We'll talk later." He said and slammed shut the double doors.

Vincent squeezed the MP3 player firmly in his black leather gloves and cursed all kinds of naughty curse words. This was not part of the plan at all. He had heard that some rich celebrities had GPS tracking systems hidden in their cell phones in case they got kidnapped. But never would've he guessed there would be one hidden in an MP3 player. He threw the MP3 player in a trash barrel and ran back to the van. It was time to get out of here.

Just as he started up the van he remembered something. As Vinny picked up his cigarette butt out of the grass he could hear sirens looming in the distance. "*Crap!*" He thought to himself. He jumped into the van and took off.

CHAPTER 16

Beams of light danced across the terrain of Pine Green

Park. The hunt for the judges daughter was on. Canines sniffed all around the dilapidated picnic table under the pavilion. Special agent Chris Carter was on his cell phone with his boss while standing next to his partner.

" Yeah we're here boss, we're definitely sure the perp was here." He barked into the phone.

Carter stood 5 ft. 8 inches tall with short curly dirty blond hair. His muscular build and cockiness made up for his short height. Carter and his partner agent John Travis were the first to arrive at the scene. They had just missed Vincent by 2 minutes and it was now dark outside.

" I think I found it." Said Travis putting on latex gloves and fishing through the trash barrel.

Agent Travis was almost a foot taller than Carter weighing in at 170lbs. With his brown spiky hair he had been given the nickname " Broomstick" since high school. Travis picked out the MP3 player and proudly flourished it in the air. Carter hung up the phone and walked over to his partner.

" Be careful with that. We can dust it for prints." Said Carter.

He pulled out a zip-lock bag from his vest and dropped it in the bag.

" Whoever this guy is, he's no amateur."

Two squirrels ran past them and startled them. Travis shined his flashlight on the squirrels like he was drawing a gun.

" This place is kind of spooky." He said trying not to act so nervous.

Carter walked towards the road and shined his flashlight into some fresh tire tracks in the mud.

" Hey, check this out." Said Carter waiting for his partner to join him.

They both hunched over the set of tire tracks intrigued by their discovery.

" We must have just missed him."

" How do you know that?" Asked Travis.

" Look how deep these tracks dig into the ground. Now look at the scattered chunks of mud behind it. These are signs of a burn out. He left in a hurry."

Travis shined the flashlight while Carter took pictures. Other police officers arrived at the crime scene and wrapped yellow tape around the pavilion. Carter paused for a minute, stroked his goatee, and stared at the full moon.

" Yeah, we almost had a better chance at catching this sucker."

" What do you mean?" Asked Travis.

" Right after this girl was kidnapped police rushed to her father's house. When they got there he was in the back of the villa planting flowers in the garden and never heard the doorbell ring."

" What does that have to do with anything?" Asked Travis

" Judge Anderson had the code we needed to track the MP3 player but we were 10 minutes too late."

The darkness seemed to hinder the extent of the investigation. Carter and Travis were about to call it a night when an officer came running with something in his hand.

" I think I've got something." Huffed the officer.

He handed Carter a crumpled up business card and took a step back.

" The dogs have been sniffing around that picnic table since we got here. I found that on the ground next to it."

Carter unraveled the business card and shined his mag light on it. The card read " Cozy Ginger's Hair salon" and smelled like perfume. Carter flipped the back of the card and saw writing that read " G33".

" What do you think this means?" He asked.

Travis stepped up to examine the business card.

" It could belong to anyone but if it belongs to the perp then he or she just made their first mistake."

CHAPTER 17

The white van cruised at a steady 55 miles per hour heading into the mountains. Vinny was feeling in a euphoric state of mind while he kept both hands on the wheel. The

police scanner on the passenger seat next to him was chattering all night long. Apparently they were still looking for the black van license plate BDX-4968 that witnesses had reported leaving the cemetery.

Stupid stupid people. Kidnapping Tina was not part of the original plan. Vinny had scouted the Anderson residence numerous times before. He had debated whether or not his homemade grenade launcher would be powerful enough to blow the villa up. It had been sheer coincidence that he had spotted Tina and what looked to be her boyfriend coming back from a jog. Vincent had noted their time of arrival and soon discovered this was a daily routine of theirs. *This is going to be so much fun* He thought once again to himself.

It appeared that he was safe now as he traveled on Rt.68, a rural road that went through the mountains. Vincent looked at the digital clock on the radio which read 10pm. He suddenly had an idea and pulled the van off to the side of the road. He loaded his 9mm and stuck it in the crotch of his pants then concealed the weapon with his long shirt tail pulled out.

Vinny walked around to the back of the van and unlocked the double doors. Nothing. Tina lay on the floor boards terrified and appeared to be shivering. Maybe she was hyperventilating or still in extreme shock. The freak really didn't know. He raised both his hands in the air signaling he had no intentions of hurting her. In his right hand dangled a handcuff key. Tina tried to scream but her parched throat emanated a squeaking sound that only a mouse would make.

" I'm not here to hurt you." Said Vinny approaching her slowly. Tina pushed her body further and further into the

corner.

" I've been thinking this over." Said Vinny," I don't think I can do this anymore."

Tina gaped in awe and her shaky body became still and serene. She nearly jumped when Vinny grabbed her right hand and uncuffed it.

" That's right sweetheart. I'm letting you go." He said as he started on the other cuff.

In a squeaky voice Tina was finally able to talk.

" I swear, I never saw you and I don't know anything."

Vinny just chuckled." Oh is that right?"

" You're a good man." She muttered.

He took his pocket knife and cut off the plastic zip-tie that was choking her legs. Tina felt the blood circulating through her body as her arms and legs were finally set free. She crawled out of the van and dusted herself off.

Vinny sat at the threshold of the van and lit a cigarette while admiring her body. Tina gazed into his sadistic eyes one last time. Vinny withdrew the cigarette from his mouth and exhaled.

" I said you're free to go. Better hurry up before I change my mind."

All in one sudden motion Tina turned around and took off like a rabbit. As she sprinted she fantasized that she was

about to run into the arms of her boyfriend. She could see him waiting patiently for her with a warm smile and arms spread wide open. She couldn't look back. What happened earlier was in the past and soon it would be just her and Steve.

Vinny sat there and watched his victim sprint away. During his incarceration he had become an avid runner. He jogged and sprinted just about every day at Spottsdale River Penitentiary. If Tina knew that she probably would've run a little faster. Her curiosity was killing her and she just had to look back just one last time. As soon as she peered her head back she saw what looked like Batman hovering over her.

Whatever it was tackled her to the ground and knocked the wind out of her. Oh how she wished it was only Batman but it wasn't, it was Vinny.

He pinned both her hands to the ground and she twisted her torso back and forth then kicked him in the crotch as hard as she could. This time it was on. Tina wasn't going down without a fight. Vinny yelped as the gun went flying and landed beside her. Tina grabbed the gun and pulled the trigger. The gun went off and Vinny let out another yelp.

" You stupid woman! You hit me!"

Tina stood up from the ground and focused the gun on Vinny. The bullet had only nicked his shin but he was screaming like a baby. He tore off a piece of his shirt and tied it around his leg to cover up the wound. Tina still pointed the gun at him as he stood up from the ground. Vinny held both his hands up as he took a step towards her.

" Don't move!" She shouted.

Vinny stepped back." I just want you to know that this has nothing to do with you. This is between me and your father."

" That's bullcrap! You had plans of raping me!"

Tina pulled the hammer back and focused her attention on the trigger. She was ready to blow this creep away and drive back home. Vinny took another step closer and took in a deep breath.

" I never had plans of hurting you. After I got the money I was going to let you go."

Tina's next question was music to Vinny's ears.

" How much?" She asked.

" Just \$200,000.00 for this job. I was going to split it with you I swear."

Maybe it was his dark brown eyes. Tina didn't know but she was about to fall right into his trap.

" We can still do this you know, we'll split the money 50/50. I promise I won't hurt you."

As Vinny nonchalantly inched his way towards her she mulled over the situation just a bit. For the time being, Tina and her father weren't getting along too well. All her friends had just left for Mardis Gras and her dad wouldn't let her go. A hundred thousand bucks sounded pretty nice especially since it was coming from her father that never gave much of an allowance.

" Okay tough guy, I guess I could use some money and my old man deserves to get robbed. We'll finish what you started but from now on I'm calling the shots. This ain't your show anymore."

Vinny's face lit up like a light bulb. Before she could change her mind he snatched the gun out of her hand, rammed the barrel into her neck and pulled on her hair.

" You're two minutes of glory are over sister. You're not getting a penny."

He kept the barrel of the gun jammed in her neck as he escorted her while limping back to the van. She didn't even bother to scream for help. It was dark outside and there was nobody around for miles. Why didn't she shoot him when she had the chance? All she could think about was Steve as she staggered along. But then something weird happened. Vinny never took her to the back of the van.

CHAPTER 18

It was late at night but every second was crucial. Agent Carter and Travis stood on the crimson porch with a bright porch light shining in their eyes. The rest of the neighborhood had such an eerie silence that the crickets chirping could easily be heard. Nobody would ever suspect that crime would happen in these neighborhoods.

Carter rang the door bell and then stepped back to admire the flower decor surrounding the porch. Just 5 seconds after he rung the door bell the front door of the villa swung open and a short portly old man with salt and pepper hair stood before them. It was obvious that he was expecting

them and before they could even flash him their credentials the judge beckoned them to come inside.

Travis tried his best to ignore the prominent mole on the judge's neck. It appeared the judge was in a big hurry to get the interview started.

" Please, please sit down and make yourselves comfortable. Did you find my daughter?" Asked Judge Anderson.

Agent Travis set a brief case on the empty sofa cushion next to him and they both sat down. The panoramic vista of the living room was absolutely beautiful. There were exquisite fish and bear heads mounted on the walls encompassing the room. The inside of Judge Anderson's house looked like an extravagant animal museum.

Carter cleared his throat and took the lead in the conversation.

" No we have not found your daughter yet but we came very close."

Another man wearing a blue apron joined them in the living room. He stood about 6ft. 2in. tall. He was a wiry fellow with a full mop of white hair neatly slicked back with a matching goatee.

The judge said, " Oh, this is my butler Alfred, would you gentlemen like some coffee?" Asked the judge.

The agents both nodded and Alfred inquired as to cream and sugar and then left the room. Carter nudged Travis signaling him to open the brief case. Travis opened

the brief case and pulled out a zip-lock bag containing the MP3 player.

" Do you recognize this?" Asked Travis.

" Yes, I bought it for my daughter last Christmas. It should contain a GPS tracking device."

" Yes we know. We found this in a trash barrel at Pine Green park just off I-36."

The judge folded his hands and rested them on his paunch.

" When they came to get the tracking code my butler and I were outside in the garden. We never heard the door bell."

Alfred walked in carrying a silver platter with 3 black hazelnut coffees in blue glossy mugs perched on top.

" Your coffees gentlemen." Said Alfred. He passed each one onto the coasters on the coffee table before them.

Carter was the first to take a sip of his coffee.

" We're going to do everything we can to find your daughter. But first we need to ask you some questions."

" Fire away." Said the judge.

" Does your daughter go on these jogs very often?"

" Almost every day at around 7pm. Usually she jogs with her boyfriend Steve but he's at the races with his

friends. I always worried about her possibly getting kidnapped. That's why I got her the MP3 player."

" I see, has she ever mentioned anyone possibly stalking her?"

" She says people honk and wave to her all the time but she's never mentioned anything strange or unusual."

Travis pulled out a yellow legal pad and began jotting down some notes. Carter did all the talking. He always did.

" So how would you say your relationship is with your daughter?"

The judge paused for a second before he answered the question.

" Usually it's pretty good. Recently she was mad at me for not letting her go to Mardis Gras but I think she's over that now."

Travis continued jotting notes while Carter gazed at the mole on the judges neck.

" Yes,yes, we understand. How would you describe your relationship with your wife?"

The judge turned flush red in the face. It was as if they had just struck an excruciating nerve in the back of his neck. Mrs. Anderson had been sleeping with the pool boy and the judge knew about it but never confronted her about it.

" How dare you deviate from the subject at hand! Is this an interview or some kind of cruel interrogation?"

Travis' pen came to an abrupt stop as he looked up in surprise. Carter squirmed around in his seat looking uncomfortable.

" We're sorry Mr. Anderson. These are just some standard questions." Said Carter. He nudged Travis to reach in the brief case and display the next piece of evidence.

Travis pulled out another zip-lock bag containing the business card of the salon. The judge settled himself down and adjusted himself closer to the edge of the sofa cushion.

" What's that?" He asked.

" We found this at the park next to a picnic table that we think the perp sat on. We're not even sure if this belongs to him or has any relevance to the case."

Travis flipped the bag around so the judge could see the writing on the back of the card.

" Obviously this is a business card of a hair salon but we're unsure as to the meaning of G33."

" Perhaps it has something to do with the game of bingo." Suggested the judge.

Carter scratched his chin and thought it over.

" We're going to look into it. Let's hope that this has nothing to do with games or riddles because those are sure signs of serial killers. Professional kidnappers don't leave clues and they don't want to get caught. They're strictly in it for the money."

The judge looked confused." So am I going to be getting a ransom call?"

This time Travis cut in." Let's sure hope so. That will increase our chances of getting your daughter back."

The door bell rang and the surprise nearly made the judge jump out of his seat.

" Oh, don't be alarmed. That's agent Sanders." Said Travis.

The butler walked over and opened the front door. The agent walked in carrying all kinds of electronic equipment with a set of ear phones. He was dressed in all black attire and stood tall with a buzz cut showing a not so good fade. He nodded and said hello then immediately walked into the kitchen to set up his equipment. All of the phone tracing equipment was set up on the kitchen table.

Carter squeezed Travis' knee and they both stood up from the sofa.

" Well, we have to be on our way. Agent Sanders will be staying with you in case a ransom call comes in. We'll let you know ASAP if we develop any new leads."

The judge got up from the sofa and shook both of their hands.

" Sorry for the discrepancy earlier. I'm under a great deal of stress."

" Oh no, it's our fault." Said Carter and they both walked

out the door.

CHAPTER 19

Carter and Travis horse played with each other as they walked out to the black Chevy Tahoe, with tinted windows of course. When they got in the vehicle Travis jabbed Carter in the abdomen one last time.

" Okay truce!" giggled Carter. He worked out all the time and barely felt the jab.

There was a moment of silence and then Travis turned on the interior light to go over his notes.

" Something seems kind of fishy about all of this."

" Yeah, it left me with a bad taste in my mouth." Said Carter," But definitely not from the coffee. That coffee was delicious!"

Carter kept both hands on the wheel as Travis carefully examined his short hand notes.

" It sounds to me like Tina may have kidnapped herself." Said Travis.

" I don't know. He got all pissy with us when we mentioned his wife. Maybe she had something to do with it."

" Yeah, I wonder why she wasn't home?"

" I dunno." Said Carter while constantly turning his head. He kept his gaze on the ritzy neighborhood surrounding them.

It seemed like every lawn had lawn ornaments and the sidewalks were cleaner than a dinner plate.

" So what about her boyfriend? Doesn't it seem odd that the night he doesn't jog with her she turns up missing?"

" You heard her father say that she was upset with him. They're probably over at her boyfriend's house laughing their butts off." Said Travis.

When the Tahoe veered right and merged onto the highway Carter put the pedal to the medal. They were FBI agents. They could drive as fast as they wanted to. Carter turned on the radio to his favorite rock station and took in a deep breath.

" Well, we still have a job to do. Tomorrow we're going to pay a visit to Tina's boyfriend."

CHAPTER 20

Tina cupped her hands over her eyes and let out a shrill utter scream. Vinny laughed as he pushed down on the windshield wiper fluid button to wash the blood off the windshield. A deer had jumped out in front of them and Vinny sped up to hit it with full impact.

" I told you if you want to sit up here you have to shut up!"

" I'm sorry." Said Tina finally uncovering her eyes.

Vinny had a bomb locked around her neck that would go off if she strayed more than 40 yards from him. The

transmitter was hidden inside his wristwatch and if he pushed a certain button on his watch the bomb would go off. Tina fully understood the danger of the contraption around her neck. Vinny had the upper hand now. If she made one wrong move he would push the button on his wrist watch and her head would blow off.

The inside of the van smelled like sulfur and mildew. There was clutter all over the place. Lots of balled up Subway wrappers that still had a bite of sandwich left in them. French fries lay strewn on the floor covered with ants. Every 2 minutes the van jerked back and forth because the transmission was going bad. As they journeyed through the woods on Rt.68 the trees looked like they were morphing into scary looking trees. The same kind of scary trees that could talk. The kind of trees that she used to read about in fairy tales when she was a kid.

Out of the blue Vinny started laughing hysterically. His whole body shook as he laughed uncontrollably. The voices were talking to him and cracking jokes about Tina. *How could you let a girl almost over power you you retard* said the voice in his head. Vincent's body shook even more and Tina wondered if he was having a seizure.

" What's so funny?" She finally asked.

" Oh, nothing. I just get these laughing spells sometimes. I've had the problem since I was a kid."

Maybe Tina was feeling braver or she was finally loosening up, but she struck up a conversation.

" So where exactly are we going?"

Vinny's laughter spell had finally ended. He sat up in the driver's seat and concentrated on the road.

" Don't worry about it. First we have a phone call to make."

" To who? My daddy?"

" Yeah. You're going to be doing all of the talking."

Tina kept her gaze on his massive forearms while she chatted. It looked like he may have once wrestled with a tiger or a bear. There were thick cut marks engraved into his forearms about 4 inches long. Her second thought was that Vincent might be a cutter. She once had a friend like that.

" What happened to your arms?" She finally asked.

Is this chick ever going to shut up? Vincent thought to himself. It left him with a sudden pang of frustration pour through his body. He had a flashback of the time Theresa talked too much and he almost had to kill her. If Tina didn't soon shut up he just might lose control and something terrible could happen.

" Could you just shut up like I asked you?"

Tina suddenly got quiet. In the corner of the dashboard she noticed a picture of a cute happy couple at the beach. Tina leaned forward to take a closer look. They were both in their swim wear and it looked like they both worked out. The girl in the photo looked as content as a little kid on Christmas day. Then Tina's jaw dropped in awe when she studied the man in the picture. The steely look on the man's face she recognized. The man in the picture had short hair, both eyes,

and an unblemished face. It didn't look remotely like him but Tina was sure the man was Vincent. Her curiosity took over and she forgot her promise to remain quiet.

" Is this you at the beach?" She finally asked.

Without thinking Vinny jerked the wheel to the right into an oncoming tree. He had had enough. He told the broad to shut up and she just wouldn't listen. Miraculously the van missed the tree by inches and continued plowing through the forest.

Vincent gripped both hands on the wheel trying to get back control of the van. Before they could do anything a loud thunk sound erupted from underneath the van and they came to an abrupt stop. Tina screamed while Vinny's head got rammed into the steering wheel. The van hissed and fluids started leaking from the van. Vinny's nose was bleeding but he was still alive. Tina remained completely unscathed.

" You idiot! Look what you made me do!" raved Vinny.

They both got out of the van to check the damage. The van wasn't completely wrecked but it was elevated under a tree trunk. There was no doubt about it, they were stuck in the woods. Vinny yanked off the license plate, folded it up, and stuck it in his pocket. Then he grabbed his gun and leather gloves from the van. Next he took an old t-shirt and doused it with motor oil and shoved it in the gas tank.

" You can kiss our ride goodbye." He said as he lit the t-shirt on fire. He grabbed Tina's hand and they took off running into the night.

CHAPTER 21

Vinny and Tina strutted leisurely along Rt.68. The ambiance was scary and Tina could hear owls hooting and hissing sounds she thought came from snakes. She was getting really hungry and she had to pee. She wasn't about to go pee in front of Vinny because he might get evil ideas in his head, as if he didn't have enough already.

Vincent huffed on a Newport and the smoke was making her queasy. He seemed nervous for some reason. Wrecking the van was not part of the plan and now they were stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no one around for miles.

While all hope seemed to be lost a green old Ford pickup truck emerged from the distance. As the truck drew nearer they noticed a prominent confederate license plate on the front.

" Turn around and stick out your thumb." Commanded Vinny," You're a chick, he'll pull over."

Tina did as she was told and they both waited patiently for the truck to come their way. It seemed to be moving at a snail's pace and Vinny could tell by the front grill that it was probably a 77 F-150. He knew this because he used to have one just like it when he was a kid.

The brakes squeaked as the driver slowed down and rolled down his window. The driver looked to be in his early 30's. He wore a green mesh hat that said John Deer. His hair was red and curly and cropped on the sides. The driver looked to be a sloppy 300 lbs. with yellow stained chipped teeth that showed when he smiled. As soon as Vinny

accosted him he could smell strong liquor emanating from inside the truck.

" Do you guys need a ride?" Asked the driver.

" As a matter of fact we do." Replied Vinny.

" Well I don't know if I have room for you both but I can definitely take the pretty lady, hey, what's she got wrapped around her neck?"

Then the driver noticed blood on Vinny's shirt and bruises on his distorted face. The driver knew he was in trouble and pulled out a knife. As soon as Vinny saw the knife he shot the driver in the temple twice. The driver died instantly and his red head dropped to the steering wheel sounding the horn. Blood trickled from the steering wheel and onto his lap. Vinny wasted no time. He opened the driver's side door and hoisted the red head out of the driver's seat. It took all of Vinny's adrenaline to drag the 300 lb. man across the street. The drag ended up leaving a sticky trail of blood. Tina screamed so loud it was hurting his ears. Vinny drug the body into a gully running along side of the road.

" Come on let's go." He said motioning Tina to get in the truck.

She did as she was told and climbed into the passenger seat. Vinny found a rag on the floor and used it to wipe off the blood on the steering wheel and driver's seat. Tina buckled her seat belt and said a silent prayer. The inside of the truck was just as messy as the inside of the van that Vinny set on fire.

Vinny put the truck in drive and vamoosed from the

crime scene.

" Go through the glove box and find out who this truck belongs to." Ordered Vincent.

Tina pushed the button on the glove box and nearly jumped at the site of what fell out. 3 pairs of lacy women's underwear fell to her feet. She rummaged through the glove box and found a gag and a pair of hand cuffs.

" This guy was a creep!" Said Tina.

" Yeah, just imagine what he would've done to you!" He chuckled.

He seemed to be familiar with the 3 speed shifter on the column. The truck had no air conditioning so Tina rolled down her window to get some fresh air. Plus she felt Vinny was starting to stink. That's when Vincent finally explained his mental condition and his yearning for silence.

" It's imperative that when you speak you only speak of relevant things. Too much chatter causes me to lose control. We almost died back there."

Tina kept her mouth shut and listened intently. There was no need to upset this monster.

For 20 whole minutes they rode in silence and Vinny loved every minute of it. Just when Tina was feeling relaxed they pulled into a gas station that had been shut down. Off in the corner of the parking lot was a well lit phone booth radiating a fluorescent beam across the lot. Vinny pulled the truck along side of it and cut the engine. He reached across Tina and dug around the glove box until he found paper and

a pen.

Tina sat in silence while he began writing things down. When he was finished he handed the piece of paper to Tina and demanded she get out of the truck. Then he grabbed her by the arm and walked her over to the pay phone.

" Don't screw this up and don't cry on the phone." He said digging his fingernails into her arm," I want you to read everything on that paper and nothing else. Do you understand?"

Tina nodded and picked up the phone while Vinny held the 9mm to her head. Judge Anderson picked up on the first ring.

" Hello?"

" Daddy it's me. I've been kidnapped."

" Are you okay? Where are you?"

" I can't say but the kidnapper has a gun to my head and wants me to read this message."

" Let me talk to him."

" I can't daddy. Here's what he has to say. He wants \$210,000.00 all in hundred dollar bills and he wants it in 78 hours. Under no circumstances are you to go to the police. We'll call you back with further instructions. Oh, and one last thing. He says if cancer could talk he'd like to be a public speaker so he can spread cancer throughout the entire United States."

" Honey, if he touches you tell him I'll kill him."

" I'm fine daddy. Just do as he asks and don't involve the police. Hey, how's Aunt Margret Stiller doing?"

Tina felt an electric shock run through her body.

" Ouch!" She cried as she accidentally dropped the phone. Vincent put on his leather gloves and hung up the phone.

" I forgot to tell you." Said Vinny, "See this other button here on my watch? It sends an electric shock to you like a dog collar if you act out of line."

Tina tried to play dumb." What are you talking about?"

" What was that crap you were saying about your Aunt Margret Stiller? Were you trying to talk in code?"

" No, my aunt is really sick. I just wanted to know how she was doing."

Tina was lying through her teeth. When Vinny shot her with the tranquilizer dart the last thing she saw was a grave stone that read Margret Stiller. She was hoping maybe Vinny left some evidence at the exact location she was abducted. Vinny grabbed her by the arm and walked her to the truck.

" Come on let's go! They're going to be here soon."

CHAPTER 22

Vincent exited the parking lot of the gas station and headed back in the same direction from which they came.

" Why are we going back the other way?" Asked Tina.

" We have to because we left a trail for them to follow. They'll never expect we'll go back the other way." He said with certainty.

Tina found an unopened bag of pretzels lying next to her feet. She picked up the bag of pretzels and examined them.

" Go ahead and help yourself." Said Vinny. He rolled up his window to light a Newport.

While she was munching on the pretzels Vinny suddenly placed his hand over her head and pushed her head down into her lap. Just before her head went down she saw flashing lights.

" Cops!" Warned Vinny holding her head down. The cops sped by and he finally took his hand off of her head.

Here I am! Come rescue me! Thought Tina to herself.

" From now on if you see cops you put your head down. Do you understand me?"

Tina nodded her head. When they drove past the site where they destroyed the van Vinny cursed up a storm.

" I lost a lot of explosives because of your incessant chatter."

Tina couldn't believe her eyes. There were pieces of the van scattered everywhere and some of the pieces were still on fire. A fire truck was at the scene and some fire men

were hosing down a tree that had caught on fire. Vinny snuck furtive glances at her while she ate the pretzels, the bag was almost empty.

" I'll bet you're pretty thirsty."

" Yeah." She softly replied.

" We'll be home in about 20 minutes. You'll be fine."

When they got off of Rt.68 and got on Rt.10 the ride became a lot bumpier. They drove past a lot of farms and cornfields. Before long they were traveling down a long windy gravel road that was surrounded by a tree farm. They slowly eased past a brown double wide trailer in need of repair. The stones spit and spat as they circled around the trailer and headed towards a small old barn. The grass looked like it hadn't been mowed in months.

Vinny parked the truck in front of the van and then unlocked the huge sliding door to the barn. He pushed the sliding door over far enough that he could park the truck in the barn. Tina looked surprised when Vinny pulled the truck into the barn and cut the engine. There were no horses or stacks of hay like most barns usually have. Vinny had turned the barn into one giant garage.

Off to the side was a red 97 Jeep Wrangler with a trailer hooked up to it. A small boat sat on top of the trailer but she could only see the bottom of it because the top part was covered in a blue tarp. Up near the front of the garage was a huge work bench covered in appliances that had been all tore apart. Among those parts was a microwave and a vacuum cleaner. On the walls hung a bunch of license plates that had been cut in half and then welded back together with

pieces from other halves. What Tina really couldn't understand was the hundreds of model rocket engines off in the corner that had been taken apart.

" Are we going to the moon?" She said jokingly. It was clear that this was where Vinny spent most of his time.

" Just take a seat on the couch and I'll bring you something to drink." He said ignoring her humor.

Tina walked over to the sofa and dusted off a sofa cushion before she sat down. Vincent walked over to a refrigerator that had a crown emblem on it and pulled out 2 Budweisers.

" Do you want one?" He asked, " It will go good with the pretzels you ate."

Tina paused before she answered and then figured why not? Perhaps a beer would take the edge off things.

" Sure, I'll take one."

Vinny twisted the cap off and handed her the bottle. She nervously sipped from the bottle while she peered at the label between sips. What was going to happen next? What was this long haired freak with the eye patch going to do to her? She watched Vinny pick up a cordless phone and dial a number. He waddled over to the work bench and ran his long sausage fingers through his long unruly hair while he waited for the other end to pick up. After 5 rings he heard his acquaintance mumbling on the other end.

" Hey Peter it's me Vinny, I just accidentally lost 20 sticks of dynamite and I need more." Vinny paced around

and reached in his pocket for his cigarettes." Yeah, tonight would be great. I'm going to bed soon so just leave it on the back porch of the trailer."

Tina finished her beer. She had completely torn off the label on the bottle without even realizing it. *What kind of dire scheme was Vinny planning?* She missed Steve so much it hurt. Every time she would try to relinquish the thought of him something terrible would happen to her and she would think of him.

Vinny saw her beer was empty so he brought her out another one. She found a People magazine to read while Vinny tinkered with electrical gadgets over the work bench. The smell of burning wire was starting to annoy her but this was no longer her show. She knew Vinny had the upper hand now and she had had her chance earlier on to shoot him but she blew it. She was better off pretending to be his girlfriend and stay vigilant for a chance to escape.

An hour passed and Tina had already drunk 3 Budweisers. She really had to go pee and crossing her legs didn't seem to help. She looked over at Vinny who was still soldering wires onto a circuit board.

" I really have to go pee." She finally said.

Vincent dropped the soldering gun and looked disappointed." There's no bathroom in here. I usually piss out the back door but I guess I can take you inside the trailer."

This time he let her walk on her own free will without grabbing her arm. Tina looked around the yard and noticed a bunch of dead birds and squirrels scattered throughout the

grass. She looked up at the full moon which seemed to be laughing at her. Vinny walked behind her and she knew he was probably staring at her butt. She walked a little faster towards the trailer but then suddenly slowed down realizing if she exceeded 40 yards of distance between them she would blow up.

When she got to the trailer she let Vinny step in front of her to open the door. The door creaked when Vincent opened it and a nice sized rottweiler was there to greet them. Tina stuck out her hands and the dog dutifully licked her hands.

"It's this way." Said Vinny pointing towards the back. He was jealous of the dog liking someone else.

Tina almost tripped on the dirty laundry bunched up in the hallway. It was clear that Vinny was a bachelor because the place was trashed. Tina slammed shut the bathroom door before Vinny could give instructions on how to go to the bathroom.

The inside of the toilet bowl was completely brown. She wondered when the last time it was when Vinny cleaned the toilet. Next to the toilet was a toilet brush in an empty peanut butter jar. It looked like at one point the dog had chewed on it. Tina chuckled when she read the sign above the toilet which read "Step closer it's shorter than you think." She checked herself out in the mirror real quick before she finally sat down and did her business.

Vincent waited patiently outside the door and whistled thinking maybe that would help her get started.

"Just make sure you put the toilet seat back up when

you're finished." He shouted loud enough for her to hear.

It made him think of the rules in prison. Every inmate knew that upon completion of doing a number 2 the toilet seat was to go back in the upward position. He remembered the time he accidentally left it down and his celly pissed all over the seat to teach him a lesson and advised him to never leave it down again.

When Tina was finished she used her foot to flush the toilet. There was no way she was going to touch anything. When she opened the bathroom door her jaw dropped and her pupils dilated as she let out a shriek.

There was Vincent standing there wearing only his boxer shorts.

CHAPTER 23

" I was just playing." Said Vinny as he pulled up his pants and put his shirt back on. Tina didn't know how to react to the situation. Should she laugh? Should she cry? What was her best move here? She put on a flirtatious look, nudged him in the shoulder, and brushed past him while waving her fanny. Vinny laughed and then caught up with her. He let out a whistle and then checked her out once again.

They walked across the lawn and headed back to the barn. Two headlights illuminated them and stretched out their long shadows. Vinny shielded her from the headlights almost as if he was trying to hide her.

" Rat's! This wasn't supposed to happen!"

He spit in the grass and tightened his grip on Tina's arm." We've got to move faster." He said picking up the pace and heading towards the barn.

When they got inside Vinny had Tina hide behind the boat and stay there until he said she could come out.

" Stay back there until this guy leaves and don't make a sound!" He said walking over to the work bench and trying to look busy.

He could hear the cobble stones ping from the tires of Peter's red truck pulling into the driveway. This was not good. Vinny did not want Peter to see Tina but maybe he hadn't and everything will be alright. He forgot that he left the side door ajar and when he went to go shut it the door swung wide open and Peter walked in.

" Hey Vinny,buddy ole pal." Peter tried to embrace but Vinny took a step back.

Peter looked like a mess and Vinny could tell he'd been drinking heavily. He wore a black T-shirt with holes in it and blue jeans that were way too tight. He had a barbed wire fence tattoo going around his right bicep that had prominent veins throbbing out because he always worked out. His green lucid eyes had an assuring look like a Charismatic preacher telling someone about God. His head was shaved completely bald and the nape of his neck looked corrugated. Peter looked like an ugly version of Stone Cold Steve Austin.

" So why do you seem all uptight little man?" Asked Peter.

Vinny had a sullen look on his face and he tried his best

to cover it up.

" Do you have my merchandise?" Asked Vincent.

Peter grinned and then pulled a bag of crystal meth out of his pocket.

" Sure I have it. It's out in the truck. But first I thought we could do some of this." Peter waved the bag and grinned while Vincent stared at his rotten teeth." You know, I could've sworn I just saw you with a woman when I pulled into the driveway."

Vinny took his gaze off Peter and fished in his pocket for a cigarette. As he lit it he mumbled through his breath." I don't know what you're talking about."

" Aw come on buddy, don't hold out. Where is she?"

Peter started gallivanting around the room kicking over empty boxes as if a woman might be hiding under it. It only took a minute for Peter to find Tina curled up in a ball hidden behind the boat.

" Sweet Mary! Would you look at that! Where'd ya pick up this foxy lil lady?"

Vinny looked agitated as he stepped in Peter's way to block his view."Just leave her alone okay."

" Sure,whatever man. But what's with the black box around her neck?"

Tina looked terrified all hunched up in the corner not sure of what to do.

" Oh it's just a little game we play." Said Vinny looking more nervous than a child at his very first spelling bee.

Peter pursed his lips and then made obscene gestures with his tongue at Tina. The hide and seek game was over so Tina went back over to the sofa and read her People magazine.

" Come on Vinny,let's do this stuff!"

Vinny followed him over to the work bench and cleared them off a spot to do the crystal meth. Peter looked at all the electrical gadgets and circuit boards that had been tampered with.

" Hey, what's with all this crap? You're planning something big aren't you?"

" Don't worry about it. Let's just do this okay."

Peter reached in his wallet and pulled out an old credit card and then started cutting lines for them to snort.

" You go first buddy ole pal." Said Peter slapping him on the back. Vinny rolled up the dollar bill and jammed it in his nose." Nothing like skiing." He said as he bowed his head and snorted the first line.

Tina was getting nervous. She was amidst two horny guys standing aloof and hovering over a work bench snorting drugs. God only knows what could happen next. She wondered about the bomb around her neck and if it was real or not. Judging by all the tinkering Vincent did with electrical equipment she surmised there was a good chance it was

real. And gosh did she miss Steve. He would do something about this.

She stared over at the counterfeit license plates welded together that hung from the wall while Vinny and Peter giggled and made perverted jokes. It seemed like they were progressively talking louder to each other as if they couldn't hear one another. The constant snorting and laughter was bothering Tina and she had already looked over every page in the magazine.

Moments later Peter came over and sat next next to her on the couch while Vinny played with a blow torch. When he sat down Tina pushed herself to the far edge of the sofa completely ignoring Pete. Faster than a bolt of lightning Peter pounced on her. He pinned her down and started kissing her. She tried to squirm her way free but the big burly man on top of her was too heavy and strong. She heard a chain saw start up and that's when crap hit the fan.

Peter became startled at the sound of the chain saw and jumped up from the sofa. There stood Vincent in a psychotic state of mind laughing up a storm and brandishing the chain saw.

" Ha! Ha! Ha!" Said Vinny swinging the chain saw through the air.

Peter raised his hands and took a step back while trying to calm his friend down. Vinny swung the chain saw towards his head but Peter put out his hands to shield himself. The chain saw cut right through his hands and all but one finger went flying through the air. One of the fingers landed in Tina's lap and she screamed like a mouse was on her lap. Vinny laughed once again while his friend backed up even

more.

" Ha! Ha! Ha!" He said. This time he poked the chain saw right into his abdomen. Peter's guts and intestines went flying everywhere. Peter went down while his eyes continued to dilate.

Vinny wasn't done having fun yet. He revved up the chain saw and cut off Peter's head then punted it like a football. The fumes from the chain saw plus all of the excitement was enough to make Tina pass out. When the show was finally over Vinny grinned and took a bow.

CHAPTER 24

Tina woke up with the taste of Budweiser spewing from her mouth. She turned her head and the beer continued pouring on her sticky face. Vinny stood over her and spilled beer on her to try and wake her up while he smoked a Newport.

" I thought I lost you but welcome back."

Tina stared at his eye patch which was partially askew. She wished that she never would've woken up. Who wants to wake up at the site of a freak hovering over you and spilling beer on your face? Tina coughed and foamy beer receded down her lips. Vinny looked excited as if he had just shot his very first deer.

" You need to get up. I have a little job for you."

Tina felt her heart skip a beat and she put her hands over her chest and feigned illness. She smelled ammonia and when she turned around she saw a mop and mop

bucket ready to go. Vincent held the mop in one hand and used his free hand to help Tina off the ground.

" You got to earn your stay around here." He said handing her the mop," I want every bit of Peter cleaned up and I don't want to find any traces of blood."

Tina looked over the unwieldy task before her and gaped in horror. There was chunks of flesh and blood spattered all over the walls and concrete floor. It was like Vinny had made Peter disappear by chopping up his body into myriad little pieces. Tina cringed and shook her head no.

" You must be out of your mind!" She protested.

Vinny's smile suddenly vanished and he became more irate than a fisherman that just lost a big fish. He stepped up to her face and scolded her while waving his hands and yelling.

" You can cut the theatrics missy!" He grabbed a fistfull of her hair," So you want to play games? We can play games. I've got one I think you'd like."

He pulled out a set of handcuffs from his back pocket and cuffed her hands behind her back. Still pulling her by her pretty blond hair, he drug her over to an old desolate chair sitting in the corner. He threw her so hard into the chair that her head flew back and her neck cricked. Then he found a rope and bound her tightly to the chair barely giving her enough room to breathe. Tina hissed and tried to bite him but she could barely move in the chair. Vinny walked over to the back door, opened it, and reached around the corner and held up a brown paper bag.

" You see this? This is a little trick we learned in the marines for people who don't cooperate."

He rushed the brown paper bag over to Tina and opened it so she could look in the bag. As soon as he opened the bag she nearly threw up from the pungent odor emanating from the bag. She was petrified to see feces covered in flies inside the bag. A few flies flew out of the bag and landed on her face.

" You are not putting that thing over my f-"

Before she could finish talking Vinny put the bag over her face with great delight. Tina's entire world went dark. She could not believe what was happening. She forced herself to stop hyperventilating and concentrate on taking little breaths through the mouth of her pursed lips. She wondered how any normal human being could ever do something like this. But one thing she knew for sure, Vincent was not normal.

" This is how the game gets played." Said Vinny lighting a cigarette," However long it takes me to clean this mess up is how long the bag stays on your head. Anytime you wish to take over cleaning up this mess the bag will come off your head."

Tina slowly took in a deep breath." My daddy's gonna kill you, you bastard!"

Vinny put his hands over his chest and laughed uncontrollably." Oh is that so? Well guess what? Daddy isn't here right now ha ha ha!"

Tina was determined not to give in. She concentrated

on taking tiny short breaths through her mouth but the stench was making her dizzy. In the mean time Vincent grabbed the mop and started cleaning while whistling like maybe he was enjoying it. Tina threw up a couple of times and after 5 minutes she decided she had enough.

" Alright. I give up. You win." She said coughing through the bag.

" That's my girl." He said as he pulled the bag off her face.

He had made the knots so tight when he tied her up that he had to use his pocket knife to cut through the rope. Then he walked her over to the sink and let her clean her face. After she finished washing up Vinny stood behind her and ran his dirty fingers through her hair.

" I'm going to help you clean this mess up because soon, very soon, we have another game to play."

CHAPTER 25

When all of Peter's remains were meticulously picked up Vinny tossed his cigarette into the mop bucket full of blood. The place looked a lot better than before. All of Peter's remains were divided up into six large black hefty trash bags and piled neatly in the corner. The smell of human flesh had temporarily dissipated when Vinny tied the bags shut.

Vinny walked over to the fridge and pulled out two Budweisers. He offered one to Tina and she took it and they did drink. Then he walked over to the saw horse which had a tie-dye blanket neatly folded on top of it.

" It's time to play our game." He said lifting off the blanket and walking towards the couch," It's kind of like monopoly only better."

Vincent stood in front of the sofa and spread the blanket out in front of the floor. Tina sipped her beer and tried not to be so nervous. She didn't particularly care for the games he liked to play." Please come over here and sit." Ordered Vinny.

Tina obediently walked over to the blanket and sat in the lotus position. Vinny walked over to the work bench and slid open the drawer to the tool chest. Tina watched him pull out what looked like two dice from the tool chest. Vinny took the dice in his hands and blew on them removing the saw dust. He walked over to Tina while still concealing the dice in his hands.

" You know I used to hate these things in prison." He said holding out the dice," I lost my left eye because of these stupid dice. The inmates used to shoot craps all night long behind my cube while I was trying to sleep. One night it was 1:30 in the morning and they were still making a lot of noise behind my cube rolling those stupid dice betting on stamps and mackerels. I finally had enough of their noise and stabbed one of them in the back of the neck with a pen. Later that same guy attacked me with a lock in the sock."

Vincent gave her an imploring look like it somehow wasn't his fault.

" I'm sorry to hear that." She softly mumbled. But really she wasn't sorry to hear that and secretly she wished they would've killed him.

Vinny tossed the dice on the blanket and snapped his fingers.

" That's another thing they did in jail. They always snapped their fingers after they rolled."

It almost seemed to Tina that maybe Vinny was feeling a little nostalgic about prison. Did maybe he want to go back? Tina was a little surprised when she looked at the dice. Instead of the dice containing dots there were names and words written on each side. The first dice had what appeared black people names on it and the other dice had words of terror written on it. Tina squinted her eyes and carefully observed the dice. The first one read " Tony", "Jamaal", " Wiggles", " Tyrone", " Prosecutor", and "Guard".

Tina flinched her eyes in frustration. Who the heck was Wiggles? Then she picked up the other dice and read it. The second dice read " Fire", " Strangulation", " Booby trap", " Bomb", " Kidnapping", and a "?".

"What exactly is this all about?" Asked Tina not understanding the dice.

Vinny picked up the dice and caressed them in his hand. He held the dice with the names on it in front of her face." These are the people that turned me into a monster." Then he held up the second dice with the catastrophes for her to see. " And this is what we're going to do to them." He let out an evil laugh similar to Dr.Evil's laugh from the movie Austin Powers. Vinny put his hand on her shoulder while he continued to laugh." And you my lucky girl are the one who gets to determine their fate."

Before she could say anything he bounced up and fetched a pen and paper from the work bench and then rejoined her on the blanket." You see it goes like this." Smiled Vinny," The FBI is pretty smart and eventually they might get inside my head and figure out my next move. But if I don't even know my next move how will they?"

Tina rubbed her eyes in dismay, cupped her hands over her mouth, and yawned. It was 3 AM and she was getting too tired for Vincent's shenanigans." I think I'm ready for bed." She said spreading out on the blanket.

" Oh, I know how to wake you up." He said pushing the button on his wrist watch. Tina felt an electric shock jolt through her neck."Ouch!" She cried while grabbing her neck.

" Did you forget that I can do that? Do we have to put the bag over your face?" Asked the freak. His yellow stained teeth looked like shark teeth when he grinned. Tina felt the burden upon her. Those people's fate was in her hands and Vinny was going to probably kill these innocent people.

" What did these people do wrong?" She finally asked.

Vinny told her the entire story about how his four students didn't like him and set him up for a crime he didn't do. Then he told her about the guard that almost dehydrated him to death by sticking him in a dry cell and not giving him any water. The doctors told him another hour he would've been dead from the dehydration. Poor Vinny couldn't walk or even have the strength to talk for weeks when he was finally hospitalized and rejuvenated. The whole story blew Tina's mind. She couldn't understand how a school teacher could turn into a serial killer and felt rather dubious as to whether or not he was really innocent.

" Enough talk! Let's play the game. Now roll the dice!"
Shouted Vincent.

Tina paused for a moment and Vinny pushed the button on his wrist watch."Ouch!" She cried then rolled the dice on the blanket. The first dice said " Tyrone" and the second dice said " Fire". Vinny wrote the information on a piece of paper." Roll again" Ordered Vinny. Tina sat there crying and covered in tears. When she saw Vinny's finger get close to his wrist watch she rolled again. The dice read " Jamaal" and " Strangulation". Again he wrote the information down on paper. Just as she was about to roll a third time Vinny grabbed her hand.

" That's enough." He said," We'll have time to finish this game tomorrow and I want to milk this out because it's fun."

Tina had a disgusted look on her face and almost felt herself vomit. Her tonsils still hurt from all the vomiting earlier. Vinny picked the tie-dye blanket off the floor and threw it on the couch." Go ahead and get some rest. I'm not going to sleep because I have some work to do and I'm all wired up on crystal meth. Better get your sleep because we have a big day tomorrow."

Tina layed on the couch and covered herself with the blanket and closed her eyes. She could still hear Vinny's voice reverberate in her mind." *If I don't know my next move, how will they?"*

CHAPTER 26

Special agent Chris Carter and his assistant John Travis waited patiently on the red brick porch out front of the

villa. They were horse playing like usual as they waited for someone to come to the door. Carter balled up his fist and gave Travis a pretty good charley horse on the side of his leg. If they were keeping score Carter was definitely one up on his partner. They both had their backs to the door and admired the beautifully cut lawn that had been cut diagonally and devoid of weeds or crab grass. Some of the other houses in the neighborhood had signs on their front lawn that read " Vote Quimby".

Carter looked at his watch which read 1:30 pm. He had been up since 4:30 am and was feeling kind of groggy. The front door opened up real slowly this time and Alfred the butler came to greet them at the door. His bright white hair was neatly slicked back but his matching colored bushy goatee still had crumbs in it as if he had just been eating.

" Please come in gentlemen." Said Alfred walking them into the living room.

Judge Anderson was sitting in a brown leather easy chair crocheting what looked to be a red scarf. This was something he always did when he had too much bothering him. On the judges lap was a soft red velvet blanket covered in panda bears. The judge did not look good at all. The purple bags under his eyes revealed that he had been up all night.

When Carter and Travis wended through the living room and sat down across from him the judge didn't even look up. They both watched the judge crochet for a minute before Carter finally spoke up.

" We think we may have some leads as to your daughter's whereabouts."

The judge put down the crochet needles and raised an

eye brow as if he was getting ready to talk to a child about smoking.

" Leads? All you have is leads? I'm still missing my daughter!" He said with his eyes filling with anger.

Carter and Travis both backed up in their chair as if a canine was in their face about to attack. The judge gave a cold hard stare while his upper lip curled as if he was thinking about biting them himself. Agent Sanders walked into the room carrying a tape recorder. Carter wondered if maybe Sanders was one of those guys that cuts his own hair in the mirror because his fade looked very much messed up.

Sanders said " The ransom call came in around midnight just after you guys left." He said reassuringly while placing the tape recorder on the coffee table. He looked like he hadn't gotten much sleep either and he smelled like a stinky armpit.

Sanders pushed play and they all sat at the edge of their seats to listen as Tina's voice came on the recorder. Carter and Travis listened intently while Travis took out his legal pad and took notes. The judge became teary eyed and used the scarf he was making to wipe his cheeks.

" I don't understand something." Said Carter," Why did this guy give a 78 hour deadline instead of a 72 hour deadline which would be exactly 3 days?"

" Maybe he's just a bone head." Sniffed the judge.

" Or he purposely left us a clue." Piped up Travis.

Sanders rewound the tape and played it again but

turned up the volume a little this time. They all looked at each other bemused as they heard Tina's voice say " Oh, and one last thing. He says if cancer could talk he'd like to be a public speaker so he could spread cancer all throughout the United States."

What on earth was that supposed to mean? Carter scratched his head and looked around at the animal heads staring back at him." This talk of cancer has us a little baffled."

" Yeah, me too." Said the judge with an imploring look.

Travis nudged Carter and whispered " Steve" into his ear. Carter straightened up in his chair and cleared his throat." I'm afraid we have some disturbing news."

" Oh?" Said the judge embracing himself for just about anything.

" We tried to talk to Tina's boyfriend Steve this morning but his mother said he's missing. Turns out he never came home from the races."

The judge squeezed the scarf while staring at the wooden floor. He purposely kept his head down so they couldn't read his face." You're not suggesting that her own boyfriend kidnapped her are you?"

Carter wiped some fuzz off his pant leg and flicked it onto the floor." At this point we can't rule anything out. This could be their elaborate scheme to extort money from you. However the evidence left behind suggests that the perp may have been someone you dealt with in your courtroom." Carter nudged Travis signaling him to open the brief case.

Travis jumped a little in surprise as if he had been day dreaming. He was wondering if the judge was going to offer more of that wonderful hazelnut coffee."Oh yeah." Said Travis opening up the brief case. He reached in and pulled out several computer printed pages and handed them to the judge.

" We stopped by Cozy Ginger's Hair Salon and got a list of names of all their customers they've had in the last six months. As you can see there's a lot of them. The majority of the names are female and we verified that the perfume on the business card was woman's perfume. It is possible the suspect is a woman."

The judge was still staring at the ground lost in his own little world. All he could think about was Tina and Steve and their big kidnapping hoax. She was going to be in so much trouble if he found out that she faked her own kidnapping. After all, she didn't sound that nervous on the phone. The judge quickly skimmed over the names but there must've been hundreds of them.

" What am I supposed to do with this?" He asked.

"Just take the time tonight to go over the names and see if any of them jump out at you." Said Travis closing the brief case.

Carter cleared his throat and wiped his sweaty palms on his pant legs." There's more we have to tell you. After the kidnapping the perp left a trail. First at the derelict park where we found the MP3 player. Then at a gas station that was shut down and under construction where we found Tina's prints on a pay-phone. We also found the van used in the kidnapping which got blown up to pieces. We did find the

VIN number but the van turned out to be stolen. All this happened in Elkton county right off of Rt.68. We have a team of officers searching through that mountain because we believe they're on foot hiding in the mountains."

The judge had a worried look on his face and he scratched the mole on his neck." She's not suited to be walking through the mountains in that hooters outfit." Protested the judge.

Carter stood up from the couch and reached into his vest pocket. He pulled out a business card embossed with gold ink and a star with a circle around it." We really have to be going but let us know if you recognize any names on these papers. We'll leave these papers with you." He said extending an arm to help up his partner.

Travis paused for a minute before grabbing his hand. Where was the coffee? He felt a rumbling inside his stomach. A sweet aroma lingered in the air and Travis recognized it as a freshly baked cheese cake. He reluctantly grabbed his hand hoping that if he held off for one more second the judge would offer them some cheese cake or at least a cup of coffee.

" Let's go." Said Carter pulling his hand and almost reading his mind.

CHAPTER 27

When Tina woke up she thought she was still dreaming. She rolled around a few times on the sofa and felt her tank top sticking to the sofa cushions. She rolled on her belly face down in the sofa cushion then quickly changed positions because the sofa cushion reeked of cigarettes. When she

rolled over on her back and opened her eyes her mind raced a mile a minute. There was Vinny standing over her holding a green turtle neck and a baggy pair of jeans. Did Vinny go inside the trailer to fetch these out dated clothes? If he did then why didn't the bomb around her neck go off?

Tina fingered the bomb around her neck and debated whether or not it was real. Vinny hovered over her with an impish look on his face while dangling a green turtle neck and tickling her face with it. Ironically the turtle neck actually smelled like fresh laundry detergent. Vinny sounded excited for some reason.

" I brought you some clothes to wear but first we have to do something before you put them on."

Stricken horror ran through Tina's mind. Last night he made her play that stupid dice game that gambled with people's lives and now what? Tina yawned, turned around, and saw the tie-dye blanket pinned to the wall. She also saw a black tripod with a DVD recorder mounted to it.

Vincent clapped his hands together vigorously like he had just come up with a bright idea.

" Hey guess what? We're going to make a movie!" He said almost jumping up and down.

Tina rolled on her belly and buried her face in the stinky sofa cushion and pretended to go back to sleep. Vinny shook her shoulder and she sat up instantaneously because she didn't like being touched. The site of Vinny frightened Tina when she looked into his hairball eye. His eye was bulging out of his head just like in the movie she once watched where a guy was stuck on mars without his astronaut gear. It was quite evident that Vincent was up all night doing drugs. He held out an arm to help her off the

sofa.

" Aw come on, you'll like it. This video is going to your dad."

Vinny led her to a big green Army blanket spread out on the floor adjoining the tie-dye blanket pinned on the wall for a background. Tina sat cross legged on the Army blanket and Vinny handed her a piece of paper which had the things she was supposed to say.

" You're going to read everything on this piece of paper and nothing else or we'll have to start over until you get it right." Said Vinny adjusting the tripod.

In his left hand he was holding a small palm sized tape recorder, the kind reporters use.

" The faster we get this done the faster we can go eat." He said rubbing his belly.

Tina read over the note first before she signaled she was ready. Vincent zoomed in the camera at her and focused on her face." Okay, three,two, one."

Tina cleared her throat and read the note." Hi daddy,I'm doing okay for now but things can get worse if you screw this up. Do not go to the police or any other law officials. It's imperative that the two hundred and ten thousand dollars be strictly in hundred dollar bills. If you go to the police he will not hesitate to kill me. We will be contacting you later with further instructions of how to deliver the money. Don't screw this up and no funny stuff."

When Tina quit talking she could hear strange noises

coming out of the tape recorder in Vinny's hand. What on earth was he doing? She watched in bewilderment as Vinny held the tape recorder next to the DVD recorder with a scheming look on his face. He placed an index finger over his lips signaling her to be quiet as the tape recorder made gun fire shooting sounds. She could also hear what sounded like a train passing by. When Vinny was finished he ejected the DVD disc and placed it in a manila envelope.

Tina still sat on the blanket looking bewildered and wondering what the train and shooting sounds were all about. Vinny lit a Newport and then looked up at the rafters and pointed his finger straight up in the air.

" You know I have a 22 semiautomatic rifle up there." Said Vinny still pointing to the roof. Tina shrugged her shoulders like she could care less. Vincent droned on. "Yeah, all those dead birds and squirrels you saw on my lawn get shot with that gun."

Tina finally stood up from the blanket and gazed up at the roof." So what's it doing on the roof then?" She finally asked.

" Oh, I don't personally shoot those birds and squirrels myself. I rigged that gun up to a machine which I plug into my lap top."

Vincent walked over to his work bench and picked up a lap top that had a mini built in joystick and plugged it into some wires that ran up the wall." Check this out." Said Vinny," It's just like a video game." He turned on the LCD screen which showed an image of the yard moving. Vinny spotted a bird in the yard and zoomed in on it.

" You're not going to shoot it are you?" Asked Tina with

her jaw dropping.

Vinny eyes glimmered." Of course not. You are." He said holding the lap top in front of her.

Tina took a step back and stared at the bird on the screen.

" Hurry up!" Shouted Vinny." It's soon going to fly away."

Before she could retaliate Vinny grabbed her arm and coerced her to push the button. The gun on the roof fired a shot and the bird flew a foot off the ground and plummeted straight to the ground. Tina turned her head while Vinny remained transfixed to the screen and watched the bird's every move.

The bird danced around in a circle with one wing raised for a while and then suddenly died. Vinny bellowed out a sinister laugh and then asked her if she wanted to play again. Tina crossed her arms and frowned at him in disgust like an upset wife would do. Vinny turned off the lap top and then unplugged it from the wires running up the wall.

" Oh, I almost forgot." Said Vinny putting away the lap top," We gotta give you a make over so I can take you out in public." Vinny dug through his tool chest and pulled out a long pointy pair of shears. Then he dug through the pile of junk on the floor and picked out a box of black hair dye. Tina felt her heart sink to the bottom. She got compliments all the time on her long blond luscious hair and here this scum bag freak of a man thinks he has the right to chop it off. It was like Vinny could read her mind as he walked towards her and pulled out some black lip stick from his pocket. Tina backed up as he walked towards her.

" Oh yeah. Girlfriend. We're gonna convert you into a Gothic chick." Said Vincent coming at her with the lip stick.

Tina knew she had no choice. She was through with pissing him off because he tortured her way too much. Vinny pulled up a folding chair and Tina dutifully sat in the chair and pulled her long blond hair behind her shoulders. Vinny snipped the shears a few times next to her ear just to tease her. He yanked the tie-dye blanket down from the wall and wrapped it around her neck. He gleefully hewed away at her hair while whistling a song he used to sing in the Marines.

Tina was still thinking about the bird he shot. She had read in a book once that most serial killers liked to torture animals. Then she started to wonder how many people Vinny killed and if she was going to make it through this alive.

" You're not gonna cry?" Asked Vinny sounding disappointed.

" I've always hated my hair." Lied Tina.

Vinny cut off a lock of hair and tossed it in her lap just to tease her even more. He detected the sarcasm in her voice and knew she was lying. Surprisingly Vinny did a good job of cutting her hair. Another skill he had picked up in prison.

" So is it your turn next?" Joked Tina.

Vinny ran his sausage fingers through his long greasy hair and frowned." Even if I cut my hair I won't look good . Those inmates mutilated my face."

" Sorry to hear that." Said Tina curtailing her smile," I

still think you look good." She lied once more.

She didn't know what was making her feel the need to butter him up. Vinny handed her a pocket sized mirror so she could check out her new hairdo. It looked okay to her but she wondered how it would look after he would dye it black.

" You know I used to pick on the Gothic girls at school and now you're going to turn me into one." Said Tina biting her cuticle.

Vinny didn't say anything and started breathing heavy like he was getting ready to convulse. Tina recognized the heavy breathing from before. Like the time he tried to smash his van into a tree yesterday. It was time to stop the incessant chatter and shut up before she would get herself killed. Tina was finally learning.

CHAPTER 28

Tina covered her ears as Ramnstein blared into her ears. She couldn't stand heavy metal but evidently Vinny was enjoying himself and singing along to every word. *"You, you hate me to say, you hate me to say and I will not obey!"* They were cruising along in Vinny's red jeep along Rt.10 heading towards her father's mansion. She couldn't believe he had the balls to go anywhere near her home but he claimed he had to drop something off.

Her stomach churned and grumbled and she felt like she was starving. Vinny promised they would go out to eat after they delivered " *The package*" to her home. The inside of the jeep was immaculate and a sweet pine aroma filled the air. Tina could feel beads of sweat trickle down her back. She was wearing the turtle neck and the baggy black pair of Levis that made her look stupid. She pulled down the visor

and put on the black lip stick Vinny said she had to wear.

Unlike his mother, Vinny revved up his motor to 7,000 RPMs before he shifted into the next gear. Tina was just finishing putting on the final touches when Vinny down shifted from 2nd to 1st. Her head jolted forward and black lip stick made a Nike swoosh alongside her face receding from her lips. Vinny looked over at her and chuckled.

" Hey you must be a rat!" He said looking her over with his one good eye.

" What's that supposed to mean?" She asked dropping the lip stick to the floor.

" In prison they used to mark the rats. Inmates would melt a razor blade inside a toothbrush and use it to slash the side of another inmates left side of his mouth. It usually left a Nike swoosh looking scar receding from the side of their lips. Then everyone knew they were a rat."

Vincent reached in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief and passed it to her." Here use this to wipe off the excess lipstick. We won't have any rats in my car."

When Tina wiped the lipstick off her face she looked in the mirror and saw a police car following them. Vinny also spotted the cruiser and let off the gas.

" Should I stick my head down?" Asked Tina.

" No. It will look too suspicious. He's already seen you, just play it cool."

Vinny made a point of not looking too much in the rear view mirror because that might cause the cop to be alarmed.

Tina's heart beat faster and faster as she secretly prayed in the lull of the moment. She surreptitiously crossed her fingers and prayed that the cop would pull them over. She snuck a glance at Vinny's hands which were at the ten and two O'clock position on the steering wheel. His hands shook incessantly while he kept his gaze straight ahead on the road. When they drove past a WAWA the cruiser veered off to the side of the road and entered the parking lot.

" He was probably just going to fetch some doughnuts for his royal nibs." Said Vinny letting one shaky hand off the steering wheel. Tina felt somberness permeate throughout her body. It was like sitting next to the phone waiting on a call from Steve and having it be some stupid sales person. All hope was lost. When they finally entered Tina's neighborhood Vinny reached in the glove box and pulled out a pair of black leather gloves. He used his knee to steer while he slipped the gloves on his hands.

Vinny looked around to make sure nobody was watching him when he pulled up to the judge's mail-box. As quickly as he could Vinny put the manila envelope containing the DVD into the mailbox and took off. Tina wanted to jump out and run inside but she still was unsure about the bomb around her neck. When they got towards the end of the street and elderly couple was sitting on the porch staring at them. Tina recognized the couple from her daily jogs and always used to wave to them. This time Vinny smiled and waved to the couple nuzzling on the porch. Tina hoped and prayed they could recognize her but she highly doubted it. She had a new look and they were old and senile and probably couldn't see too good.

When they left her neighborhood Vinny turned up the heavy metal on the radio and became in a euphoric state of mind.

" Now we can go get something to eat." Said Vinny taking the gloves off.

They made a left on Oak street and a garbage truck in front of them was letting off nauseous fumes making Tina dizzy. Vinny looked like the fumes were bothering him too. He passed the garbage truck on a double yellow line and nearly collided with an oncoming motorcycle. The motorcyclist flipped them an obscene gesture that Vinny knew all too well. He thought about turning around and going after him but his stomach was telling him it was time to eat. He whipped into an Ihops parking lot and parked the jeep leaving it in first gear.

The restaurant appeared to be extremely busy but Vinny liked it that way because they would appear less conspicuous and he didn't want anyone remembering their faces. When they ambled into the Ihops Vinny felt a pang of uneasiness run through his body. It seemed like everywhere he looked there was a mirror. Seeing himself in the mirror usually causes him to go into fits of hysteria.

A 16 year old girl with long braided golden brown hair and freckles greeted them at the door. Vinny took Tina's hand to signify they were a couple. Tina looked like a worried mother visiting her son in the hospital. The 16 year old girl smiled pompously with a fake grin that said "*You guys look funny together*" while holding onto a stack of menus.

" Hi, I'm Ashley. I'll be your waitress today. Smoking or non?"

Vinny gripped Tina's hand a little harder and his whole body began to shake and tremble." Heh-heh-heh-heh." He began to laugh nervously. He stared at the floor tiles trying to

hide his upcoming fit of hysteria.

Ashley took a step back but smiled pleasantly like maybe she's seen strange people before and this was okay. Vinny's body continued to quiver while he snorted out laughter while staring at the floor with his face flush red. Ashley patiently waited for a response thinking maybe a camera man would step out and tell her she was on Candid Camera. Tina finally piped up.

" We'll take the smoking section." She said reassuringly. She was hungry and not in the mood for any more of Vinny's shenanigans.

" Okay, right this way." Said Ashley trying to keep from laughing herself.

Tina pulled on Vinny's arm and they followed the waitress to a booth and sat down. Vinny was still shaking vigorously like he was having some kind of seizure." The mirrors." He said," The mirrors are making me nervous." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fresh unopened pack of Newports.

Tina watched him without a care in the world. She was beginning to feel sorry for him and wondered what happened in his life that turned him into a monster. Vinny lit a Newport and inhaled deeply. The cigarette seemed to be calming his nerves. People stopped looking at him and returned to their meals. Ashley came back feeling all giddy. She was holding a pen and a tiny note pad and was ready to take their order.

" Are you guys ready to order?" She said in a barbie girl voice.

" We just sat down!" Shouted Vinny looking furious and

showing his razor sharp teeth.

The site of his shark teeth frightened Ashley causing her to jump back and her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

" Just excuse him. He's not feeling well." Said Tina putting her hand on his arm trying to settle him down.

" Oh, I'm sorry. I'll come back later." Said Ashley while cursing at him inside of her mind.

Vinny carefully looked over the menu trying his best not to look at the mirrors. Tina went to pick up her menu but Vinny put his fist on top of it. " Don't bother. I'll be doing all the ordering." He said giving her a death stare.

Tina carefully observed the hideous scars scattered all over his face and ran down his neck. She reminded herself that each scar probably told a story. Vinny played with his eye patch while he studied the menu. Customers chattered on their cellphones while waitresses scurried about trying not to trip on each other. Tina noticed a little blond haired boy wearing a green corduroy jumper sitting at another table. He was pointing his action figure at her and making shooting noises. Tina felt like she was in a trance while she stared at the Gi-Joe action figure that appeared to have a weapon in it's hands that was pointed right at her.

The mother saw what was going on and took the Gi-Joe and put it in her purse. The little boy started to cry and the mother told him he could have it after they left. Vincent seemed to be completely oblivious to what was going on around him and took his time scrutinizing the menu. A different waitress with short red curly hair and five freckles on each cheek came to their table with a serious look. Vinny looked up and saw her chomping on a piece of gum like it

was a piece of leather.

"Yo, ya'll ready to order or what?" She said popping her gum.

Vincent tilted his head to look around her and saw the manager standing aloof just waiting for an oncoming discrepancy. He shifted his gaze to the waitress that had a *don't give me any crap* look and cleared his throat.

"Yes, we'll both have the waffle special with extra strawberries and a large chocolate milk." He said adamantly.

The red head winked at Tina and then stuck her pen in her mouth." Would you like coffee with that?"

Tina looked at him dumbfounded and Vinny raised his index finger."Just coffee for me thank you." He said adamantly once more. He averted his one good eye every time he felt the waitress stare at him. After the red head finished jotting down the order she harshly dotted an "i" nearly stabbing the pen into the pad of paper, then she finally walked off.

By the time Vincent finished his second cigarette their food had arrived. For the first time that day Vinny saw Tina smile when she saw the food. They both had a stack of blueberry waffles topped with strawberries and whipped cream. Also there was two side dishes of bacon and sausage links. Tina grabbed her fork and was ready to dig in when Vinny grabbed her hand to stop her.

"We have to say the blessing first." He said with a serious look on his face.

Tina's jaw nearly dropped to the floor as she sat there dumbfounded. Vinny bowed his head and closed his eye and began praying. Reluctantly she did the same only she secretly peeked through her eye lids. He looked devoted and sincere. He even folded his hands on top of the table.

" Dear heavenly father, thank you for this day and for this food. Thank you that we can have Tina with us today heavenly father. Also I pray that I can find each and every one of those little brats that destroyed my life. Bless this food once again heavenly father. In your name. Amen."

Without even looking at each other they both began to dig into their waffles. By the time Tina went for her second waffle Vinny was already finished eating and chugging down his chocolate milk. He took a napkin and wiped the grease around his lips from the sausage." You know I've got two vehicles I have to destroy." He said licking his lips.

Tina put down her fork." Do you mean the vehicles belonging to the guys you killed?"

" Yeah. But maybe I'll just take the vehicles to a chop shop in Philly."

Tina tried to pretend that she was listening but really she was thinking about Steve. She missed him so much that it hurt inside.

" Do you like to fish?" Vinny blurted out.

" I don't know. I never tried it." She said placing her straw in her chocolate milk.

" Well, I hope you like it. Tomorrow we leave for

Chicago for a fishing trip." Vinny lit a Newport and patiently waited for Tina to finish her meal.

CHAPTER 29

"She's going to have her baby any day now." Said Travis while sipping his Mountain Dew. It was 6pm and Carter and Travis were sitting at Taco Bell munching on Chalupas.

" Did you buy any baby clothes yet?" Asked Carter.

" We didn't have to because her mother gave us tons of baby clothes. My baby boy is going to be spoiled." Said Travis opening his fifth packet of fire sauce and spreading it on his chalupa. Travis' wife was about to have a baby and it was going to be their first child.

A young Spanish couple was standing behind the counter demanding a refund because their orders were messed up. Carter could hear the teenage employees in the back making fun of the couple saying that they were only looking for a handout. Just when Carter bit into his third chalupa he felt his cellphone vibrate in his pocket like a wet trout. Travis was still talking about his wife when Carter raised his index finger to cut him off.

" Hello, this is Special agent Carter."

" It's me Judge Anderson. I need you guys to come over here right away. The kidnapper has dropped off a package."

" Okay. We'll be right over." Said Carter and used his cheek bone to snap the cellphone shut.

" What was that all about?" Asked Travis.

" We've got to go see the judge. The kidnapper dropped something off." Said Carter stuffing in the last few bites of his chalupa.

They both stood up in unison and left the restaurant then clambered into the black Chevy Tahoe. Within 15 minutes they were standing on the red brick porch of the judges home. This time they weren't horse playing because they had too much on their mind. The judge immediately opened the door just seconds after they rang the bell. He still had dark circles under his eyes with a spry look on his face. He looked like he was ready to go catch the person or persons that kidnapped his daughter.

" Please, please come in." Said the judge waving them in while huffing and puffing and sounding out of breath.

The judge scampered across the living room floor and into the kitchen and picked up a manila envelope off of the kitchen table." Alfred get these men some coffee." He screamed at the top of his lungs. Carter and Travis stood at the threshold of the kitchen eagerly awaiting whatever evidence the judge was about to present. The judge handed the parcel to Carter." Here. I peeped inside and saw the DVD unless it's just a CD. I didn't touch it because I thought you might be able to pull up some prints."

Carter reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a pair of latex gloves." Do you have a DVD player?" He asked while putting on the gloves.

" Yes, yes over here in the living room."

Carter and Travis raised an eye brow at each other and wended into the living room following the impatient judge." Alfred hurry up with that coffee." Shouted the judge. They could hear a faint sound emanate from another room indicating that Alfred understood.

Travis turned on the television while Carter popped the disk into the DVD player. The judge pranced over to the sofa, picked up the remote, and put on the proper channel. The three of them crowded around the television while the judge pushed the play button. Within seconds Tina's pretty face came on the screen. The judge got a little teary eyed at the sight of his daughter and scratched his eye lids. Travis grabbed his pen and legal pad and got ready to take notes while Carter turned up the volume. To their surprise, Tina's speech wasn't very long. They felt a sense of hopelessness not being able to see the kidnapper.

" What is around my daughter's neck?" Asked the judge.

Carter had a feeling it was a bomb but he didn't want to scare him." We're not really sure." He said scratching his chin and squinting his eyes. Travis looked over his previous notes and noticed something unusual." This makes no sense." He said twitching his eyes," Both times the kidnapper said he wants two hundred and ten thousand dollars all in one hundred dollar bills. Why two hundred and ten? Why not an even two hundred thousand? And why does he insist it all be in hundred dollar bills?" Travis took his pen and bit on the cap." Yeah, this guy is really weird with numbers. He gave us a 78 hour deadline instead of an even 72."

If Carter and Travis weren't so stupid they would figure out that the importance of the hundred dollar bills had everything to do with weight. Vincent needed the money to be as light as possible for his grand scheme of retrieving the money. The judge looked at them both like they couldn't solve riddles meant for kindergartners. His baby girl was being held captive by some hideous monster while these two imbeciles stood in his living room asking questions instead of answering them. Something conspicuous caught the judge's attention and he placed his ear closer to the television.

" Do you guys hear that?" Asked the judge.

" Hear what?" Asked Carter.

" I think I hear shots being fired and I could've sworn I just heard a passing train."

Travis put his legal pad down and they both stepped closer to the television. The judge turned the volume up on the television as loud as it would go." Yeah. I hear it too." Said Travis cupping his ear." The way the shots are being fired I'd say someone was target practicing."

" Perhaps Tina is located somewhere near a rifle range." Suggested Carter.

Alfred finally walked in the room with some coffees evenly lined up on a silver platter." Your coffees gentlemen." He said nodding curtly and setting them on the coffee table. He looked extra spruced up today with his snowy white hair slicked neatly back and his matching goatee nice and trimmed.

The judge put the remote on the coffee table and

walked back out to the kitchen." I'll be right back." He said as he left. Carter and Travis quietly played the DVD one more time.

The judge came back with a stack of computer printed papers in one hand and some memoirs from the courts in the other hand. His whole attitude changed like he really felt he was on to something." I did my homework and I think I may have our kidnapper." Said the judge. He held out the list of names from the salon and put his thumb underneath a guy named Patrick Adamson." I sentenced this guy 10 years ago to 78 months in jail. We never go by years, we always sentence people in months."

Carter and Travis both took their eyes off the television and gave the judge their undivided attention. The judge continued on with his theory.

" Oh there's more to it." He said holding out court papers," Look what I said to him right after I sentenced him." He handed them the documents.

Carter and Travis both gaped when they read the judge's closing statements to Patrick Adamson. They both knew Patrick Adamson because he used to be the city councilman. It was big news when the media exposed him as being corrupt and taking bribes. There in tiny print read "This is the kind of cancer that is eating away at our society." Was the judge's last words to Patrick Adamson.

" That's it." Said Carter sounding excited, " This has to be our guy. The talk about cancer. The 78 hour deadline instead of a 72 had something to do with his jail sentence."

The judge chuckled a little bit to let out some stress."

Well, people do accuse me of being a very cynical person right before I put the bad guys away. I have a habit of throwing my two cents in before I reach my verdict." Said the judge sipping his coffee.

Carter reached in his pocket and pulled out his cellphone then started rapidly pushing buttons. He took a few steps away from Travis and the judge then pressed the cellphone to his ear. When they weren't looking he scratched his crotch a few times while he paced back and forth." Jen, it's me Carter. I need some information. Are there any rifle ranges in Elkton Maryland?" Carter paced nervously back and forth," Oh, there's three of them? Do any of them have a train that passes through?" He waved his free hand for Travis to bring pen and paper over to him." Okay great. How do we get there?" He said frantically while jotting down everything she was telling him. While Carter was on his cellphone Travis began to query the judge about Tina's boyfriend. It did still seem odd that Steve was missing.

" There's no way that boy was capable of doing something like this." Said the judge trying to still focus on Carter still on his cellphone. Carter's eyes got really big as he teetered back and forth stubbing his toe into the veneer floor. They stopped talking about Steve and gazed at Carter in awe watching him clench a fist like his football team just won the Super Bowl. Carter clasped the cellphone shut using his chest and placed it in his pocket. He yanked the coffee out of his partner's hands and placed it on the coffee table and then grabbed his arm tugging it like a child trying to drag his father onto a roller coaster.

" Time is of the essence. Let's go." Said Carter wasting no time. Travis and Carter made their way to the front door when the judge came stumbling after them." Wait! Let me go

with you guys." Blurted out the judge. They both turned around to face the judge. They tried to keep from staring at the hideous mole on his neck." We're sorry Mr. Anderson. This is strictly police business. Don't worry, we'll get your daughter back."

CHAPTER 30

A white tailed deer ran across the parking lot and into the woods when Carter and Travis arrived at Bear Run rifle range. The rifle range looked vacant as far as they could tell and they wondered how much daylight they had left." Over there." Said Travis pointing to a set of train tracks running through the woods. Carter pushed the four wheel drive button and drove over the rocky terrain towards the railroad tracks which ran through the woods. Travis fidgeted with his sunglasses and kept staring at the handle to his passenger's side door.

" Are you sure we should do this all by ourselves? Should we be calling the SWAT team or HRT?"

Carter straightened up in the driver's seat and caressed the steering wheel with his thumbs." You worry too much broomstick. You know how careless those SWAT team guys can be trampling through the woods. The kidnapper will hear those idiots coming and might get away." Said Carter pursing his lips. He pulled the Chevy Tahoe right along side the railroad tracks on a slanted dirt path making the SUV careen slowly through the woods.

" So we're just going to do this whole job by ourselves?"
Asked Travis

" That's right broomstick. All the credit is going to go to

us." Carter said reassuringly.

Travis balled up a fist and gave Carter a charlie horse right on the side of his leg." You know I can't stand that nickname."

Carter rubbed the side of his leg and grinned." They've been calling you that since high school. Why should I stop now?"

Travis put the sunglasses back on his face and itched his nose getting ready to sneeze. The ride became bumpier as they followed the tracks into the woods." So what exactly are we looking for?" He finally asked.

" I dunno. My guess is a small cabin somewhere in these woods." Just as Carter was talking Travis noticed a fresh pair of tire tracks veering off into a skinny trail going through the woods.

" Did you just see that?" Asked Travis.

" See what?"

Carter put his foot on the brake and looked at his partner quizzically.

" Back up for a minute. I think I saw something."

Carter put the Tahoe in reverse and backed up slowly.

" There." Said Travis," See those tracks leading into the woods?"

" This must be it." Said Carter putting the SUV in park.

" We just gonna park here?" Asked Travis.

" Well, we don't want him to hear us coming bone head." Carter cut the engine and pushed a button that unlocked the trunk. Then he took a minute to look over Travis' face with a bestial look of his own like he was ready to capture Big Foot." You ready for this?" Asked Carter with steely eyes.

" Let's do this." Replied Travis clenching his teeth together. Travis opened the glove box and pulled out two glock 40's and handed one to Carter. They opened their doors at the same time and walked over to the back of the SUV. Carter rummaged through some old police uniforms in the trunk before he pulled out two bullet proof vests. He handed one to his partner and then unzipped a black duffel bag and pulled out two headsets." Try this gear on." He told Travis. They both put the gear on and then flipped the tiny microphone on the headset in front of their mouths.

" Testing, testing can you hear me?" Said Carter into the headset.

" Loud and clear." Replied Travis. They quietly shut and locked the trunk of the SUV and tip-toed into the forest following the tire tracks in the mire. The wind picked up a little causing the sun to flicker through the tops of the trees. Carter took the lead not even noticing the spider web he just walked through." I'll pay attention to the ground. You watch everything else." Said Carter bending his knees carefully with every step. The tire tracks ended just 50 yards into the woods when Travis noticed a sparkly thumbtack pinned eye level to a tree. They both stopped and looked around when Travis spotted an identical thumbtack pinned to another tree

just 10 yards away.

" It looks like someone marked a trail." Said Travis pointing to the thumbtack.

" Let's follow it. It could lead to where he's keeping her." Said Carter loading his gun. They both moved in a crouching position and ambled along making sure to stay alert for any signs of Tina or the kidnapper. After 8 minutes of stumbling over fallen branches and swatting at gnats circling their faces, they could find no more thumbtacks in trees to follow. They scratched their heads deciding what to do next when Carter noticed shot gun shell casings scattered under a big oak tree. When he looked up he chuckled to himself and scratched his chin.

" Yo Travis check this out. We're a bunch of idiots. This trail led to someone's hunting spot. Do you see the tree stand up in the tree?"

Travis put his gun in his holster and walked over to the big oak tree." Aw Crud! What do we do now?" He said picking up and examining the shell casings. The swarm of gnats buzzing around their faces was starting to get to them. Neither one of them had a compass and they were worried about getting lost.

It was getting close to sun set and the woods was looking darker and creepier. Travis stood aloof to go take a leak in the bushes. Just when he was finishing up his business he noticed a small cabin looming in the distance. Immediately he grabbed for his gun and whispered into his headset." Carter, over here, I think I found it." He said zipping up his fly with the other hand. Carter pulled out his gun and walked over to his partner who was pointing a finger

towards the cabin.

" See it over there? This was your idea to do this ourselves. So what's the plan big guy?" Said Travis snorting a gnat up his nose.

" You approach it from the front. I'll sneak around the back. Pay attention and don't make much noise sneaking up." Said Carter releasing the safety on his gun. They split up in different directions while they whispered to each other on their headsets. Travis became startled when he heard the crack of the branch that Carter had accidentally stepped on. A million things ran through his head like a schizophrenic having a psychotic episode. It seemed like the whole forest was coming to life and Travis felt like he was being watched. Carter was already a good 50 yards away circling towards the back of the cabin, Travis felt his heart race as he thought about his wife and their soon to be son.

" You alright?" Whispered Carter.

" Yeah, I'm fine. I don't see any lights on." Said Travis caressing the butt of his gun with his thumb. He squinted his eyes and noticed what looked like rusty metal bars covering the windows." I'm pretty sure the cabin is hot." He whispered to Carter. Travis assumed the crouching position as he crept through the woods towards the front of the cabin making each stride exactly the same length. Massive spider webs occupied every corner of the roof.

" What's your position?" Asked Carter.

" I'm almost at the front. I think I see something in the window." Whispered Travis.

" I found a back door around here." Whispered Carter.

Travis lodged himself ducking beneath the front window while trying to listen for sounds. Slowly he got up and peeked through the window. It was very dark inside but he saw a silhouette of a long haired girl tied to a chair in the middle of a hardwood floor." I think I see her tied to a chair." Whispered Travis. He looked over and noticed the front door was slightly ajar. Travis crept over and put his ear in the crack of the door. Nothing." I'm going in." He whispered," Watch the back door in case he escapes."

" Okay, be careful." Advised Carter.

Travis tugged a little at the door and it made a creaky sound. The inside air felt dank and a fly landed on his nose scaring him half to death. Travis felt his heart race as he gripped his gun with both hands resting his index finger on the trigger. He opened the door just enough that he could slip his wiry body through going in sideways. The inside of the cabin appeared to be desolate and it reeked of mildew. As quietly as he could he tip-toed towards the girl tied to the chair. He was ready to shoot anything that jumped out at him.

The girl in the chair remained frozen and didn't make a sound. Travis became confused and squinted his eyes trying to spot movement in the dark. Why wasn't she moving? Was she already dead? He inched his way closer and closer to the girl in the chair and spotted a piece of paper neatly propped up on her lap. Travis took a deep breath and inched his way closer. Intense agitation filled his chest as he realized it wasn't Tina but rather a mannequin tied to the chair. He stepped closer to look at the piece of paper on the mannequin's lap. His eyes filled with horror as he looked at

the piece of paper. Written in Bold letters on the piece of paper was the word " Gotcha!". Travis looked down and noticed a red LED light taped to the side of the chair blinking faster and faster. Then he heard a hissing sound that sounded like a lit sparkler coming from underneath the chair. That's when he figured out what was going on.

"Carter! It's a tra-". Before Travis could even take two steps back a bright white flash illuminated the room and a great big fireball erupted from the chair. Shrapnel flew in every possible direction destroying everything in it's path. The entire cabin blew into smithereens making a boom sound as loud as a scud missile reaching it's target.

Carter felt a wave of heat thrust into him causing him to go airborne making him fly backwards a good 20 feet. He landed along side a tree and the impact knocked him unconscious. The bomb destroyed almost the entire cabin and ended up blowing Travis into little pieces.

When Carter woke up everything seemed like a nightmare. The first thing he saw was a rusty metal bar wrapped around a tree. There was debris everywhere and most of it was still on fire. It looked like aliens had come and attacked just like in that movie *War Of The Worlds*. Carter put his hand on his head and felt blood. Everything seemed to happen so instantaneously and he was already having trouble remembering. Where was Travis? Was he not with him that day? He nearly choked to death when he looked down at his lap and saw one of Travis' brown eye ball staring him in the face. He flicked the bloody eyeball off his lap as if it were a creepy spider. He checked over his body one more time to make sure everything was intact. He seemed to be okay except for the gash along side his head. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cellphone then used his teeth to pull out the antenna.

" This is Special Agent Carter. My partner is gone and I'm gonna need an ambulance. The kidnapper is still one step ahead."

CHAPTER 31

Tina pushed the buttons on the PS2 controller as fast as she could. It was the tenth round and she was about to knock Vinny out for good and his power was drained to next to nothing. Vincent entered a secret code into his controller and administered a series of relentless punches knocking Tina out of the ring and winning the game.

" You cheated!" She declared throwing down the PS2 controller. They were both sitting on the living room floor in front of Vinny's 27" television playing Playstation 2. It was getting too hot for them in the barn and Vincent opted to relocate to the trailer which had air conditioning.

Vincent's dog Sparky came over and rested his head in Tina's lap and licked her fingers. The rottweiler seemed to be infatuated with Tina for some reason. Vinny looked away from the television and squinted his jealous eye on Sparky. He plotted what he might do to him if he didn't stop giving so much attention to Tina. Yes indeed. He'd have a little surprise for Sparky.

Vinny was starting to feel a little groggy. He hadn't slept since he kidnapped Tina and he didn't plan to sleep until after the job was finished. He pulled a bag of crystal meth out of his pocket and dumped some on the coffee table. Tina looked over and saw him cutting out three lines neatly on the coffee table. *Oh no! Not this again!* She thought to herself. She felt her heart pound against her sternum and found herself biting her lower lip. The last time Vincent did this nasty drug he chopped up his friend to smithereens with a chain saw. Before she could object Vinny rolled up a dollar

bill and snorted a line. When he turned around there was snot running down his nose and a big grin on his face. He held the rolled up dollar bill in front of her face and smiled once more showing his shark teeth.

" Do you want to try some?" He asked. All the drug lectures she had at school flashed through her mind all at once. She shook her head no but Vinny persisted on like a car salesman." Aw come on! You'll like it. I promise." He said wistfully. Tina remembered the time her and Steve went to the movies to watch Star Wars. Her boyfriend tried to explain to her how the movie would've been so much cooler if Luke Skywalker would've joined the " Darkside"." *If you can't beat em, join em.*" He used to tell her. Tina knew there was no way she could beat Vinny. He was too powerful and too smart. After a moments notice of hesitation Tina finally grabbed the rolled up dollar bill out of Vinny's hand. Vincent clapped his hands together.

" Alright, that's my girl!" He said straightening out a line for her with a credit card. Tina ruefully bent her head over the coffee table, let out a deep breath, crammed the dollar bill up her nose, and sucked in air up her nose with all her might. As the white powder ascended up her nose she felt a temporary burning sensation. But all in an instant it felt like Tinker Bell from Peter Pan had flown up her nose sprinkling fairy dust and taking her to a heavenly place.

Tina tilted her head back and closed her eyes like she had just placed a piece of soothing chocolate into her mouth. She hadn't felt euphoria like this since she first kissed a guy at 16. She suddenly remembered her friend Jackie and what she had to say about drugs. "*Don't knock it until you've tried it.*" Her friend used to say. Vincent went to grab the rolled up dollar bill from her to take his turn but she pushed him away and snorted another line.

" Whoa that's my girl!" He said excitedly massaging her shoulders. When she looked at him a second time he no longer looked like a monster. In fact, the more she stared at him the more he looked like prince charming. Without notice Tina wrapped both her hands behind Vinny's long hair and kissed him on the lips. While they were kissing, Sparky jumped in and began licking both of their faces.

It started to get hot and heavy when the phone rang. The ringing phone startled them both and Vinny dug through a pile of dirty laundry on the sofa looking for the cordless phone." Hello?" He said breathing heavy into the phone.

" Vinny it's your mother. You sound out of breath. Are you alright?"

" Yeah, I just came in from jogging. What's up?" He asked.

" Well, I just pulled a homemade apple pie out of the oven. I know it's your day off and everything, but we haven't seen you in two months."

" Well, I've been kind of busy and working over time." He lied.

" Okay, the reason I called is your father and I want to come see you today and I just baked this apple pie. We'll be over in an hour."

" But....." Pleaded Vinny.

" Oh, I don't care if the place is a sty. Your father and I really want to see you. We'll be there soon hunny. Buh-bye."

Before Vincent could object, Theresa hung up the phone.

CHAPTER 32

Vincent pulled his hair in frustration and then lit a Newport to calm his nerves. Tina still sat cross legged on the floor looking at him like he's her favorite rock star with a glazed look in her eyes. Then he kicked an empty shoe box just to let out a little more steam.

"What's up?" She finally asked.

"My parents are going to be here in an hour." Said Vinny exhaling a deep cloud of smoke.

"Do we have time to finish what we were doing?" Asked Tina.

Vincent stared down at the floor to hide his reaction. *Did she mean the drugs or the love making?* He snorted out a chuckle and then pulled a set of keys out of his pocket. "Let's go move Peter's truck. I don't want them to see it when they get here."

When Tina stood up she felt dizzy. The room was spinning around but Vinny was looking better and better. She walked over and put her arms around him but he pushed her off of him. "We don't have time for that. Come on. Let's go." He said putting out the Newport. Tina placed her index finger in his back pocket as she followed him out the door.

It was really bright outside and not a cloud in the sky. The yard looked like some type of battle site with all the dead squirrels and birds strewn all over the knee high grass. Peter's red Ford F-150 gleamed in the sun. It looked like it

had just recently been waxed." See all these carcasses in the grass? Mother might not like that. You and I are going to clean it up after we hide the truck behind the barn."

Tina let go of his back pocket. For some strange reason Vinny didn't seem attractive anymore. Vincent wanted to park the truck inside the barn but there wasn't nearly enough room. As they got inside Peter's truck Vinny patted the leather seats." I'll bet I can get a grand for this at the chop shop I go to." Tina pretended like she really cared and smiled while she fluttered her eyes like a butterfly. After they parked Peter's truck behind the barn Vinny went inside and grabbed some black hefty trash bags and a shovel. He then wiped away a bead of sweat trickling down his face.

" You can either hold this bag open for me or shovel up the carcasses. Which will it be?" He asked holding out both the shovel and some trash bags. Tina reluctantly grabbed the black trash bags and looked around the yard." Good choice." He said clinging to the shovel and deciding where to start.

For 15 minutes Vincent shoveled up as many carcasses as he could while Tina held the trash bag and pinched her nose with the other hand. Before she was having so much fun playing video games and doing drugs. Now here she was in the hot sun wearing a turtle neck and looking at dead squirrels and birds. Evidently she was still feeling the effects of the crystal meth because the ground looked like it was moving like the ocean.

Once the trash bags were full they placed them in the back of Peter's truck. Tina felt relieved when they stepped foot back into the icy cold trailer. She hadn't showered or even gotten a chance to put any deodorant on and she knew from all the sweating from outside she probably stunk.

" If your parents are coming over shouldn't I shower first?" She asked grinding her teeth and not even realizing it. Vincent walked over to her and looked her over from head to toe. She seemed to be unaware that she was grinding her teeth and her head was shaking like an Alzheimer's patient on too much medication. Her pretty blue eyes were blood shot and her pupils were dilating. Vincent began to question himself. *Was this really going to work? Would Theresa figure out that this broad was stoned out of her mind?*

" No you can't shower because if the device around your neck gets wet you'll continue to get shocked." He said lighting another cigarette.

" Can you take it off so I can shower?" She said sniffing her armpits.

" We don't have time and they're going to be here soon. You can wear some of my deodorant and cologne."

Vincent went into his messy bedroom and rummaged through the bric-a-brac on his dresser until he found some speedstick and a bottle of cheap cologne. Tina followed him and stood at the doorway of his bedroom. *What a slob Vinny is she thought to herself.*

CHAPTER 33

Tina sat in front of the 27" television playing HotShots Golf on Playstation2 while Vinny scurried about and hid dirty laundry under the sofa. He had explained to her earlier that she was to play the role of a girl named Sally whom he had met at the Piker's Nest truck stop where he visited often. Just as she got a hole in one Sparky took his head off her lap and raced over to the front door and barked up a storm.

" Rat's! They're here already." Said Vinny quickly clearing the kitchen table."Remember your role. Your name is Sally and I met you at Piker's Nest where you waitress." He pursed his lips and paused for a minute." Oh and one more thing. We're just friends."

There was a knock at the door that sounded just like the secret code knock his friends used to use. The same secret knock they used so everyone wouldn't have to scurry about hiding their drugs thinking it was the police. Vinny opened the door and was greeted with Theresa's friendly smile with Mark in tow. Mark was holding a crockpot with an apple pie on top of it wrapped in tin foil. He was wearing a loose fitting pair of blue jeans and a Pennstate T-shirt that looked 10 years old. Theresa wore a green button down blouse neatly tucked into her long brown cashmere dress along with leather sandals that showed her freshly pink painted toes.

" Surprise!" Said Theresa finally breaking the ice. Vincent had his arm stretched out over the doorway and before he could invite them in Theresa ducked under his arm and invited herself in. Mark just shrugged his shoulders, smiled, then invited himself in as well. Sparky couldn't wait to lick both of their hands and mark pulled out a treat for the dog from his pocket.

" Just put that on the table." Vinny said to his father. Theresa tried not to act too surprised when she saw Tina nestled up on the sofa staring at the television. Mark placed the crockpot and apple pie on the table then took a moment to admire the view of the tree farm looking out the back sliding door. Vincent stood in the middle of the living room floor and tried to keep an eye on everybody at once.

" So I see you have company." Said Theresa walking over to shake Tina's hand. Tina felt like she was coming face to face with the mother on *That 70's Show* she used to watch on television.

" So what's your name sweetheart?" Asked Theresa.

" I'm T-.....My name's Sally." She said looking over at Vinny. Vincent gave her a death stare and showed her his shark teeth.

Theresa placed her other hand on top of the handshake and squeezed gently." I'm Vinny's mother but you can call me Theresa." She said looking calmly into Tina's blood shot eyes. Tina felt a pang of nostalgia as she wished that she could be with her own family. If she screwed this up would Vinny really have the balls to blow her up right in front of his mother? Then she thought of Peter and the drunken redneck that offered them a ride. *Patience is a virtue that must be learned* her father used to say. She would wait until the time is right and she would flee.

Vinny was feeling uncomfortable with his mother introducing herself to Tina. He walked over and put a hand on Theresa's shoulder." Mom I'm starving. What are we having to eat?" He said giving Tina the evil eye while he spoke. Theresa let go of Tina's hand and turned around to face her son. She placed both her hands on his shoulders and sized him up.

" Oh honey. You're still my growing boy. I'll tell you what, I'll start on dinner right now while you talk to your father. We're having spaghetti and meatballs, your favorite." She let go of Vinny and quickly hustled into the kitchen. Mark

was acting like the same way he always did. Laid back and completely oblivious to anything that could possibly be going wrong. Vinny walked over to his father and noticed the soup stain on his shirt.

" You look like you put a little weight on." Said Vinny lightly prodding his father's belly.

" Yeah, your mother takes good care of me." Answered his father resting his hands on his paunch. Tina sat aloof on the sofa carefully watching the father/son bonding. Mark looked nothing like Vinny at all. He was shorter, clean shaven, with soft lucid brown puppy eyes and looked softer than a teddy bear. Vinny was tall and rigid looking with prominent veins sticking out of his massive forearms.

" Why don't we sit down." Suggested Vinny allowing his father to sit in his favorite recliner while he sat next to Tina. Theresa was already in the kitchen setting up paper plates that she had brought from home. Vinny could hear her singing christian hymns and he could feel his body tensing up as he clenched his fists. Mark immediately broke the ice and began talking about football. Something Vinny had no interest in but he always played along just to impress his father.

Tina was grinding her teeth but no one really noticed. Vinny kept a placid look on his face while Mark babbled on about the Nittany Lions.

" Your mother and I are heading up to Beaver Stadium next weekend. Would you like to come along?" Said Mark licking some cheese danish residue along side his lips.

" No I can't. I have to drive truck that weekend." Replied Vinny staring down at the floor while he spoke. The words

drive truck piqued Tina's interest and she suddenly became more focused on the conversation. *So that's what Vinny did for a living. He was a truck driver.* She thought to herself. Tina hated truck drivers. They were potty mouthed pigs and always rude towards women.

Vinny did his best to keep his father talking to obliterate his mother's singing. How dare she sing in his own home.

"Dinner's ready." Announced Theresa standing in the door way.

Okay thought Vinny to himself, *it's showtime.*

CHAPTER 34

Everyone gathered around the rickety dining room table. The kitchen table was in desperate need of a table cloth. There were all kinds of abrasions and sticky spots on the table. Tina refrained from resting her tender arms on top of the squalid table. Theresa had forgotten to bring plastic ware to go along with the paper plates so they were stuck using Vinny's silver ware. Tina stared at her rusty fork that still had traces of chocolate icing on it.

Theresa picked up the tongs and doled out a small serving of spaghetti and meatballs on Mark's plate then placed a copious serving on Vinny's. Then she stretched her sallow arms across the table flourishing the tongs and staring at Tina's plate.

"Just say when honey." She said digging deep into the crock pot of spaghetti.

"When." Said Tina staring dubiously at the pile of spaghetti on her plate. She really didn't feel that hungry. Vinny had taken her out earlier to Ihops where she had her

fill. She picked up her rusty fork but suddenly realized nobody had touched their food yet. Everybody bowed their heads and Mark said the blessing. He was sure to thank God for the food and who he thought was Sally's presence.

While Mark was praying Tina felt something warm and fuzzy nestle between her legs and then lick her hands. Since nobody was looking Tina grabbed a meatball and slid it underneath the table to Sparky. Vinny caught on to what she was doing and pushed the shocker button on his wrist watch. Tina jumped and let out a yelp startling everyone at the table.

" Honey are you okay?" Asked Theresa.

Vinny cut in before she could respond." Oh yeah, She's fine mom. Sally is very charismatic and can sometimes feel the holy spirit inside of her." Vinny leaned back in his chair taking pride in his bogus statement.

" That is so neat!" Said Theresa," What church do you go to?"

Vinny felt a big lump in his throat. This one was on Tina and she'd better come up with something fast. Tina looked at Vinny and he slightly nodded his head giving her permission to answer the question.

" I go to Heaven's Gate in Parkerton." She finally replied.

" Oh,okay. I've never heard of that church." Said Theresa slicing a meatball in half with her fork. Vinny already had most of his food eaten but Tina still hadn't taken a single bite. While Vinny's mother sliced her meatballs she mused whether or not this so called " Sally" girl really went to

church. With her dyed hair, black lipstick, and dark eyeliner, Tina looked like something that just walked out of a rock concert.

Theresa put her fork down and picked up a paper napkin then wiped the tomato sauce from her lips. "I just remembered something I wanted to tell you." She said looking at Vinny, "I saw on the news that Judge Anderson's daughter has just been kidnapped."

Vincent stared down at his plate of spaghetti to hide the expression on his face. "Oh?" He said trying to sound surprised.

"Yes that's what I heard. They say she was last seen jogging through a cemetery wearing a Hooters outfit. A Hooters outfit. Can you believe that Vinny? Somebody dressed like a slut deserves to get kidnapped." Theresa said sounding serious.

Vinny reddened in the face and couldn't help but put on a smile. He looked over at Tina who looked absolutely disgusted. Her opinion of Theresa changed faster than a bolt of lightning.

"I have a friend who works at Hooters." Piped up Tina.

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend anybody honey. It's just that I was always taught to dress modestly." Said Theresa trying to take back her previous statement. "Oh and there's more." She said looking concerned, "They thought Patrick Adamson the city councilman had something to do with it but the judge's daughter's boyfriend has come up missing."

Tina felt a pang of anxiety race through her body like

electrodes racing through a micro chip. Where was Steve? Did Vinny have something to do with Steve's disappearance? She looked over at Vinny and he had the audacity to give her a wink. Tina grabbed her napkin and spewed a tiny bit of food into it then then curled it into a ball and placed it next to her plate." Excuse me." She said getting up from the table.

" What's up with her?" Asked Theresa.

" Oh, I guess she's just not feeling too well." Said Vincent shoving the last few morsels of spaghetti into his mouth.

CHAPTER 35

Special agent Carter sat glued to the ritzy redwood chair on the 13th floor of the conference room in the FBI building. Carter's boss SAC (Special Agent in Charge) Max Trowell paced hastily around the dim room grasping the tops of every empty chair and squeezing it with all his might as he passed by. Carter sat motionless and steadfast like a person on death row sitting in the electric chair. His partner was dead and it was all his fault. Special Agent in Charge Max Trowell loosened up his tie when he came back around.

" The FBI doesn't make mistakes." He grumbled.

Carter took a deep breath and stared at the green vein throbbing on his boss's forehead. At the end of the long mahogany table along the wall was an elevated plasma television on a black cart with wheels. Tina's pretty face was on the television screen and slowly spinning around in 3-D motion. Carter never fully understood why his boss always preferred the lights being off but this time he was glad they

were off because he was ashamed to show his face. Besides, there was already plenty of light coming through the windows to illuminate the room. Just enough light to see that throbbing green vein on Max Trowell's forehead.

" So run this by me one more time. Why did you decide to do this take down alone?" Asked Trowell.

Carter fidgeted with his wrist by wrapping his fingers tightly around them and rubbed them until they burned." It was my fault sir. I didn't have faith in our HRT guys and I thought they would get clumsy and bungle this whole operation."

Max picked up an empty chair and then slammed it back down on the floor." How much do you know about our Hostage Rescue Team?"

Carter stuttered when he tried to respond." I uh....well I....very little sir." He finally spluttered out.

Max looked him right in the eyes with a stern look on his face." So what do you think I should do about this?"

The question kind of shocked Carter and it was starting to make him not care what the boss man decided to do. Travis' death was an accident and at the time they thought they were doing the right thing. Well, at least **he** did anyway.

" I really don't know sir." He said really fast playing into his little game.

Max leaned over the table. His green vein was still throbbing." Well, I was going to take you off the case but since you and Travis were close friends I think this case is

rather personal. Isn't that right Agent Carter?"

Carter straightened up in his chair and felt his heart rate return to normal." Yes sir that's correct." He said in a confident tone.

Max squeezed the top of an empty chair one more time and mused for a second." You'll have a new partner by tomorrow morning. Let me make one thing clear. From now on every move you make gets run by me first. Do I make myself clear?"

Carter felt a tear trickle down his cheeks. He quickly wiped it with his index finger and made a scratching motion like he had an itch." Yes sir. I fully understand."

" Good." Said Max releasing his grip from the chair," Then this meeting is adjourned." He tarried in the corner of the room to enjoy the panoramic view of the city while Carter got up from his chair.

Just as Carter placed his hand on the door knob he felt his pager vibrating on the side of his belt. He pushed the indiglo button and right away recognized the number. It was the judge.

CHAPTER 36

Tina hunched over the dirty toilet bowl vomiting profusely. Everything that had happened tonight made her sick. The thought of Steve missing made her stomach churn like an ice cream maker. Vinny stood outside the bathroom door beating the door so hard with his fist that it hurt Tina's ears.

" Hey are you alright in there? They left so you can come out now." Vinny lit a Newport and patiently waited outside the bathroom door. When Tina finally came out of the bathroom she looked like a mess. The eyeliner was smeared all over her pretty face and it was quite evident she had been crying. For the first time Vinny actually felt a subtle sense of guilt. Could he back out of this now? Was there some way he could make amends and have everything go back to normal? No. It was too late. *Finish what you start.* Someone in jail had once told him. Besides, he still had to avenge himself with those little brats who put him away for ten years.

Vincent knocked on the door once more." Hurry up Sally. We have to finish our dice game."

" My name is not Sally and I'm not playing your stupid game." She shouted from inside the bathroom.

Vinny pushed the shocker button on his wrist watch. Nothing. Vinny pushed the button once more. Still he didn't hear a sound from Tina. He placed his ear against the door and pushed the shocker button once more. He could hear the device around her neck letting out an electric shock but Tina remained quiet. Vincent finally realized what was going on. Tina didn't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know that he was hurting her.

" Oh, so I see daddy's little girl has got some mettle." He said sliding a screw driver into the door knob and unlocking the door. When he opened the door Tina was standing with both of her hands on her hips staring at him like an angry drill sergeant.

" So I see you've built up a tolerance to my little

shocking device." He said blowing smoke in her face.

Tina scrunched up her lips showing her perpendicular teeth with a steely look in her eyes like she was on a last limb and ready to attack. But she didn't say a word. Vincent smiled and tried to reconcile by putting his gritty hand on her shoulder." So Miss Tough Girl. Do you think you built up a tolerance to that bag of feces?"

Tina fluttered her eyes for a moment musing over the thought. Then without hesitation she took Vinny by the arm and led him out of the bathroom." Come on. Let's go play your stupid game." She said leading him down the hallway.

" That's my girl." Said Vinny pleased that she had come to her senses. He cleared some old newspapers off the coffee table and pulled two dice out of his pocket. *If I don't know my next move how will they?* He thought to himself. He placed the dice on the coffee table and went into the kitchenette to fetch paper and a pen. When he came back out he sat on the other side of the coffee table facing Tina. She picked up the dice and dropped them on the table without even shaking them.

" That doesn't count." Declared Vinny scooping the dice up with his hand," Watch closely. This is how you do it." He said shaking the dice and blowing on them. He then rolled them onto the table.

" I didn't know." Said Tina picking up the dice. She vigorously shook the dice while blowing on them. Vinny's eye got big with excitement as he eagerly waited for the results. When the dice finally settled the first dice read " Tony" and the second dice landed on the question mark. Tina had no idea what the question mark meant but she guessed Vincent

didn't know either.

" We already know Tony's fate. He dies in a fire. Roll the dice again." Demanded Vinny.

Tina took in a deep breath and picked up the dice. Sparky trotted over and put his head on Tina's lap to comfort her. Vinny saw the dog's head on her lap and a rage of jealousy swarmed permeated throughout his body.

" Sparky!" He shouted. The dog panted softly but didn't move. "Sparky! Get over here!" He insisted.

Tina looked at Vinny and shrugged her shoulders as if to say *I guess he loves me more than he loves you.* All in a blink of an eye Vinny leaped over the coffee table and punched the dog in the head. The 100 pound Rottweiler pounced Vinny and bit his ear. Vinny let out a yelp as the two of them wrestled around on the floor. Tina saw blood trickle down Vinny's face as Sparky continued to attack him. They rolled around on the floor legs kicking and paws scratching.

Tina stood up and backed herself against the wall. Sparky bit down on the watch band and the wrist watch came loose. It flung through the air landing just 3 feet in front of her. It was like a big miracle from God and all his Angels. She took one last look at Sparky and Vinny trying to kill each other then she picked up the watch and ran out the front door.

" Get back here!" Shouted Vinny but the dog held him down and continued biting him in the face.

When Tina stepped outside she could feel a gust of heat waft in her face as if she had just opened a pizza oven

door. Her first instinct was to run down the long driveway toward the road but she remembered the drunken redneck that probably had plans of raping her. She turned around and stared at the tree farm encompassing the yard. All the miniature trees looked to be the exact same size evenly planted in nice little rows. Way off in the distance past the vast tree farm she could see a light shining on a hill. She figured maybe the people that owned the tree farm lived there and that she could take refuge there.

Tina sprinted through the tall grass and towards the miniature trees. The eerie night was so serene that Tina felt a paranoia like people were watching her. The feeling of paranoia caused her to run all the more faster but her baggy jeans were slowing her down. Running through the trees was a lot harder than she thought and she could feel her body start to totter and tremble. She kept on going but suddenly she felt her left foot sink below the ground and twist in the opposite direction. She went down hard and scraped her hands while trying to catch her fall. Her left foot was still stuck in the hole in the ground where a tree was supposed to be planted. As fast as she could Tina pulled her left foot out of the hole and stood up again. She was in too much pain to continue running but she wended towards the light on the hill limping like a three legged dog. She tottered along as fast as she could towards the light looming in the distance. The light looked to be a mile and a half away and she wondered if she could make it.

Suddenly she saw a beam of light flashing in every direction scouring the tops of the miniature trees. Then she heard a jingling sound coming towards her so she ducked below the trees and lay flat on the ground. Could Vincent possibly be chasing after her? Wouldn't he think she took off running towards the road? She laid motionless on the

ground hoping to hide from her assailant. The jingling sound kept getting closer and closer and so did the beam of light.

She looked once more at the glowing light on the hill and realized she wouldn't make it. Tina's best bet was to stay on the ground hidden amidst the trees. The jingling sound kept getting closer and she could feel her heart pulsate like a wild animal. Before she even knew what was happening, Sparky was hovered over her licking the wounds on her hands. When Vinny finally caught up he laughed triumphantly pointing a finger at her.

" Did you really think you could get away from me? Sparky picked up your spoor in a matter of seconds." He said still laughing.

Tina looked terrified as Vinny shone the flashlight in her eyes like a police officer would testing for alcohol. Not knowing what crazy thing Vinny would do next Tina pulled the wrist watch out of her pocket and handed it to him. Sparky wagged his tail and licked Tina on the cheek. Tina looked up at Vinny once more in dismay while she petted the dog. Vincent's face looked cut up pretty bad and it looked like Sparky really did a number on him. He pulled a bandanna from his back pocket and wiped the blood oozing down his left ear lobe. Tina was astonished at what he did next.

Vincent pulled out his 9mm and pointed the gun right between her eyes. Then a big smile lit up his face and he pointed the gun at Sparky.

" Good bye Sparky." He said and fired twice. The 100 pound Rottweiler dropped to the ground and left his tongue stick out. Tina remembered watching that movie *Old Yeller* when she was a kid and cried when they had to shoot Old

Yeller because he had rabies. Seeing a dog shot in real life was ten times worse.

Tina leaned over to vomit but nothing came out. Vincent didn't seem to be phased in the least bit over the loss of his dog. He extended his arm revealing his massive forearm to help Tina off the ground. Tina refused his assistance and stood up on her own putting most of her weight on her right leg. Vinny dug his fingernails deep into her arm leading the way as she hobbled back to the trailer. Steve. All she could think about was Steve and how much she missed him. And what exactly happened to Steve?

Tina was about to soon find out.

CHAPTER 37

18 year old Bobby Fisher had been playing hooky from school for the past two days. He would go back to school whenever it was over. Whatever "it" was he didn't know but "it" was coming for him just like it always did in the movies. Besides, he was an adult now so what could they say about him staying home?

Bobby hung out in his bedroom sitting at the edge of the waterbed watching *Leave it to Beaver* on his 13 inch color television while eating soup. Not the good creamy soup in a can but the 12 cent Raman noodle soup with the flavor packets that the poor often ate. Bobby Fisher's family wasn't poor but his hoodlum friends were and they got him addicted to this so called "Crackhead Soup" they used to call it. Bobby's friends also got him into some illegal drugs he hoped his parents would never find out about.

A shiver crept down his spine as he wondered what dire things might have happened to his friend. Was he next? He almost fell off the edge of his bed and spilled his soup when he heard his cell phone ring.

Maybe everything was just a prank. It had to be Steve calling to say that he was alright and everything back at the races was just a big mistake. Bobby answered on the fourth ring and stuttered into the phone.

" Heh-hello?"

The other person hung up and the line went dead. Bobby squeezed the cell phone and bit on the antenna. This was all a big nightmare. Who had called him? Was it the mysterious man at the races wearing a dark hoodie and looking like the UNAbomber? Was the UNAbomber look-a-like coming for him next?

Bobby heard the vacuum shut off in the outside hallway and there was a knock at his bedroom door. Was he here already? Were these his final moments? He braced himself and turned the volume down on his television.

" Bobby, there's a man here to see you." Said his mother.

" Who is it?" He asked with his voice still quivering.

" There's a man here with the F.B.I. He just wants to talk to you."

Bobby remembered what happened when he and his friends went to the police after Steve's disappearance at the races. First the cops laughed at them and then threatened false report charges if they didn't straighten up.

" I don't want to talk if he's just going to ridicule me." Replied Bobby.

" Honey, he's just here to help. Open the door." Said

Mrs.Fisher

Bobby reluctantly unlocked his bedroom door and stared at the short burly agent with short dirty blond hair. The agent looked beat like he had maybe lost a loved one in the family.

Carter extended his arm out and shook Bobby's hand. "Special agent Carter. I'm with the F.B.I." He said precariously as if he wasn't even sure he was still with the bureau. Bobby gave a weak handshake and then walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. Carter surmised that maybe Bobby was a skater because of his Airwalk shoes and JNCO pants. The boy looked awfully tenuous with acne covering his face and medium length greasy unkempt hair.

Carter loosened his silk tie and gazed into the boy's imploring eyes. The boy looked terrified like he still couldn't believe what happened.

" So where do you think your friend Steve is?" Asked Carter trying to absorb every last little odd detail in the bedroom.

" We don't know. That's why we went to the police." replied Bobby.

" Who's we?" Asked Carter pulling out a pen and legal pad.

" Me, Scott, Billy, and Steve. We all went to the races together." Mumbled Bobby. Carter did his best to read the boy's body language. Bobby looked him in the eyes when he talked and he seemed shaken up. The theory that Steve was behind the kidnapping of Tina was slowly starting to fade away.

" So how did Steve disappear?" Asked Carter still scrutinizing the room with his eyes. The boy picked up his crackhead soup and gulped down the remaining juice.

" The last we saw him was when he went to the bathroom." He replied slowly.

" Which was where?" Asked Carter.

" There were port-a-potties out in the parking lot about 150 yards from where we were parked. Steve went to the bathroom and never came back." Said Bobby putting the empty soup bowl on top of the television. Carter kept glancing around the room as if the boy had a hidden camera. Off in the corner was a book shelf with the whole series of Harry Potter. *Harry Potter, How weak* Carter thought to himself. Carter cleared his throat and glanced at the dirty keyboard at the computer.

" So did Steve go to the bathroom before or after the race?" He asked.

" He went after the race when there wasn't too many people around and it was dark."

" What were you guys still doing there?" Asked Carter jotting notes.

" I'll tell you but can you close the door? I don't want my mother to listen in."

" Sure." Said Carter. He got up and gently closed the bedroom door. On the door was a poster of Albert Einstein with his hair all over the place. Carter loosened up and sat

down next to the boy on the bed.

" I'm all ears." He said.

" Okay, we tried to have a tailgate party before the race but there were too many cops around and we're all under age. After the race we realized we still had a cooler full of beer and the parking lot was vacating so we figured why not?"

Carter did his best to analyze the story in his head." So did you see anything happen to Steve?"

Bobby leaned over to stare at his Airwalks allowing his greasy hair to drape over his eyes." I didn't see anything happen to Steve but something weird happened earlier."

Carter circled something on his legal pad and tilted his head a little to peer at the boy's pocked face." What happened?"

The boy shook his head knocking some hair out of his face." Well, earlier in the day our driver Billy thought someone was following us to the races. After we parked a guy in a white van pulled along front of us and kept staring at us all creepy like."

" So what did he look like?"

" He looked just like the UNAbomber. He wore really big sunglasses and an either black or blue hoody and he had lots of facial hair."

Carter wrote on the pad as fast as he could." Anything else unusual about the subject?"

Bobby rubbed his forehead while he closed his eyes trying to recollect." Oh yeah, he kept smiling at us and his teeth looked like shark teeth."

" What about the van? Was it just a plain white van?"

" No,no. I think it was a work van of some plumbing company."

" Jake's Plumbing?" Asked Carter.

" Yes that's it! How did you know?"

" Don't worry about it." Said Carter circling more words on the pad.

" Oh, there was just one other thing." Said Bobby sounding more vigil.

" I'm listening." Carter said softly like a doctor talking to his patient.

" Well, when the UNAbomber was gawking at us, I saw him what looked like write something down on a piece of paper smaller than the size of his hand."

Carter stopped writing and bit the tip of his pen while musing over Bobby's previous statement." He wrote on something small you say, like maybe a business card maybe?"

" I couldn't see too well that's why I'm not even positive he had long hair but I suppose he may have been writing on a business card."

Carter felt a tingle of exhilaration rush down his spine." What exact location were you guys parked?"

" I...think...I...,um... G-33? Yes, I remember now. We parked at G-33."

Carter picked up his cellphone and called Max Trowell his boss." Max, I've just learned new information. We're dealing with a double kidnapping." It was time to play things by the book. There was no more room for screw ups. He was going to catch this monster and he was going to do it for Travis.

CHAPTER 38

People. Lots of happy people on every page. Tina stared at all the jewelry wrapped around the celebrity's neck. She had read through the people magazine several times but she liked looking at all the happy faces. Tina wondered how the celebrities would handle being kidnapped. They looked so comfortable and sure of themselves. If they only knew how quickly their world could change. She used to have a life just like theirs and it had been taken away by a hideous monster. A ruthless monster without a conscience.

The air inside the barn was hot and the green turtleneck was starting to make her sweat. Vinny was over at the work bench soldering some wires onto a model rocket. Tina had seen a lot of model rockets when she was a kid but the one Vinny had looked to be about 4 feet long. Off to the side were a huge pile of empty cardboard rolls that used to be "D" sized model rocket engines. Evidently Vinny was taking apart all the "D" sized engines to make one big engine. Vincent had also repaired his watchband that Sparky chewed up using a sewing needle and dental floss. Tina's

left ankle still hurt but she didn't think she sprained it. She was so close to getting away but she tripped over that stupid hole in the ground.

Vinny chugged the rest of his Budweiser and walked over to the side door to piss out in the grass. Tina stared at the empty bud bottles he had accumulated. She really needed something to take the edge off things.

" Can I have a beer?" She finally asked.

Vinny gazed into the night while he watered the lawn. Without turning around he said "Sure, just help yourself. They're in the fridge but stay out of the freezer door." He began to laugh as if the voices were talking to him again. Tina walked over to the fridge and opened the fridge door. Good. There were still 10 Budweisers left. She felt a chill pulsate through her body when she grabbed a longneck bottle. She peered over at Vinny who was relieving himself and laughing up a storm. Tina shut the refrigerator and stared at the crown emblem on the freezer door. She looked over at Vinny once more but he still wasn't looking and he just would not stop laughing as he pissed out the door. Tina slowly placed her hand on the freezer door and debated whether or not to peep inside. She looked over at Vinny once more and his back was still turned. Tina quickly yanked the freezer door open and tried to scream but nothing would come out.

There was Steve's severed head staring right at her like in a horror movie. Icicles of blood hung from Steve's nose and his right eye had been plucked out. Tina felt herself losing control of her body. She slammed the freezer door shut and lunged herself onto Vinny's back in an effort to try and take him down. Vinny fell to the ground and rolled around laughing hysterically like a little kid watching an episode of the Three Stooges. Tina attacked him with all of

her might punching and kicking him but it didn't seem to faze him in the least bit. Vinny was rolling around on the ground laughing so hard he had to hold his stomach and he even got teary eyed.

" Okay that's enough!" Cried Vinny trying to push her off while still giggling.

Tina wouldn't give up and eventually put him in a head lock trying to choke the life right out of him.

" I said that's enough!" Vinny threw Tina's 130 pound body like it was a sack of potatoes almost to the other side of the room. Tina landed right on her fanny and badly bruised her tailbone.

" You're never going to get away with this!" She cried. Vincent pulled out his pack of Newports and lit a victory cigarette while staring at her like he would his dog. He inhaled deeply then exhaled through his nose.

" Probably not." He said," But I'm sure having fun in the meantime."

CHAPTER 39

Tiger Woods appeared to be staring at Carter from the Wheaties box. Carter picked up the Wheaties box and moved it closer to his bowl to admire the professional golfer. He and Travis were supposed to go golfing today and Travis would show up at his door step any minute.

Carter shoved spoonfuls of Wheaties into his mouth as fast as he could. He didn't much care for the taste but he had to eat fast before the cereal would become soggy. In fact he hated Wheaties but he was a health nut and coerced

himself to eat them.

The doorbell finally rang and Carter knew it had to be Travis. He scurried through his apartment to answer the door. To his dismay a big bald burly African American dressed up as the mailman stood on his porch with the sunlight bouncing off his glossy head. The man looked like a character from the movie Matrix with a deadpan look on his face. The mailman had a name tag half peeling off his uniform which read " Tez". The light blue collared shirt and dark blue Dickies pants clung to his body so tight he wondered how Tez could breathe.

" I've got a package for you." Said the man from the Matrix movie. He handed the 16" by 16" package to Carter who almost dropped it after receiving it.

" This is heavy." Carter said with mirth in his voice to lift the big man's spirits. When Carter looked up from the package the mailman disappeared without a trace. Carter peered around the corner but the man had vanished like a ghost. Carter wondered what was in the heavy package. Maybe a bowling ball from the chick at the health club he was dating. Travis would probably show up any minute but he figured he had time to open the package. He walked into the kitchen and grabbed a pointy pair of scissors and cut into the package. Carefully he pulled back the flaps of the cardboard box and placed his hands in the box.

A pungent odor emanated from the box and he quickly covered his nose. When he peered into the box he felt Wheaties burn through his throat and exit out of his mouth. Inside the box was Travis' severed head covered in blood. Carter dropped the box on the floor and tottered backwards while holding his chest and gasping for air. A huge white flash engulfed the room and then everything went black.

* BEEP!*BEEP!*BEEP!*BEEP!* Went Carter's annoying alarm clock. Carter sat up in his bed breathing heavily and sweating. He hadn't had a bad nightmare like that since his mother died in a terrible car accident 2 years ago. Carter pounded the alarm clock with his fist and the beeps ceased immediately. The alarm clock showed that it was 6 AM. In two hours he would be meeting his new partner. Today was going to be a big day for him. The kidnapper would be calling for the ransom and probably opt to do the drop off at night time.

Carter stepped into the shower and used a huge handful of shampoo to wash his curly dirty blond hair. He always washed his head first and then worked his way down. After 10 minutes of a piping hot shower Carter turned the shower temperature down as cold as it would go. He often did this on days that he really needed to be awake.

He got dressed and made his way out into the kitchen. He pulled out a box of Wheaties from the Lazy Suzan then quickly put the cereal back after seeing Tiger Woods' million dollar smile. The nightmare had spooked him and he was feeling dejavu. Instead he grabbed a box of cherry pop-tarts and popped them in the toaster. He looked at his watch. It was 6:50 AM and he knew he better get going if he wanted to stop off at Starbucks on his way to work.

Max Trowell sat hunched over at his cluttered desk massaging his temple while compartmentalizing everything that had happened since the kidnapping in his mind. Today was going to be their only shot at catching this ruthless kidnapper in which they had few clues to go on. There was a

rat-tat-tat at the door and Max looked up at the clock which read 7:45 AM. Carter never came to work early but since his screw up at the cabin in the woods he had a lot of butt kissing to do.

" Come in." Said Max putting down a picture of the aftermath of Vincent's booby trap in the woods. Carter humbly approached his boss while taking delicate sips of his double shot espresso. Max stared at the Starbucks cup in Carter's hand and then looked at his own cheesy cup of coffee on his desk from the vending machine.

" So where's my Starbucks?" Asked Max. His green vein throbbed prominently from his forehead already.

" Oh I'm sorry boss, I didn't know you wanted one. Next time I promise I won't forget." Carter seemed to be dressed a little neater than usual. His jet black double breasted suit looked like it had just been purchased and there wasn't a single wrinkle in his navy blue tie.

" Today is the big day. Are you ready for this?" Asked Max chucking his 50 cent cold coffee into the waste bin.

" Oh absolutely I'm ready." Replied Carter like a football player talking to his coach.

Max clapped his hands together and stood up from his desk." Good, let's go meet your new partner."

Carter followed his boss down the corridor and into the elevator like a lost puppy. Max pushed the button for the 3rd floor, one of the very few places Carter had ever been. They departed from the elevator and entered a room full of cubicles. Pretty secretaries were scurrying about with stacks

of papers in their hands and phones were ringing. Max quickly peered into each cubicle as they made their way to the back of the room. A foxy brunette in a red dress winked at Carter as she walked past him. Max stopped dead in his tracks and Carter nearly tripped over his boss.

" This is it." Said Max extending his arm to signal Carter to enter the cube. Carter cautiously peered around the corner like a child seeing his long lost mother for the very first time. Max cleared his throat and the agent looked up from his neatly organized desk.

" Paul, I want you to meet Special Agent Chris Carter. He's working the Tina Anderson kidnapping case." Said Max. Carter reached over the desk to shake his hand. Paul dropped his pen on top of his sudoku puzzle and shook Carter's hand. Paul's hand was icy cold and his handshake was weak like a woman's.

" How do you do? Paul Newman. I just go by Paul."

Carter surveyed the inside of his cubicle with furtiveness. There were no pictures of wife or kids but rather unique poetry surrounded with cherubim hanging from the cubicle walls. Next to his computer was a completely solved Rubik's cube. Paul was a little shorter than Travis and a lot more feeble looking. His dark black hair looked like it had recently been cut and neatly combed to the side. Carter wondered if Paul ever had to shave because his face was so smooth like a baby's face. There wasn't even the slightest trace of stubble on his face. Paul was in fact 32 years old but he looked only 17. Carter's throat tightened up when he saw the sponge Bob sticker on the bottom of the computer screen. *What a dork* he thought to himself.

" So what's the first order of business?" Asked Paul. Max started to walk away.

Carter said," Well...." He paused staring at the sponge Bob sticker," I guess we need to pay the ex-city councilman Patrick Adamson a visit."

Paul spritzed some hand sanitizer on his girly hands and rubbed his hands together revealing perfectly manicured finger nails. Two thoughts bounced around in Carter's mind. *Homosexual or metrosexual?* He was definitely hoping the latter. Paul pulled out several sanitary napkins from underneath his desk and placed them in his pocket.

" Okay I'm ready to go." Said Paul trying to analyze Carter's dumbfounded look.

CHAPTER 40

Carter felt awkward walking out to the parking garage with his new partner. He was used to Broomstick towering over him like an NBA player walking back from the locker room. Carter wasn't sure but he felt two inches taller than Paul. And what kind of name was that? Paul? So plain sounding. He may as well call himself John Doe.

Paul had offered to drive and Carter assumed that he probably drove something girly like. Like a VW Bug or maybe a Ford Focus. Paul pulled out a set of keys and pushed a button on the tiny black plastic box attached to the key ring and brake lights flashed on a brand new black Lincoln Navigator.

" That your ride?" Asked Carter.

" Yup. Just bought it last week."

Carter jumped in the passenger's seat and fastened his seat belt. As soon as Paul climbed into the driver's seat he pulled out a sanitary napkin and began wiping down the steering wheel. *What a fruitcake!* Thought Carter to himself. Paul started up the Navigator and reggae music came on the CD player. Paul used the sanitary napkin to turn down the music because he didn't want to dirty up the dial on the radio. The ride to the ex-city councilman's home was very quiet. Carter was daydreaming about Travis. He wished he could still be working with him instead of this dork for a detective.

Patrick Adamson's home was nothing like they expected for someone who used to be the city's councilman. They eased into the driveway of the ranch style home and cut the engine. The tacky red shutters looked out of kilter with the rest of the middle class neighborhood. Carter noticed that a large creek ran through the back yard. Perhaps a perfect place to hide bodies or evidence. When Carter and Paul stood on the ex-councilman's porch Carter nudged Paul in the shoulder.

" Ouch! Why'd you hit me?" Asked Paul rubbing his shoulder.

Carter got defensive." I was just horse playing. Travis and I used to do it all the time."

Instead of hitting Carter back Paul just whined like a baby." Well, I'd appreciate it if you didn't touch me."

Carter turned his head and silently repeated Paul's words while making a face and mocking his new attitude. It was going to be a long day. Getting used to this nerd was going to take a while.

The front door opened up and a very short man with a perm wearing only a white bathrobe looked up at the two agents.

" Can I help you?" Asked Patrick Adamson. He was extremely short with prominent chest hairs like Austin Powers and beautiful silky, dark, brown permed hair. Paul rested his right hand on the doorway then quickly removed it realizing it was probably dirty. Carter was still flush red in the face from the embarrassment earlier over the horse playing.

Paul said, " Are you Patrick Adamson?" He tried to peer into the house just to be nosy.

A startled look ran across the councilman's face realizing he might be in trouble." As a matter of fact I am. Is there a problem?"

Paul rolled his eyes and looked at his watch." Not at all sir. Have a good day." Carter looked at his new partner dumbfounded.

" Let's go." Said Paul walking back to the Navigator. By the time Carter opened the passenger door Paul had already started up the Navigator. Carter got in but didn't shut the door.

" What the heck is going on?" Asked Carter impatiently.

" He's not the perp."

" How can you be so sure?" Asked Carter demanding an explanation.

" Did you see how short that guy is? I read the report on

the getaway van that the perp blew up. The driver's seat was pushed way back. That little midget in there would've never been able to reach the gas pedal."

Carter snapped still crimson red in the face." That doesn't mean anything! The kidnapper is smart. He could've pushed the seat back before he blew it up."

Paul pulled out a lemon scented wipe to clean his hands from touching the dirty doorway." You really want to go back in there? Fine. But this might be our last day and we're running out of time before the kidnapper asks for the ransom."

" Let me do the talking this time." Said Carter handing him a legal pad.

CHAPTER 41

The bewildered ex-city councilman stood on his tippy toes to look over the agents through the storm door. They both flashed their credentials with shady grins on their faces. Patrick Adamson cracked the storm door so his voice could be heard.

" Is there something I can do for you?" He asked with serenity.

Carter did the talking." Yes, we're sorry for that mix up earlier. May we come in and ask you a few questions?"

Without hesitation Patrick opened the door and waved them in. When they walked inside the living room they saw large cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other against the wall with writing on them in black magic marker. The

kitchen was covered in plastic and paint cans were everywhere.

" Don't mind the mess." Said Patrick clearing a seat on the sofa," We just moved in here."

" Where did you used to live?" Asked Carter.

" Bethesda Gardens in Avonsville. The government took everything from me after I went to jail. This is the nicest place I could afford."

Carter recalled the ritzy neighborhood Patrick was referring to. One of his golfing buddies lived in Bethesda Gardens. Carter immediately sat down and watched his partner unfold an old newspaper,spread it out over the sofa cushion, and then sit on it.

" Is he okay?" Asked Patrick.

It was all Carter could do to keep from bursting out with laughter. He snorted a little and then rubbed his nose to cover it up. Paul didn't seem to take notice.

" Oh, I'm okay." Said Paul pulling on his pant leg," I'm allergic to dust."

Now that actually made sense to Carter. Maybe his new partner wasn't much of a goofus after all. Patrick sat down on his la-z-boy and turned the volume down on the television. Carter glanced at the T.V and saw a golf ball soaring through the air. He waited until the golf ball landed on the green before he started his query.

" Mr. Adamson are you aware of the Tina Anderson

kidnapping?"

Patrick kept his eyes glued to the television while he talked." Of course I am. It's been all over the news."

Paul clicked his pen and began writing." So you know that her father is the same judge that sentenced you?"

Patrick took his gaze off the T.V and nodded his head. "Yeah,yeah,yeah. Judge Anderson was the most cynical person I've ever met."

" What do you mean?"

" He's more like a clown running a circus. He always has to put his two cents in with his wise guy comments. Not just with me. He does that with everybody."

Carter cleared his throat." You mean comments like your behavior is the cancer that's eating away society?"

The ex-city councilman pulled his bathrobe together even tighter concealing his hairy chest and crossed his arms." I believe he did say that. How did you know he said that?" Patrick asked petrified now at this point.

" We talked to the judge. When the ransom call came in I guess the kidnapper decided to throw his two cents in as well. He said if cancer could talk he'd like to be a public speaker so he could spread cancer all across the U.S."

Patrick looked confused." So now you think I did it?"

Carter spoke quickly before Patrick even finished his sentence." We didn't say that. We were hoping you might

know something. Maybe someone's been following you around that might try to set you up."

A sly grin started on Patrick's face and he looked up like he had the answer to the million dollar question." I just remembered something." He said matter-of-factly," My whole case was known publicly. As I'm sure you're already aware of. I used to be the city councilman but I got caught taking bribes from an underdeveloped construction company who really wanted to build the Penmar building. The media had a field day with my case. Everything said in the courtroom was all over national television."

Carter gently kicked away a kitten trying to nestle around his feet." Okay, that helps us out a little." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a zip-lock bag containing the business card to the hair salon and tossed it onto Patrick's lap.

" Do you recognize this?" Asked Carter.

Patrick flipped it over and looked at the writing on the back of the business card." I do except for the G-33 written on the back. I go to Cozy Ginger's Hair Salon usually twice a month as you can tell by my natty hair."

Carter tugged on his pant legs revealing his chalk stick legs and then sat up in his seat. Paul converted to short hand to keep up with writing down everything coming out of Patrick's mouth.

Carter abruptly asked," Ever notice anyone following you around?"

" As a matter of fact I did, but I thought he was with you

guys. I'm still on supervised release and the guys in prison told me the government would be spying on me when I got out."

" What did you see exactly?"

" I kept noticing a guy wearing big thick sunglasses like the kind old people wear over their glasses. He was also wearing either a dark blue or black hoodie dressed just like the UNAbomber. I think he had long hair but I'm not sure. Oh, and he drove a red Jeep Wrangler."

Paul wrote down UNAbomber and circled it twice. Carter asked," What year was the Jeep and did you get the license plate?"

Patrick ran his stubbly little fingers through his wavy hair and tried to think back." I told you earlier I thought he was with you guys so why would I get his license plate? As for the year and make of the vehicle cut me a break. Nobody can tell the year make of a Jeep Wrangler because the body styles stay the same each year."

Carter looked over at Paul who just shrugged his shoulders." You're absolutely right Mr.Anderson, I apologize. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?"

The kitten jumped onto the ex-city councilman's lap and he gently stroked the kitten." I'm afraid that's all I know."

Carter grimaced getting ready to bare the bad news." So you have a cabin in the woods out in Elkton?"

Patrick stopped petting the kitten and squinted his eyes at Carter." I do, yes. I haven't visited it in years because

supervised release won't allow me to go hunting so I have no use for it. Why do you ask?"

Carter stared at the floor with a sullen look on his face." Because we believe the kidnapper set a booby trap which killed my partner. The whole cabin has been blown up."

Patrick looked shocked and his adam's apple bulged as he gulped." Why am I just now hearing about this? Why wasn't it on the news?"

Carter scratched his nose and snorted." Because the FBI screwed up and we don't like screw ups on the news."

" Oh..." Said Patrick wondering who made the big screw up. Carter looked over at Paul who was tapping his wrist watch. They both stood up and Paul re-folded the newspaper he was sitting on and placed it on the arm chair. Carter walked over and shook Patrick's hand while Paul scrutinized his suit for dust.

Carter said," Thank you for your time Mr.Adamson, you were quite helpful. We're pushed for time so we have to get going. Sorry about your cabin."

Patrick stood up from the la-z-boy revealing his hairy chest and gripped Carter's hand firmly." Oh it's no big loss. That cabin was deteriorating anyways. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you."

Paul's maroon wing-tipped shoes clanked as the agents walked across the veneer floor to the front door. When they boarded the Navigator Carter balled up his fist ready to give Paul a charlie horse then quickly retreated. Paul pulled out another sanitary napkin and wiped his hands then the

steering wheel. The engine revved up with authority when Paul turned the ignition key. When they backed out of the driveway they both put their sunglasses on at the same time.

" So what do you make of all this?" Asked Carter.

" I'd say our perp spent some time in the service. Probably a former Marine."

" What makes you think that?" Asked Carter impressed with Paul's assumption.

" I studied the photographs of the damage done at the cabin. I noticed a peculiar knot in the rope used to tie up the mannequin. That's a special knot they teach Marines. Mr. Adamson said the person following him around drove a Jeep Wrangler. Jar Heads fall in love with Jeeps and prefer to drive nothing else."

Carter watched a teenage boy pedal his bicycle on the wrong side of the road coming in his direction." You used to be in the Marines?" He asked curiously.

Paul grimaced and veered the Navigator closer to the other side of the road so the kid on the bike had plenty of room." Of course not. Too much dust. My father was a Marine."

There was a moment of silence as Carter mulled over the thought of getting used to his new partner. The silence was broken by the sound of *doo-wop* music piercing the air. Carter looked at the radio but the music was not coming from the radio.

" Oh,that's my cell phone." Said Paul reaching into his

vest pocket.

Doo-wop music? What kind of dork listens to Jazz?
Carter crossed his arms while Paul took the call.

" Yes,yes. He's here with me. They found what? And they're sure it's him? Okay,we're on our way." Paul clicked the cell phone shut and placed it on the dashboard. Carter felt a pang of jealousy because Paul got the call and not him.

Carter asked," What was that all about?"

Paul pushed a little harder on the accelerator." That was Max. They found the corpse of Tina's boyfriend in a murky river 10 miles from the Dover races. The body had been decapitated and they can't locate the head but they ran fingerprints to verify his identity. This kidnapper is one sick puppy we're dealing with."

Carter clucked his tongue and squeezed the door handle letting out some stress." He's a sick one indeed." Said Carter. Then he remembered his dream.

CHAPTER 42

Tina could tell by the way her stomach was growling that it had to be at least 12 O'clock in the afternoon. The clicking noise from the strobe light was driving her crazy and she did her best to nurse her possibly broken hand. Vinny had her locked in a bedroom inside the trailer. The window was boarded up with thick plywood and there was a huge strobe light mounted to the ceiling. The strobe light flashed incessantly and made a horrible clicking noise. After finding nothing in the bedroom to smash out the strobe light with Tina had finally jumped on the bed and tried using her fist.

The glass casing was thick and wouldn't shatter. Now her hand had swelled up and she was sure she'd broken it.

To make matters worse Vinny had removed the sheets and blankets from the bed so she couldn't hide under them to shield herself from the vicious bright flashes of light. He had even taken the pillow! Tina wondered if maybe that was another torture trick he learned from the Marines. Then she wondered if Vincent even had any plans of keeping her alive at all. Tina assured herself that he had to keep her alive or her father wouldn't pay the ransom money. She knew Vinny needed money because of the unpaid bills stacked on the kitchen counter. Her father was smart. He would want proof that his baby girl was okay before he would part with the ransom money.

Tina heard keys jingling outside the bedroom door. The monster had finally come to check on his prey. Vinny unlocked the door and stood in the doorway holding a pair of blue jeans and a red turtle neck shirt that was brand new and still had the tag on it.

" Here." Said Vinny tossing the clothes on the bed," I had to agree with you. You are starting to stink." Then he threw a stick of deodorant and some spray on perfume on the bed also." Gussy yourself up. We've got a big day today. You're going home."

Tina's mood brightened up like a Christmas tree. She was fortunate she never got raped and one day she could put all this behind her. Vincent lit a Newport and walked out of the room. Tina changed into the new set of clothes as fast as she could before he would come back.

Vincent's eye looked a little less blood shot and it looked like he had gotten some sleep. The strobe light on the ceiling was still blinking rapidly and making that awful clicking sound. Tina was in such a hurry to get out of the

bedroom that she carried her sneakers out and put them on while sitting on the living room sofa. She didn't sleep that night at all and she felt stuck in a trance. She wondered later if she would develop seizures. Vinny puffed on his cigarette and watched her put her sneakers on.

" So how did you sleep last night?" He finally asked leering at her with his evil eye. Tina didn't even look up from tying her sneakers. Instead she pretended like she didn't hear him. Sitting on the sofa cushion next to her was a white plastic bag still partially opened. Tina peered into the bag and saw a black hoody and a pair of thick sunglasses. The kind old people wear over their glasses to keep the sun out of their eyes. Vinny saw her looking into the bag.

" That's my attire for special missions. It's like I'm bringing the UNAbomber back out into society."

Tina rolled her eyes and finished tying her left shoe. Her ankle looked swollen and still gave her pain and Vinny saw her rubbing it. He turned around to walk into the kitchen." Let me get you some Vicoden for that. We're going to be spending some time in public and I don't want us looking out of kilter with you limping around."

Vinny came out with a glass of water and a couple vicodens in his hand. He looked at his wrist watch after handing her the pain killers." Hurry up. It's 11:30 already and we have a long drive." Tina popped the pills into her mouth and chugged down the misty water. Sitting by the front door was two fishing rods and two dark blue brand new ponchos still in the wrapper. Vinny grabbed one of the fishing rods and a large tackle box that Tina surmised probably wasn't filled with fishing supplies.

Vincent looked like he was in a hurry." Help me carry the rest of this stuff. We've got to get going." He said holding the tackle box securely to his side. Tina picked up the other fishing pole and the two ponchos then followed Vinny out to the barn. Tina was shocked when they entered the barn and everything was neatly organized including beer bottles put away. The rusty trailer with the skiff neatly perched on top was snugly attached to the Jeep Wrangler's receiver. Vinny unsnapped part of the big blue tarp that covered the boat. She handed him the ponchos and fishing poles and he placed them inside the boat. Tina stood on her tippy-toes to try and glance inside the boat.

" Don't look in there!" Vinny snapped at her. She didn't have the slightest clue what all the gadgets were inside the boat but she recognized the 4ft. model rocket Vinny had been working on. Vinny re-snapped the tarp back onto the boat which then concealed everything inside. Then he jumped into the driver's seat of the Jeep and left the driver's door opened. Tina walked over towards the passenger's door but Vinny called out to her.

" Don't get in yet. I need you to check the trailer lights for me so we don't get pulled over." Vincent turned the ignition switch halfway until the interior lights came on. Tina stood at the back of the trailer patiently waiting further instructions. Vinny pushed down on the brake pedal and poked his head out the door.

" How about now? Are the brake lights coming on?" He yelled to the back.

All the lights on the trailer came on except the right tail light didn't seem to be working." Everything looks okay." Called out Tina while she crossed her fingers.

Vinny put on the right turn signal and poked his head out once more." Is the right turn signal blinking?" He asked.

The right tail light did absolutely nothing at all and Tina almost giggled." Everything looks great!" She called out disguising her laughter.

" Good. Open the sliding door so I can back out."

Tina pushed the massive wooden door open far enough that Vinny could back out. A small splinter had dug into her thumb from sliding the door. Once Vinny finally backed out of the barn he got out of the Jeep, pulled the sliding door shut, and locked up the barn. Tina got into the passenger's side and fastened her seat belt. As they made their way down the long driveway Vinny put on his sunglasses and then gently squeezed her knee.

" And we're off like a herd of turtles." He finally said. Something his grandpa used to say when he was a kid. Tina felt a rush of exhilaration which quickly diminished at the thought of Steve.

CHAPTER 43

The woman's articulate voice was music to Jake the Snake's ears. She was not a real woman but she was definitely bearing good news. It felt good to have a woman talking to him even if she was just a robotic machine. Jake the Snake pushed the #2 button on the phone once more to check his commissary account.

The phone said," You have five hundred dollars and zero cents. Push two to repeat this message." A smile ran

across the hit man's face. So the letter hadn't been a phony after all. After he'd finish the job another five hundred would be added to his account. Jake the Snake had been indigent for the past 6 months. He was tired of brushing his teeth with the free 3 inch toothbrushes and that nasty toothpaste powder. The indigent care packages that the prison handed out were minuscule and the cheap one bladed razors often cut his face. A thousand dollars wasn't much compared to the jobs he'd been paid to do on the streets but a grand was a small fortune in jail. Besides, this job was going to be a piece of cake.

Jake the Snake hung up the phone and scratched his copper red goatee. He pulled the letter out of his pocket and read it once more. The letter said, *Hey Jake the Snake remember me? The Teacher? The lady that lives inside the phone has some good news. I need you to buy the Catholic priest an ice cream. Next week I'll be sending you five pictures.* The note was obviously written in code. Buying an ice cream meant **to kill**. Five pictures being sent meant five hundred dollars was on it's way. Jake the Snake looked at the clock on the wall by the mail room. It was 12:30 pm. In thirty minutes the Catholic priest would surely go to his cell for his daily afternoon nap. It was going to be a very long nap on this particular day.

Jake the Snake walked in circles around the unit with the rest of the zombies that were overly medicated. He had worked hard with feigning a mental illness to be on this special secluded "Pill Block" where it was nice and quiet compared to the rest of the prison.

Sure enough at precisely 1pm Jake the Snake watched the priest saunter over to his cell for his afternoon nap. Most of the inmates didn't like the Catholic priest because he was a big time rat. To make matters worse the priest was a kingpin pedophile. Jake the Snake hated rats and rats could

never be trusted. The priest would observe inmates stealing from the kitchen and report it to the authorities.

The hit man ran all these thoughts through his mind to excuse his upcoming behavior. He circled the unit one last time and spotted the priest's cell mate sitting down at a table and starting a new game of scrabble. Good. That meant he had at least 30 minutes. Jake the Snake circled the unit for 10 minutes allowing the priest to fall asleep before he furtively slipped into the priest's cell. Perfect. The pedophile had the bottom bunk. This was going to be easy.

Jake the Snake pulled a thick clear plastic bag that had been used to hold the books his mother sent him out of his pocket and unfolded it. There were lots of identical bags like this in circulation throughout the prison. What made these bags so special is that they fit snug around one's head leaving virtually no room for air. The Catholic priest lay on his back toes up in the air and snoring like a bear. The hit man stared at the priest's cross necklace dangling from his neck then slowly crept towards him. Cross necklaces were the only form of jewelry the prison allowed inmates to wear.

Long nose hairs teetered about under the stertorous conditions of the priest's snoring. Jake the Snake wondered if he was dreaming about little children or alter boys. All in one swift motion the hit man leaned forward and pulled the bag over the priest's head. The priest sat up like the girl in the movie *The Exorcist*. When the priest inhaled to let out a scream the bag fastened to his face like saran wrap. The hit man clamped shut the bottom of the bag with his hands being careful not to leave choke marks. The hit man climbed onto the bed and used his knees to hold down the priest's arms. After an excruciating 90 seconds the priest's face turned pale and he remained motionless. Jake the Snake reached into his pocket and pulled out a shoe lace then neatly wrapped it around the bag and tied it in a neat little bow.

He took a few steps back to admire his work and then reached in his pocket once again and pulled out a small piece of a soda can shaped like a press on nail. He quickly ambled over to the priest's locker and used the tiny piece of soda can to pop the combination lock. A little trick he learned from the Mexicans. Jake the Snake reached in his pocket once more and pulled out a zip-lock bag containing a handful of anti-depressant pills, the exact medication the priest was purportedly taking. Ironically Jake the Snake was on the same exact medication as the priest and hid the pills under his tongue at pill line so he could hoard them up and sell them.

The hit man neatly tucked the pills under a t-shirt inside the locker and then re-locked the combination lock. They would later find the pills upon investigation and conclude that the priest wasn't taking his medication resulting in thoughts of suicide. Jake the Snake was just about to push the cell door open when he stopped dead in his tracks. He dug the neatly typed suicide note out of his back pocket and layed it on the priest's paunch.

" Another job well done." He muttered to himself and walked out the door.

CHAPTER 44

Vinny kept his speed at a steady 65 MPH. They were heading west on the Pennsylvania Turnpike making the long journey to Chicago. Vinny wondered if Jake the Snake managed to pull off the job that he paid him to do. The Catholic priest used to be Vincent's cell mate at one time and Vinny had told the priest that as soon as he got out of jail he was going to kill the judge that sentenced him. Later he found out that the priest was a big time rat. Tina's abduction was all over the news and Vinny couldn't afford to

risk the priest snitching him out. A thousand dollars was a small price to pay compared to the almost quarter million dollars he was about to receive. One of the things Vinny had learned was that you had to spend money to make money.

Tina sat in the passenger's seat, arms crossed, and glowering at Vinny. She was still mad that she had to sleep locked up in a bedroom with a loud clicking strobe light that drove her insane. Since the window was boarded up there was no air conditioner and she sweated all night. The dark clouds up ahead was a clear indicator of oncoming rain. She wondered why two hours had passed and Vincent had not yet lit a cigarette. Because what Tina didn't know was that the Jeep didn't belong to Vinny. The 97 Jeep Wrangler belonged to Vinny's good friend Eric. A month ago Vinny had purchased a new Toyota Tacoma pickup truck. His friend fell in love with the truck and so since Vinny liked the Jeep they decided to temporarily trade vehicles. Upon discontent at any time they would agree to switch vehicles again.

Tina had just rested her head on the passenger door to try and get some sleep when she saw Vinny putting on his UNAbomber attire. The thick rectangular sunglasses looked just like what her grandpa used to wear. Vinny pulled into a rest area and parked the Jeep in the far back corner of the parking lot near the pay phones. Tina knew they weren't stopping for food because they were parked way in the back. Vinny pulled a note out of his pocket and handed it to her.

" I need you to read this note to your father. Make it quick and don't screw this up." Vinny got out of the Jeep and escorted her to the payphone. Tina picked up the phone and rested it on her shoulder and tilted her head to hold it in place. Then she cupped and held her hand out and patiently waited for Vinny to give her some quarters.

Vinny grimaced at her stupidity." Call him collect. I'm

not giving you quarters with my fingerprints on it."

Tina turned her head and rolled her eyes then dialed some numbers. When her father answered the phone Tina heard a faint click sound. She knew the police were listening. She unfolded the note and read it aloud." Be at the Majestic Hotel located on Shoreline drive in Chicago by midnight. Bring the money in a brief case. Get a room and wait for a call for further instructions." Before the judge could even get a word out Vinny hung up the phone.

" Come on let's go." He said pulling her arm. Tina almost tumbled on the ground when she put weight on her left swollen ankle while trying to scurry back to the Jeep. Vincent helped her along into the passenger seat then darted across the front of the Jeep and got in on the driver's side. When he slammed the door shut the seat belt got caught in the door. He said a very bad word then re-opened the door to free the seat belt and closed it once more. Tina wondered if she had been on the phone long enough for them to trace the call. She pictured umpteen police cars coming from every direction and boxing them in.

Vinny slammed the Jeep in first gear and merged into the PA Turnpike traffic. Hearing her father's voice gave Tina a pang of nostalgia. She wanted to tell her father how much she loved him and was contrite for scolding him for not letting her go to Mardis Gras. Maybe brandishing her lovely upper body to the public in New Orleans was a bad idea. Perhaps her father was right. That kind of behavior could possibly get her raped or even killed. There were a lot of sickos out in the world. She couldn't understand Vinny. He never hesitated to bestow pain upon her but he had all the chances in the world to rape her and he never did.

Tina watched Vincent gnashing his teeth as he drove with both hands on the steering wheel. She tried to study his

wrist watch wondering which button was the button that could blow her up. She could see the dental floss stitch marks in the watchband where Sparky had chewed through the watch. It felt weird knowing that today was the day that she would either be freed or be killed. Then she thought of Vinny's students. It was their fault that Vincent turned into a monster. Tina could no longer keep her thoughts to herself.

" So tell me more about your students." She finally said. Vinny turned off at the very next exit. Tina could tell by the way he handled the turn descending down the ramp that he hadn't driven the Jeep very long. Jeeps handled turns a lot different than regular cars. Had they stayed heading west on the PA Turnpike which turned into Ohio Turnpike it would've been the easiest and most direct route to Chicago. However there were lots of cameras and pay tolls on the turnpike and Vinny felt they would get discovered. Vincent got off the PA Turnpike and headed south for a while on a back road until he eventually got on route 322 west. A road without cameras and pay tolls that ran parallel with the turnpike that would take them to Chicago in a few hours longer.

After a long pause Vinny finally responded." I never knew those brats could be capable of so much turmoil. The only one that wanted to learn anything was a girl named Natasha." Vinny reminisced thinking about the short corpulent girl and the gaudy purple lipstick she always wore to class. He never did tell his wife about their little jaunts to exquisite restaurants after school. Natasha sure liked to eat and he wondered how much bigger she had gotten since 10 years had passed." She's going to be a lawyer when she grows up." Vinny said with assurance in his voice.

" Why didn't she stick up for you when you went to trial?"

Vincent almost felt a tear forming inside his eye." Her kooky parents wouldn't let her testify. She was only 12 years old." They drove further into the overcast. Little drips of rain smaller than a teardrop stuck to the windshield. The trees began to sway like NBA basketball players stretching before a game as the wind became brutal. As the wind blew harder and harder the roof of the Jeep made an annoying whistling noise. Vinny saw the big golden arches looming in the distance.

Changing the subject he asked," Are you hungry?"

After all the food she threw up the night before Tina felt extremely famished." Yeah, I'm starving." Vinny pulled into the Mcdonalds making a wide turn because of the boat he was hauling . At first he wanted to go through the drive-thru because it was raining harder but didn't want to risk the Jeep being seen on camera. So he parked aloof in the back corner of the parking lot. Since it was now raining the temperature also dropped tremendously. This made them not look so out of kilter with him wearing a hoody and her a turtle neck.

When they entered Mcdonalds there was no line at the cash register. A 16 year old girl with numerous piercings in her ears and nose was ready to take their order. She chewed gum obnoxiously while she waited for them to order. Vinny thought she looked like a character from one of those Chinese cartoons with her hair dyed bright pink and frizzy. The cashier didn't want to look at Vinny,instead she stayed focus on Tina. She gave shrewd looks as if to say *What are you doing with this moron?* Vinny pulled out a stack of dirty one dollar bills from his money clip. The cashier still kept her gaze on Tina. Maybe she was admiring her Gothic look and probably wondering how beautiful she would look without the

excessive make up and dyed black hair.

" What can I get ya sweetie?" She said to Tina.

" I'll have..."

Vinny cut her off." She'll have a happy meal with a water and I'll have a number three with a large coke." He said adamantly. An older woman with too much hair pouring over her visor was making fries. She overheard Vinny's rudeness and gave him a dirty look. The cashier continued chomping on her gum like a cow chewing grass.

" Okay,that's like \$6.50." She said looking over Tina once more. Before Vincent even handed her the money their food was already neatly propped on a brown tray ready to go. The cashier finally looked at Vinny as he handed her the exact change. Her curiosity finally took over.

" Isn't it a little dark outside to be wearing sunglasses?" She pointed out. Vinny didn't respond to her question and grabbed the tray of food and Tina followed after him. They took their seats in the back corner of the restaurant where smoking was permitted. Vinny shoved the Big Mac with cheese into his mouth like a drug dealer swallowing marijuana before the cops got to it. Tina stared at him like his mother used to do in awe and impressed that he could eat food so fast. Vincent plopped the bag containing the happy meal in front of her and she partook in the food. Tina pulled the sliced pickles out of her hamburger and Vinny snatched them and shoved them into his mouth. By the time Tina got to her small serving of fries Vinny was finished eating and smoking a cigarette. He then blew smoke in her face and smiled. She coughed as she popped fries into her mouth while at the same time wishing she had ketchup.

Vinny told her that condiments were for wussies and while he was in the Marines nobody had time for condiments.

When Vinny finished his last drag from his cigarette he impressed her by putting it out on his tongue then placed the cigarette butt in his pocket. He motioned for her to get up because they had to get going.

" Just bring the rest of the food with." Instructed Vinny. Tina scooped up the few remaining fries and placed them in the Happy Meal bag. When she looked in the bag she saw a toy car. She pulled the toy out of the bag and admired it as she walked over to Vinny who was patiently waiting at the door. Just as they were about to walk out the door a mother and a small boy wearing a Power Ranger shirt walked through the door. The little boy had a mop of hair on his head almost covering his eyes and looked cute as a button. Tina handed him the toy car.

" What do you say?" Said the prim happy little mother. The boy looked up at Tina with his twinkle eyes and smiled." Thank you." He finally said.

Tina smiled back at the boy. Vincent became enraged. Just as the boy was inspecting the toy car Vinny snatched the car out of the boy's hands and placed it in the front pocket of his hoody." We'll be needing that." Vinny said curtly. The little boy began to cry and took refuge in his mother's arms. Tina gaped in shock.

" You have some nerve mister!" The mother said angrily. Vinny grabbed Tina's arm ignoring the mother and escorted her out the door towards the Jeep. As Tina hopped along Vinny thought about stabbing the woman with the knife in his pocket right in front of her son. But he had an agenda to follow. First the money, then the killings would begin.

CHAPTER 45

By the time Carter and Paul arrived at the Burmanian river where Steve's body had been discovered a great multitude of onlookers mingled on the embankment. As they got closer they saw a petite Chinese lady holding a microphone and interviewing people accompanied by a camera man wearing a New York Yankees ball cap backwards on his head.

" Oh great a newsy." Grumbled Paul. A heavy mist daunted the ambiance and caused the temperature to drop tremendously. Paul pushed the four wheel drive button and descended down the hill towards an ambulance guarded by police sitting adjacent to the river. Paul and Carter got out of the Navigator simultaneously and sauntered towards the back of the ambulance. A tall wiry officer with neatly cut,silky,light brown hair briefed them both quickly and to the best of his ability.

" He's in the ambulance." Said the cop," But I must warn you, it stinks really bad in there."

Carter grimaced and stared at the bridge the corpse had purportedly been dropped off of. There was all kinds of obscene vandalism spray painted on the side of the bridge. Paul kept his gaze on the Chinese lady reporter that was interviewing two fishermen . The murky river water was unusually high and flowing fast which indicated a heavy rain from the night before.

A throng of people waited eagerly in hopes of a chance to get on television. The wiry cop pointed to the two fishermen being interviewed." They're the ones that discovered the body. You might want to talk to them."

Carter glanced at the fishermen then turned around and faced the ambulance." We'd like to check out the body." Said Carter checking his wristwatch.

" Oh, sure thing." Said the cop getting out of their way. Carter opened the door and Paul followed him into the ambulance. There was a concrete block on the floor tied to a rope which led into a black body bag containing the corpse. Paul pulled a lemon scented sanitary napkin from his vest pocket as Carter unzipped the body bag. A ghastly odor emanated from the body bag making Carter a little nauseous. The rope leading from the floor was neatly tied to the foot of the headless corpse. Paul placed the sanitary napkin over his nose trying to block out the ghastly odor. Steve was wearing a Dale Earnhart t-shirt and faded blue jeans. His black Nike sneakers were covered in mud and slime. Paul examined the stitching on the rope a little more closely.

" I don't think our perp grew up in the city." Said Paul.

" Why do you say that?" Asked Carter.

" This is no ordinary rope. Look at the fancy stitching and the clamp at the end of the rope. This is a trick rope often used at rodeos. I'm not trying to eliminate any theories, I'm suggesting the likelihood that our suspect may have spent time on a farm or worked at a rodeo." Paul leaned over and observed the knot wrapped around Steve's foot. Pointing with his index finger he said," Look, the very same peculiar knot as the one tied to the mannequin that blew up Travis."

Carter shot him a menacing look and placed his index finger over his lips." Shh-" He said looking around," That

catastrophe is not to be known to the public."

" My bad." Said Paul fondling the rope.

" Hey check this out." Said Carter lifting Steve's right arm. There were three burn marks made by a cigarette lighter on Steve's forearm.

" We don't know that the perp did that." Said Paul.

" Why not?" Asked Carter already feeling inferior by his partner's know-it-all attitude.

" Because it may have been self inflicted. Kids in High school did that stuff all the time just to show how tough they were."

Carter reminisced his High school days and vaguely remembered some teenage punks engaging in that kind of behavior. A sudden knock came from outside the ambulance doors. Carter zipped up the body bag and opened the ambulance doors. A haggard looking old man wearing a long black trench coat and smoking a pipe greeted them as the doors swung open.

" May I have a word with you guys?" Asked the old man.

" Sure." Said Carter and they both stepped out of the ambulance. The haggard old man had a vial of the murky river water sticking out of his trench coat pocket. Paul cleansed his hands with the sanitary napkin and breathed in the fresh air. The haggard old man quickly adjusted his red beret then pulled a business card from inside his trench coat pocket. He handed it to Paul and then cleared his throat.

" My name is John Stiller. I'm a private investigator."

Carter looked at his wristwatch debating whether or not they had time to talk to the man. John had wild hairs growing out the back of his neck including prominent clusters of hair growing out his ears. A tiny brown pin that said " Coffee Day" pinned to his lapel. Carter slammed shut the ambulance doors and briefly looked over the private investigator.

" What can we do for you?" He finally asked.

" I'm investigating the murder of Horace Burns. I've been hired by his wife. Are you familiar with the case?"

" I'm afraid not." Replied Carter. Paul whispered in Carter's ear then wended out towards the fishermen leaving Carter and the P.I alone.

John spoke quickly realizing the agents were pushed for time." About 6 months ago a midnight janitor working at a truck stop on the PA Turnpike discovered Horace Burns' body propped on a toilet and locked in a stall. There was an exuberant amount of paper towels crammed into his mouth."

Carter looked at him with incredulity and shook his head." What's that got to do with this?" He asked with a puzzled look in his eyes. John reached in his trench coat and pulled out a picture of an automated towel dispenser with loose wires hanging from it. He handed the picture to Carter who studied it intently. While Carter studied the picture Paul was conducting an interview with the fishermen that discovered the body.

" As you can clearly see," Said John," The pyro sensor

is missing from the towel dispenser. Possibly the same pyro sensor used in the booby trap that killed agent John Travis."

Carter felt his heart pound against his sternum and he quickly looked around to see if anyone was eavesdropping." How the heck did you find out about that? That was supposed to be kept confidential." Carter glowered at the man and took a step closer and breathing heavier. John licked his lips and smiled wryly.

" I have friends in the FBI. People working in there leak information all the time." Said John.

Carter took a step back letting the man breathe." Did they lift prints off the towel dispenser?"

" None. The perp wiped them clean. We're still not sure what his motive was but people up my way have already given him a name."

" What's that?" Asked Carter now staring at Paul who was waving him over.

" The Gadget Man. People are calling him the Gadget man."

Carter handed the picture back to John then pointed to Paul." I've got to talk to my partner over there, you can come with if you'd like." Carter joined up with Paul who was holding a pen and legal pad jotting notes and listening intently to the fishermen. The fishermen turned out to be father and son wearing bright yellow rain coats. Their skiff had been brought out of the river and sat in the grass behind them.

Paul turned to Carter," These guys said they were fishing under the bridge and their boat made a horrible thunk sound. Mr.Martin here said he almost had a heart attack when he discovered the decapitated corpse. Evidently when the perp tied the cinder block to the victim's foot he didn't realize that part of the river isn't very deep."

Before Carter could respond he heard that annoying doo-wop music coming from Paul's pocket.

" Excuse me a minute." Said Paul answering his cell phone. Carter checked his own cell phone to make sure it was still on. It was. Why did Paul always get all the calls? Carter clenched his fist as his mind filled with jealousy. Everyone grew quiet as Paul's voice filled with exhilaration."Okay boss, we'll be there ASAP." Said Paul into the phone. Paul folded shut the cell phone then quickly wiped it with a sanitary napkin before placing it back in his pocket." We've got to get back to head quarters as quickly as possible." Said Paul turning around and heading towards the Navigator.

Carter shook John's hand then followed after his partner already in hot pursuit." I'll keep in touch." Hollered Carter back to the private investigator. Carter hopped into the Navigator which was already started up and ready to go. "Looks like the show is going to take place in Chicago." Said Paul stepping on the gas.

CHAPTER 46

Lightning struck the celestial skies in almost perfect cadence. Rain drops pounded on the Jeep's roof as if they were trying to break in. Vinny and Tina were still heading west on Rt.322 piercing through the storm and enjoying the

sites of Ohio. The constant clatter of the rain drops falling like bullets from the sky was getting on the Gadget Man's nerves. Tina wanted to sleep but the violent thunder storm was much too entertaining. The Happy meal that she had from McDonalds was meant for little children and Tina still felt hungry. Vinny fooled around with the radio but didn't find any good songs to listen to. Then he had a sudden idea.

" Want to hear some music I made when I was a kid?" He asked.

Not wanting to upset the Gadget Man Tina shrugged her shoulders and said " Sure." Vincent reached up above the visor and pulled out a CD and popped it into the CD player then turned the volume all the way up. Loud heavy metal music blasted through the speakers and Tina covered her ears. Then she recognized Vinny's voice coming on the speakers.

" I'll steal the flowers from their graves. I'm gonna smash their wedding cakes." Vinny sang along with the uproar and beat his fists into the steering wheel. Tina cringed in her seat still covering her ears and patiently waiting for the song to end. The chorus repeated. *" I'll steal the flowers from their graves. I'm gonna smash their wedding cakes."* Tina looked into the side view mirror and saw flashing lights. Vinny was rocking back and forth in his seat singing along to the song completely oblivious to the cop behind him. Tina nudged him on the shoulder and pointed to the rear view mirror. Vinny immediately turned the music down, checked his speed, then put both hands on the steering wheel.

" I don't understand." He said," I wasn't speeding." He looked at Tina as if she might know the answer. Tina

shrugged her shoulders and crossed her fingers where Vinny couldn't see them. Vinny saw an upcoming country road and he turned left onto it heading south on the barren road away from traffic. Most people when they get pulled over look for a public area with people to pull over to be safe. Vinny was doing the complete opposite. The cop following him assumed he couldn't see the flashing lights because of the boat obscuring the view behind them. The cop turned on the siren in hopes Vinny would soon pull over. Tina watched Vinny's hands shake incessantly on the steering wheel as they both listened to the siren screeching in the wind.

When it looked like all possible nosy onlookers were out of site Vinny pulled off to the side of the road next to a corn field. The cruiser's siren made two last beeps then shut off but the bubble gum lights remained on. A million thoughts raced through the Gadget Man's mind but he never once thought to consider a tail light might be out. Vinny had been pulled over several times before and knew that the officers usually sat in their cruiser for a while before they accosted their quarry. However, when Vinny looked in the side mirror he saw the officer holding his hat from blowing away in the wind and observed the officer trotting up towards his Jeep.

The portly, retired looking cop looked like he was in a hurry and rapped on the Jeep's plastic window. Vinny unzipped the window and folded it inward . The heavy set cop was still holding the hat down on his head to keep it from blowing away in the wind. The rain poured harder now and the officer squinted his eyes looking concerned but not threatened. The officer's hat was covered in plastic to protect the hat from the rain but his long black trench coat was getting soaked. Vinny saw doughnut crumbs on the side of his mouth. The gray haired officer looked way too old and out of shape to be a cop.

" Do you know why I pulled you over? What took you so

long to pull over?" Said the officer.

Vinny cleared his throat and glanced at Tina. She had a worried look in her eyes." I'm sorry officer. I didn't see the lights because of the boat I'm hauling."

The officer rested his hairy fingers on the window sill then stared at Tina to see if she would corroborate the story. She watched Vincent furtively tap his wrist watch with his index finger as if to say *Go ahead, screw this up and I'll blow you to smithereens*. Tina nodded her head looking at the cop with imploring eyes then noticed the wedding band on his hairy fingers. She surmised that he probably had kids maybe even as old as her. The cop looked back over at Vinny.

" The reason I pulled you over is because you have a tail light out on the trailer. I'm going to need to see your driver's license and proof of registration."

Vinny bit down on his lip." Oh sure, absolutely officer." The rain continued to pour even harder but the cop pretended not to mind. Instead of reaching in his back pocket for his driver's license, Vinny reached over and opened the glove box. The cop looked back over at Tina. Tears were running down her cheeks.

" Mam, are you alright?" The cop asked with a look of concern.

Vinny pulled a 9mm with a silencer out of the glove box. At the last minute Tina saw what Vinny was doing and tried to grab the gun out of his hands. The Gadget Man was too quick and powerful. The cop went for his own gun but he didn't have time to unsnap it from the holster. Vinny fired twice into the officer's chest. The retired looking cop

staggered backwards and the hairy fingers slowly slid away from the window sill. Tina screamed that annoying shrill that she always did and Vinny back handed her straight across the jowl.

Vinny became enraged." Shut up you sissy! His blood is on your hands. That cop died because of you!" Tina opened the passenger door and threw up. Vinny wasted no time. He reached into the glove box and pulled out a pair of needle nose pliers. The cop lay on his back in the middle of the street. The pouring down rain was already starting to wash away the blood leaking from the officer's chest. Vinny put black leather gloves on and jumped out of the Jeep. Then he got on top of the officer and used the needle nose pliers to pluck the two slugs out of his chest and then placed the slugs in his pocket. Vincent rolled the cop over and took his wallet and also found a cell phone that would later come in handy. The Gadget Man did a quick look around. Perfect. It appeared that nobody was watching.

Vincent drug the officer's body all the way across the other side of the street then stuck the cell phone and wallet in his pocket. The gusty wind blew harder and pellets of rain beat down on his face. Vinny got in the cruiser and parked it on the other side of the street facing the other way to confuse the police. The cruiser was equipped with a video camera which was recording everything so Vinny ripped that out as well and took it with him. Two minutes had passed and he had to hurry before someone would spot him. He changed the license plate on the trailer and replaced it with another counterfeit plate. Vinny popped the red plastic casing on the right tail light and tweaked the wires. The tail light came right on. He jumped back into the Jeep soaking wet and cursing up a storm. He turned the Jeep around and made his way back to Rt.322. Tina cried like a little baby. Her black eye liner trickled down her face.

She had knuckle prints on her face.

CHAPTER 47

The violent storm had finally passed. The 97 Jeep Wrangler appeared to be engulfed in the infinite caravan of cars, trucks, and minivans. Vinny kept both hands on the wheel and prayed that nobody would accidentally side swipe him. Even though the traffic was heavy and they were packed in like sardines, the flow of traffic moved swiftly. Vinny unzipped the driver's side window, folded it inward, and breathed in the scrumptious Chicago air. It felt good to be in the big windy city. There were cars with no license plates and even cars driving without headlights. That's the way it was in Chicago. Cops didn't have time to pull people over for busted tail lights or broken headlights. Half of the drivers in Chicago didn't even have car insurance.

Cars were honking and people were waving their hands in frustration. The Gadget Man felt safe blending in with angry motorists. Despite the noisy streets of Chicago Tina was sound asleep slouched in the corner of the passenger seat. Her mouth was wide open and a slight trickle of drool slithered down her chin. The storm was over but the gusty winds were relentless. Vinny stuck his head out the window once more and sniffed the yummy smells of food that wafted through the air. Everything appeared perfect, just the way it should be.

Vincent made a left hand turn onto shoreline drive and enjoyed the vista of the upbeat city. Several miles ahead he could see blinking lights on a Ferris wheel looming in the distance at the Navy Pier. To his right he could see the soft glow of lights coming from the boats floating on lake Michigan. He looked at Tina. She was still sound asleep. Vinny made a right hand turn and pulled into the parking lot

of a seedy hotel. Naturally of course it was not the Majestic Hotel that the judge was told to be at by midnight.

It was 10pm. Many people were still out milling the streets but in Chicago that would continue all night long. Vinny took up two parking spots because of his boat and trailer. He cut the engine then gently prodded Tina in the abdomen. Tina woke up abruptly.

" Stay in your seat for now. I'm going to stand outside and smoke a cigarette." He said opening a new pack. Tina nodded, yawned, then shut her eyes again. Before Vinny stepped out of the Jeep he put on his hoody and his UNAbomber sunglasses. The nicotine felt good running through his system. He hadn't smoked a cigarette in 5 hours and the Newport in his mouth felt pretty good. While he puffed on his cigarette his imaginative mind ran faster than a race horse as he tried to devise a plan. He reached into the hoody's pocket and pulled out the cell phone belonging to the cop he killed. Just half a mile up the road was the Majestic Hotel. By now the Majestic Hotel was probably crawling with cops. Suddenly the perfect plan hit Vinny like a lightning bolt. He finished his cigarette, put it out using the bottom of his shoe, and placed it in his pocket. He got back into the Jeep and rattled Tina like a kid would wake his parent on Christmas Day.

" What? What?" She cried like a nagging old crone.

" I need you to get us a hotel room." He said while unbuckling her seat belt.

" I don't have my driver's license." She declared.

" Don't worry about it. This is Chicago. They're not going to care. Besides, I know just what you're gonna say."

He said quickly conjuring a fabricated story in his head. Tina cracked her door open and stared at the heavy flow of traffic cruising up shoreline drive. She poked her head out the door and breathed in the scrumptious Chicago air.

" Mmm... Something smells good." She said licking her lips.

" Look, we don't have time to dilly dally. I need some time to set up my equipment." Vinny pulled out two hundred dollars from his wallet and handed it to her." You're gonna say that you and your boyfriend just got in a fight and you're giving him the night to cool down. You forgot to bring your driver's license and you can't go back and get it because he's still furious."

Tina bit down on her lower lip and counted the wad of cash." You sure this is going to be enough money?" She asked.

Vinny looked at her like she was a child asking a stupid question." Just look at this place. It's still being renovated. It's not going to cost much and they'll be happy for your business." Tina gazed at the seedy hotel. The big neon sign displaying the name of the hotel *Eagles Nest* was only partially lit. There was a scaffold at the front of the hotel with big sheets of plastic drooping down and empty buckets of paint scattered about. Tina fondled the bomb wrapped around her neck while watching some teenagers carry a case of beer up the fire escape.

" What about the bomb wrapped around my neck? Don't I have to stay within 40 yards of you?"

Vinny pointed to a pay phone right outside the front

entrance." I'll be standing at that pay phone over there pretending to make a call. The front is right there when you walk through those glass double doors. That's way less than 40 yards." Vinny looked at his watch then got out of the Jeep." Come on, time is a wasting."

Tina got out of the Jeep and stretched her legs out. They were stiff from the long journey. She followed Vinny over to the pay phone. He was already pushing buttons on the cell phone he had stolen from the cop. When she caught up with him the pay phone was ringing. Vinny put his black leather gloves on and picked up the pay phone. He handed the cell phone to Tina." Here take this with you. I'll be watching and listening to everything that's going on so don't pull any tricks."

Tina put the cell phone to her ear and heard his disturbing voice." Oh, I almost forgot something very important. Ask for a room with a view of Lake Michigan. It is very imperative that you get a room facing the lake."

Tina walked under the canopy and pushed on the glass doors while Vinny remained outside hunched over the pay phone. The hotel was not like any hotel Tina had ever been at. There was no friendly bellhop there to greet her and take her luggage, (not that she had any). The desk clerk wasn't wearing a uniform of any kind or a neat little bow tie like she was used to seeing. Instead she saw a scary looking man in his 30's sitting on a bar stool in the corner behind the desk reading a tattoo magazine. He had long black greasy hair pulled tightly back in a pony tail and he was wearing a white tank top revealing all of his offensive tattoos. The walls were painted yellow and the color seemed to fade at certain sections, especially near the ceiling. The desk clerk seemed to pay no attention to Tina walking through the door. It seemed he was infatuated with the tattoo magazine. He held it up closely to his face and scrutinized every page. Tina saw

a little bell next to the cash register and gently tapped it. The scary looking clerk waited a good 30 seconds before he finally put the magazine down and walked up to the cash register.

" Can I help you?" He said with a steely look in his eyes. Tina felt that the man was trying to undress her with his eyes. She felt the same way around him as she did Peter who Vinny ended up chopping to pieces with a chain saw."Act like you're talking to your mother." Whispered Vinny into the phone. Tina stayed dutiful.

" Okay mom, I'm getting a room right now." Said Tina into the cell phone while putting the wad of cash out in her other hand. Tina looked at the desk clerk who pretended not to be irked at her being on a cell phone. Tina continued to play her role.

" I need a room just for tonight with a view of the lake." She said while still chatting into her cell.

The desk clerk looked over a sheet of paper adjacent to the cash register." No problem. I've got plenty of them Lakeside view. Can I see your driver's license?"

Tina looked at him with imploring eyes and placed the cash on the desk." Look, my boyfriend and I sort of got in a fight and I can't go back there and get it. I'm only staying for one night."

The scary man's eyes glistened like maybe violence fascinated him. He carefully observed the knuckle prints on Tina's face and then asked," So that's why the turtleneck huh?" Tina ran her delicate fingers inside the collar of her turtleneck and lightly nodded her head." You're doing good."

whispered Vinny into the phone. He was still outside watching the whole thing from outside. The desk clerk slithered his tongue like a snake causing Tina to take a step back.

" Well, since you're only staying one night I guess I can bend the rules a little bit. You're not going to invite a bunch of teenage punks and trash the place are you? Teenagers these days can't wait for their folks to go on vacation to throw a party in their own homes so they decide to come here and trash our hotels. We've had that problem a lot."

Tina pushed the wad of cash closer to him hoping he'd shut up and take the money." No, I won't be having any parties." She finally said.

The desk clerk picked up the wad of cash and then handed her back 4 twenties." Good, I'll put you in room 315. Enjoy your stay." He reached under the desk and pulled out a set of keys and handed them to her. Tina snatched the keys and headed out the door before he could change his mind. The scary looking clerk jumped back on the bar stool and went back to reading his tattoo magazine.

CHAPTER 48

The nervous judge squeezed the cell phone in his hand like it was a rubber ball. The cell phone was saturated in sweat perspiring from his hand. He glanced at his Rolex. It was 11PM. Just one more hour and the kidnapper would call giving instructions of how to deliver the ransom money. The judge sat at the edge of the bed of his spacious hotel room wondering if he could put his trust in the FBI. The agents assured him that they had scoured the entire hotel and Tina was not in the building.

Federal agents swarmed around judge Anderson dressing him up like he was a Hollywood star about to go on stage. Paul sat at the edge of the bed next to him putting his hand on the judge's shoulder to comfort him.

" We're going to put a wireless hidden cam inside your tie. The lens is the size of a pin hole. The kidnapper will never see it." Paul showed him the miniature wireless camera which was about the size of a nickle." It also has audio so we'll be watching and listening to everything that's going on."

Carter stood at the window aloof from Paul drinking a hot cup of coffee and watching the late night fishermen on the lake. He was tired of competing with Paul who proved to be a whole lot smarter. He wished he still had Travis and he felt a little incredulous on whether or not Paul was gay. Another agent walked into the hotel room carrying a bullet proof vest.

" I think this one ought to fit." Said the tall blond haired agent setting it on the bed. (The portly judge had tried on a bullet proof vest on earlier but it was too small.) Paul noticed there was little black hairs growing out of the mole on the judge's neck and he quickly averted his eyes to keep from getting grossed out. The judge was still squeezing the cell phone with all his might while staring down at the carpet. Just then the phone belonging to the hotel room started ringing. The call caught everyone off guard and everyone froze and remained quiet. They had already tapped the hotel room phone just in case the kidnapper decided to call it rather than the judge's cell phone.

Agent Sanders put on his headset and pushed the record button getting ready to monitor the call. After the third ring the judge stood up from the bed and walked over to the

phone. Before he picked it up he looked at Paul. Paul gave him a thumbs up and the judge swallowed hard then reluctantly picked up the phone.

" Hello?" He said nearly choking on his own words. The judge nervously twiddled the phone cord with his index finger.

" Hey, is Al there? Last name Coholic?" The judge could hear a bunch of little kids laughing in the background. He looked over at Agent Sanders who cracked a smile then shrugged his shoulders. The kids were still laughing in the background.

The judge grunted." Listen you little punks, you're going to be in big trouble. Let me talk to your parents."

The little boy at the other end of the line paused for a second and then said," Umm..uh..you stink!"

The phone went dead. The judge slammed the phone down in frustration. Paul walked over and put a hand on his shoulder." It's okay, don't worry about it. Just some kids having some fun." The judge wanted to cry but he held back the tears. Carter walked away from the window and took a seat next to the judge on the bed. He finished his last few sips of coffee then looked over the judge and wondered how he would hold up." Look, this guy is no ordinary thug, he's tricky. He might have you walk across a bridge or get on a train we don't really know..."

The judge cut him off." What if he sees you guys he might take off and I'll never see my daughter."

Carter crushed the empty coffee cup in his hands.

"Don't worry about that. Our undercover agents know what they're doing. We'll give you plenty of space. We installed a tracking device inside one of the stacks of hundred dollar bills. We also have a tracking device inside the briefcase itself."

The judge loosened his grip on the cell phone." Where are you going to be?"

Paul interrupted this time. " There's an unmarked van parked out front. You know like the kind you see in the movies where they do stake outs. Carter and I will be inside it watching and listening to everything. We also have undercover agents evenly dispersed up and down the streets disguised as pedestrians watching your back."

The judge looked down to check his Rolex when suddenly the door swung open and a foxy brunet with long legs wearing a red dress quickly accosted the judge while holding a lap top." May I?" She said looking at Carter. Carter immediately rose from the bed offering her his seat. She sat down next to the judge and a lovely scent of perfume infiltrated the room. The expensive perfume made the judge a little dizzy but also gave him solace. The foxy lady opened the lap top." My name is Patricia Koltex. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

The judge sat up straight ready to brace himself for the bad news. Patricia turned on the computer screen and a mug shot picture of a man came on the display. The man in the mug shot had dark slicked back hair and an evenly trimmed goatee. The stony look in the man's eyes made him look vaguely familiar.

" Do you recognize this man?" Asked Patricia.

The judge stared at the mug shot intently." Yes, but I'm not sure from where." Replied the judge.

" We did a thorough background check on your butler. This is him in 1985."

The judge cupped his hands over his mouth." Do you mean Alfred?"

Patricia snorted a quick chuckle." Well, that may have been the name he gave you but his real name is Juan Chavez. He did 10 years in state prison out in California for molesting a little girl."

The judge felt sick to his stomach. Alfred was like family which they trusted for a long time. Then he wondered if the butler ever did anything to Tina when she was little. He'd been their butler for 10 years.

" I'm sorry to have been the one to tell you this." Said Patricia closing up the lap top and giving Carter back his seat. The judge got on his cell phone and dialed home as fast as he could. His wife answered the phone." Maud, it's me Tom. Yes I'm still in Chicago. Listen, call the police and have them remove Alfred from the house. I don't know if he has anything to do with this or not. I'll explain later. Just tell him he's fired. I love you too. Goodbye."

The judge hung up the phone and stared out the window. It was going to be a very long night.

CHAPTER 49

Loud rap music echoed across from hotel room 315. Tina recognized the song being played. The song was called

" It's your Birthday" by 50 cent and it was one of her favorite songs. Vinny hated rap music. In fact he despised it and claimed it gave him a migraine headache. The inmates in prison used to play rap music on their radios and he would steal their radios, break it into little pieces, and flush it down the toilet.

Vinny was trying to set up a metal detector device that could sense the faintest sign of metal as small as a sewing needle. The music from next door grew louder and teenage punks could be heard hooting and hollering. The Gadget Man beat on the wall with his fist." Keep it down over there!" He shouted. He heard kids laughing and someone replied " Hey why don't you come over and make me."

Vinny fondled the 9mm in his hoody pocket and mulled over whether or not to shoot each and everyone of those punks. He already killed a handful of people but couldn't keep killing everyone he came in contact with or eventually he would get caught. He reluctantly let go of the gun and pulled his hand out of his pocket. He looked at Tina and gazed into her pretty blue starry eyes. She seemed to be in awe with the way Vincent meticulously had the place set up. Wires running up the wall and electronic equipment being set up that she was unfamiliar with. Evidently Vinny spent a lot of money on this kidnapping project and it seemed rather frivolous to go into all this effort for two hundred thousand dollars. Then she remembered Vinny had asked for two hundred and ten thousand dollars which seemed kind of odd as well.

The Gadget Man wore his black leather gloves while he worked and Tina soon got bored watching him and turned on the T.V. She flipped through the channels but didn't find anything about herself on T.V. This was Chicago after all so she wasn't really all that surprised. Big stuff happened out in this city all the time. Vinny was standing on his tippy-toes with a staple gun stapling a small camera into the corner of

the ceiling when they both heard keys jingling outside the door. Tina looked at Vinny and he signaled for her to remain quiet. Vincent pulled up his pant leg and pulled out a long sharp hunting knife then turned out the lights and stood by the door. Tina had no idea who was trying to break in but she knew it was about to get ugly so she hid under the bed. The jingling sound grew faint but when Vinny put his ear to the door knob he could hear a key slowly being inserted. Vincent gripped the hunting knife tightly in his hand and crouched beside the door. Using the 9mm with the silencer would be so much easier but Vinny didn't like the sulfuric smell that someone passing by could possibly detect. Plus he didn't feel like prying more bullets out of a dead body with the needle nose pliers.

Vincent pinned himself taut against the wall and rested his free hand lightly on the door knob. He could feel the knob turning slowly. Someone was definitely trying to sneak their way in. When the knob could turn no more the door slowly started to open. The first thing that poked through the door was a shaky arm brandishing a knife. Vincent slammed the arm into the doorway and the knife fell to the floor. He pulled the intruder inside and slit his throat faster than you can say " Jack Robinson". The intruder made a pratfall to the floor and Tina could feel the thud from his fall. Vinny turned the light on then kicked the intruder in his side to make sure he was dead.

Tina got up from under the bed and gaped when she recognized the intruder. The desk clerk lay motionless on the floor with his tongue sticking out. Blood was trickling down his neck and obscuring his offensive tattoos then reaching it's way all over his white tank top. A condom lay 3 inches from his left hand.

The voices in the Gadget Man's head were congratulating him and cracking jokes about the whole

situation. A tingling sensation rushed through Vinny's body and he fell on the floor next to the dead man. spurts of laughter started out soft but grew more intense. Pretty soon Vinny was laughing hysterically holding his abdomen and rolling around on the ground like a pig in the mud. His laughter grew so loud that the teenagers next door pounded on the wall.

" Hey buddy are you okay over there?" Shouted a teenage punk from behind the wall.

Neither Vinny nor Tina responded. After 2 minutes Vinny's psychotic episode finally diminished and he lit up a cigarette to calm his nerves. He put the hunting knife back in his ankle holster but used the desk clerk's tank top to clean it off first. Vinny put on his UNAbomber sunglasses then peeped out the door to see if anyone was coming." Come on. We have to get out of here." Said Vinny slinging the hoody over his head. Tina duteously followed him out the door. Vinny purposely left the door unlocked and hung a dark blue turtle neck sweater on the outside door knob. Together they descended down the fire escape and into the night.

CHAPTER 50

The small boat rocked back and forth on Lake Michigan like it was dancing to disco music. The billowy waves crashed against the side of the boat getting both of their feet wet. Vinny's friend Peter had assured Vinny that although the boat itself was junk, the motor had tremendous speed. The boat was hot merchandise that Vinny had bought from Peter for fifteen hundred dollars. Too bad he ended up chopping up Peter to smithereens with a chain saw. The Jeep and trailer was parked in a secluded area at a park

adjacent to the lake 3 miles away from their hotel. When Tina and Vinny first boarded the skiff, Vinny had first taken the boat along shore of the back of the Eagles Nest. Tina didn't know why, but Vinny was tossing plastic floating devices into the lake every 100 yards as they moved further and further out into the lake.

They were now at least a mile away from the Eagles Nest wearing ponchos and posing as fishermen. It was 11:55 pm and there were other late night fishermen as well enduring the billowy waves. The other boats had soft lights glowing from them but Vinny insisted not casting any light. He didn't want to be seen and risk having other boaters pull along side of him and make small talk and taking up his precious time. Vinny looked through the binoculars scrutinizing the back of the Eagles Nest trying to find the bloody tank top belonging to the desk clerk that he had hung out the hotel room window.

After scrutinizing each and every window he finally caught a glimpse of the tank top dangling from a window three stories up. Tina held the fishing pole in her hand but didn't bother reeling or casting her line. The Gadget Man held a barometer up in the wind and entered calculations into the lap top which sat on his lap. A soft humming sound drew closer and closer and Tina turned around to see what was coming. To Vinny's dismay, he saw flashing lights and suddenly realized the coast guard was approaching. Vinny folded shut the lap top then nudged Tina in the shoulder. "Put your hood on and make it look like you're fishing." He said in a low tone.

Vinny picked up his own fishing pole and cast it into the lake. A bright spot light was shining on them making the hairs on the back of Vinny's neck rise." Keep your head down and don't look into the light." Commanded Vinny. Tina kept her head down and did as she was told. A man dressed

in white wearing a sailor hat looked at them with concern.

" Hey, are you guys alright?" Asked the sailor.

Tina desperately wanted to push Vinny off the boat and take refuge with the handsome sailor. Vinny swallowed hard before he spoke." Yeah, we're doing fine. Just doing a little late night fishing." He said gritting his teeth.

" That boat looks a little small for a lake this size. The waves are rough because of the storm we had earlier. Are you sure you're gonna be alright?"

Vinny squeezed his fishing pole noticing that it was shaking a little bit." We've been through storms worse than this. I think we'll be alright."

The sailor lit a cigarette and pushed the spot light down away from Vinny's eyes and towards the bottom of the boat. After a brief moment, the sailor finally shut off the spot light but had one last question.

" Did you catch anything?"

Vinny reeled his line in a little bit and glanced at Tina. She still had her head down as he had instructed." No, not yet. But we will soon."

The sailor tossed his cigarette into the water." Well, be careful and good luck." He said as the boat's motor grew louder.

When the coast guard finally left Vinny pushed the indiglo button on his wrist watch. It was 11:57 pm. Just about time to call the judge. Vinny dug around in his back pack for his voice synthesizer. When he finally found it he rested it on

his lap and handed the stolen cell phone to Tina. " Here, call your daddy's cell phone and then hand me back the phone." He looked at his wrist watch, 11:59 pm.

Tina punched in the numbers then handed Vinny the cell phone. The Gadget Man clipped on the voice synthesizer then looked up at the dark sky. A helicopter was circling the sky.

CHAPTER 51

The judge wiped his sweaty palms down his pant leg then glanced at his Rolex. It was 12:01 AM and he was getting worried. *Did he do the right thing by going to the police? Maybe the kidnapper figured out he had gone to the police and got scared and took off already?*

Everyone had left the judge's hotel room except for agent Sanders wearing a headset ready to monitor phone calls and another agent almost falling asleep in the corner. The judge was all fixed up and ready to go with the briefcase full of money at his feet. The FBI had done a great job concealing the hidden camera and microphone into his attire. The bulletproof vest he was wearing felt heavy and made him sweat like a pig.

Paul and Carter were already out in the van out front waiting for the show to begin. Undercover agents heavily armed ambled the Chicago streets pretending to read the newspaper. Suddenly the judge's cell phone vibrated sending a tenuous shock wave throughout his body. The judge answered before it had a chance to ring a second time.

" Hello?" Said the judge in a precarious voice.

A robotic voice said," Did you go to the police?"

The judge paused before he answered stunned at the question." Of course not. You told me not to."

The sleeping agent in the corner woke up and gave him a thumbs up.

The robotic voice said," Then why is a helicopter circling the sky?"

The judge was quick to respond this time." They're not for you. Helicopters are out all the time. This is Chicago. It's always like this. I can't clear the skies for you."

The robotic voice said," Don't get smart. Do you have the money?"

The judge lifted up the briefcase then set it back down." Yes, it's right here. All two hundred and ten thousand dollars. But first I want to talk to my daughter."

Vinny unclipped the voice synthesizer and handed the cell phone to Tina. Tina sounded like a little kid with mirth in her voice.

" Hi daddy,I'm okay."

A salty tear welted up in the judge's. He wiped it away quickly then stood up from the bed.

" I love you honey."

The same thing happened with Tina but she let the tears run down her cheeks.

" I love you too daddy."

Vinny snatched away the cell phone and re-attached the voice synthesizer." Let's not waste time" He said into the cell phone," Walk out of the hotel and come out the front entrance. Bring the money and stay on the phone."

The judge picked up the briefcase and left the hotel room. Paul and Carter sat dumbfounded in the van shocked at the information they received from agent Sanders. The cell phone the kidnapper was using belonged to an Ohio state Police Officer. Carter scratched his head while flakes of dandruff fell from his curly hair and onto his shoulders." I don't understand," Said Carter," Why would a police officer do something like this?"

Paul looked at him in disgust." You can't be serious. Do you really think a cop would be dumb enough to use his own personal cell phone to make a ransom call?"

Carter turned red in the face realizing his stupid assumption. Paul shook his head and removed a sanitary napkin from his pocket to wipe the computer screen keyboard." The kidnapper probably got stopped on his way to Chicago, killed the police officer, and stole his cell phone."

Carter unbuttoned the cuffs on his sleeves and rolled them up because he couldn't take the heat inside the van." Yeah, I figured that. I was just playing with you." Said Carter. Paul grunted and pushed some buttons on the keyboard. A perfectly angled display showed the judge getting onto the hotel's elevator." He's on the move." Said Paul while cleansing his hands.

CHAPTER 52

The judge held the briefcase firmly in his right hand. In his left hand he pushed his cell phone into his ear carefully

while listening to every word. The robotic voice said, "Where are you at now?" The judge nervously glanced around at all the perky families mingling around in the lobby." I'm in the hotel lobby. I'm coming out the front doors."

The judge walked out the front entrance and stood under the green canopy hovering over the entrance." What do you want me to do now?" Asked the judge while trying to peer into every window of every car driving up and down the street.

The robotic voice said, "Okay, good, I see you. Now make a left and start walking up the street. I'm going to call back in a few minutes and you better still be walking. Don't stop walking or I kill the girl."

Before the judge could respond Vinny hung up the phone. The judge dutifully wended up the busy street walking at a steady pace. He looked to his right and saw a man standing on the street corner reading a newspaper give him a slight nod. Although the undercover agents were keeping a safe distance the judge could still feel their presence lingering in the air around him.

The Gadget Man quickly entered a new mathematical formula onto his lap top. He was a math teacher and not supposed to make these kinds of mistakes but he had overlooked something. Vinny had lied to the judge when he said that he had seen the judge coming out of the hotel. He hoped the judge was still walking up the street like he told him to do. Perhaps the threat of killing Tina would make the judge more conscientious and prevent him from pulling any last minute stunts. Vinny started the boat's motor and took the boat out further across the lake. It was a perfect spot far away from other boaters and just where he needed to be. He pushed the indiglo button on his watch and read the time. If his calculations were correct, he should be calling the judge

in 6 minutes.

Carter and Paul sat in the hot van transfixed to the computer screen watching the judge saunter through the busy streets of Chicago. They could see the faces of passing pedestrians giving the judge funny faces probably wondering why a man was carrying a briefcase so late at night. Paul captured some of the faces of the suspicious looking pedestrians and enlarged their picture on the computer screen. The equipment they were using was working great and they could see and hear everything the judge was experiencing. Since the kidnapper had said he could see the judge coming out of the hotel, agents were thoroughly searching all the buildings across the street of the Majestic Hotel.

" This guy looks kind of suspicious." Said Paul zooming in on a man with too many gold chains around his neck. They had surmised that the kidnapper might just blend in with passersby and snatch the briefcase and then run. The annoying doo-wop music echoed inside the van. Paul picked up his cell phone and answered it without even checking his caller ID.

" Yes this is detective Paul Newman."

When Paul recognized the voice he moved to the far corner of the van away from Carter." Look, I really can't talk right now. I'm in the middle of a hot pursuit."

Carter couldn't hear what the person talking to Paul was saying but he could hear a man's voice." Okay, I love you too." Said Paul and hung up the phone.

" Who was that?" Asked Carter.

" Oh that was my girlfriend." Said Paul all too quickly. But Carter knew Paul was lying. His first instincts about Paul's sexual orientation were correct. Paul was a homosexual.

The billowy waves had come to a lull. Tina couldn't relinquish the song Vinny had played earlier from her mind. *I'll steal the flowers from their graves. I'm gonna smash their wedding cakes.* What kind of song was that? Obviously Vinny had been a disturbed individual, even in his early youth. Vinny pushed the indiglo button on his wrist watch and checked the time. Exactly 10 minutes had passed. It was time to call the judge.

The judge huffed and puffed as he sauntered down Shoreline drive. The bullet proof vest felt heavy and he was sweating profusely. The howling gusts of wind blowing in his face seemed to take the edge off things. He was getting worried again because the kidnapper said he would call back in a few minutes and nearly 10 minutes had passed. He had already walked half a mile down the busy street and he didn't feel the undercover agents were doing a good job with staying out of site. The helicopter flying above him must have circled him at least 6 times already.

The cell phone shook vigorously in his left hand. The judge answered it before it could ring a second time." Yes, I'm still here walking down the street as you instructed me to do." Said the judge sounding out of breath.

The robotic voice said," Good. Have you passed a doughnut shop on your left?"

The judge anxiously looked around and spotted the doughnut shop behind him." Yes, I just passed it." Said the

judge stopping dead in his tracks.

" Keep walking and don't stop. Okay, I see you now." Said the robotic voice. Vinny couldn't in fact see the judge at all but he knew his exact whereabouts. Part of his plan was to fool the FBI into thinking that he was close by." Okay, do you see the big neon sign that says Eagle's Nest?" The robotic voice said.

" Yes, it's right in front of me." Replied the judge.

The robotic voice said," Good, you're being watched Mr.Anderson. Come up the fire escape of the hotel alone and stop on the 3rd floor."

The judge ascended up the stairs while undercover agents entered the hotel through a back entrance. Meanwhile across the street snipers were setting up on the roof ready for action.

" Okay, I'm on the third floor." Said the judge. He looked up and saw the helicopter making another pass. He prayed to God that this would not get ugly.

" Alright. Come inside and walk down the hallway until you see a dark blue turtle neck hanging on the door." Said the robotic voice. The judge walked with caution checking every door until he finally spotted the turtle neck hanging from the door knob. A drunk teenager ran past him almost knocking him over and scaring the daylights out of him.

Carter and Paul sat in the hot van feeling perplexed watching and listening to everything on the computer screen." What do you think he's going to do next?" Asked Carter. Paul had a sullen look on his face." I honestly don't know."

The judge looked up and down the hallway to see if any agents were about to blow his cover. He could hear the sounds of people having a party but the coast was clear. The judge stopped at the door with the hanging turtle neck." Okay, I see it." Said the nervous judge.

The robotic voice said," Put the turtle neck on and come inside. If I see you come in without the turtle neck on I kill the girl." The word "kill" shook up the judge. He couldn't bare the thought of his daughter getting shot in the head because he tried to pull a fast one. Since the kidnapper had never said that he had to take any of his clothes off, the judge decided to wear the turtle neck right over top of his vest.

The judge donned the dark blue turtle neck and stepped through the door. He almost fainted when he saw the dead man lying on the floor.

CHAPTER 53

Carter stood up and smashed his fist into the van roof. "Dang it! We lost visual." He said as the computer screen went black. Then he got on the radio to chat with the agents flying in the helicopter.

" What's going on out there? Do you guys see anything?" A crackle of static came over the radio as Carter eagerly awaited their response.

" There seems to be what looks like a white t-shirt hanging from a window. We can't see inside because the drapes are closed." Said a man's voice above the chopping sound of the helicopter.

Carter picked up a bulletproof vest in the corner of the van and fastened it to his burly frame. Then he donned a dark blue wind breaker and loaded his glock 40.

"What are you doing?" Asked Paul.

"There's no point in us both staying here. If he's been watching the judge this entire time he's got to be close by. I've got a hunch where he might be hanging out."

Paul turned up the volume on the computer and was relieved to discover he could still monitor the audio. "Shouldn't you first get authorization from Max?"

Carter looked at him like he might be one of those freaks also known as a mind pretending to be stuck in an invisible box. "We don't have time for that." He said and jumped out of the van and into the night.

Tina's mood suddenly perked up when she saw her father appear on the screen of Vinny's lap top. Occasionally the screen went sketchy but for the most part Vinny and Tina could see everything the judge was doing. Vinny saw the judge gaping as he stared at the desk clerk lying on the ground. The Gadget Man barked into his cell phone, "That guy tried to rape your daughter. I had to put him down."

The judge saw the condom laying 3 inches from the desk clerk's hand. "Thanks, I guess." Said the judge.

"Let's not waste any time." Said Vinny, "Do you see the attache case opened up on the desk?"

The judge looked to his left and saw the opened up attache case with wires spewing out from it. "Yes, I see it."

The robotic voice said, " Good, walk over to it, open the brief case of money, and set it next to it on the desk."

The judge opened the brief case full of money and set it next to the attache case. Then he looked up at the camera and awaited further instructions. He heard the robotic voice say, " Place each stack of bills on top of the metal detector one at a time. Then drop them into the trash can below at your feet. Continue to do so until I say stop." The judge paused a minute looking at the 21 stacks of hundred dollar bills. *Would the kidnapper get mad when he finds out one of them has a tracking device?*

" Hurry up. We don't have much time." Said the robotic voice. One by one the judge placed the stacks of bills onto the metal detector then into the empty trash can. When he got to the 8th stack of bills the metal detector beeped as loud as a fire alarm.

" Throw that stack of bills onto the floor." Said the robotic voice. The judge threw the stack of hundred dollar bills over his shoulder like he was throwing a sash at a wedding." Hurry up with the other 13 stacks of bills." Said the robotic voice. The judge went a little faster like a Chinese factory worker but the metal detector never went off again. The money in the small trash can was clean.

Carter rushed through the door of the doughnut shop brandishing his glock 40." Nobody move!" He shouted. Everybody froze looking petrified thinking he was about to rob the store. Carter made his way to the back corner where a man was gazing into his lap top and sipping coffee. Carter

yanked the lap top out of the man's hands and stared at the screen. The tycoon became enraged and stood up from his seat showing no fear of Carter's weapon.

" Hey man what gives?" Shouted the wiry tycoon. Carter felt like a complete idiot staring at the information on the screen realizing it had nothing to do with the kidnapping.

" I'm sorry sir." Said Carter handing back his lap top, " I'm with the FBI investigating a kidnapping." He pulled out a picture of Tina and showed it to the rest of the patrons." Has anyone seen this girl?" He said wistfully. Carter got about as much attention as a fat woman in a beauty pageant. Evidently he was not familiar with " The Chicago way" and how people acted in the windy city. Everyone seemed to ignore him except for the angry tycoon that gave him his undivided attention.

" You people think you can just waltz in anywhere you darn well please and expect people to pay you some respect. I have friends in the FBI and I want to know who your boss is?"

The thought of Max finding out about this little blunder didn't sit too well with Carter." Uh, umm.... I gotta go." He said dashing out the door.

CHAPTER 54

The judge wiped the sweat from his brow on the sleeve of his turtle neck. He finally understood why the kidnapper had asked for \$210,000. instead of an even \$200,000. But he also wondered what kind of idiot would go through so much trouble with this intricate process for a measly \$200,000. Maybe this wasn't about the money. It had to be

about something more. He pressed the cell phone firmly against his left ear. The robotic voice said, " Pull the plastic bag full of money out of the trash can." The judge pulled the plastic bag full of money from the trash can and held it up in front of the camera. The Gadget Man's eye got bigger when he sat at his lap top watching the judge hold up the untainted bag of money. Now is when things were about to get pretty intense. By now the FBI probably figured out that Vinny wasn't in the hotel room with the judge. He also surmised that they knew that the tracking devices had been removed from the money. But since the FBI couldn't see what was going on in the hotel room they had no clue about the rocket mounted on a tripod facing the window.

The helicopter was still circling the hotel in hopes of spotting them but the small boat illuminating only the small light from Vinny's lap top which he kept concealed and their dark blue ponchos made them nearly invisible. The coast guard was nowhere in sight and the other boaters were closer to shore. Vinny finally spoke into the voice synthesizer attached to the cell phone and said, " Now quickly go over to the rocket,unscrew the nose cone, shove the money into the tube, screw the nose cone shut, open the drapes and the window, then push the button. Do it quickly or I kill the girl."

The judge scurried over to the large rocket,unscrewed the nose cone, and began to shove the money into the long hollow tube. For one reason or another the judge had trouble cramming the plastic bag full of money into the tube." The money wont fit." The hasty judge protested.

The robotic voice said, " It will fit. You have to wrestle with it a little bit. You've got 20 seconds or I kill the girl."

The judge tried once more and was finally able to screw on the nose cone. When the judge opened the window the

bloody tank top fell to the ground. The judge wasted no time. He pulled back the drapes and pushed the big red button on the tripod. The number 10 lit up on the LED screen and began counting down.

The robotic voice said, " You might want to get the heck out of there. It's about to get smoky."

The judge scampered out the room and descended down the fire escape and ran towards the lake.

CHAPTER 55

Carter's two-way radio bleeped on his cell phone. When he pulled it out of his pocket he could hear chopping sounds coming from the rotor blades of the helicopter. An agent's voice shouted over top of the helicopter's noise." Hey, you're not going to believe this."

Carter looked up at the looming helicopter and pushed the talk button." What's going on? What do you see?"

There was a crackling sound and Carter could hear some agents arguing with each other in the background."There's a rocket perched in the window. The hotel room appears to be empty. Hold on,wait a minute. I see the judge running towards the lake." Carter sprinted to the backside of the hotel, saw the judge, and ran after him.

Vinny's boat floated gracefully in the water and rocked gently like a baby's cradle. The cool breeze helped eradicate the tension in the air. Vinny started up the boat's motor and then placed his lap top in a water proof back pack. When he looked up the rocket was flying flamboyantly through the air coming straight towards him. He was over a mile away and

hoped the rocket had enough power to reach him. The Gadget Man's calculations were very close because the rocket landed just 75 yards from the boat. Vinny pushed the throttle all the way down and raced towards the rocket floating in the water and still slightly glowing from the left over ashes in the rocket's engine. As quickly as he could, he pulled the money out of the rocket and stuffed it in his waterproof back pack.

Tina looked at him awe struck and impressed with his elaborate scheme. Vinny put on his scuba gear faster than a fireman changing into his fire fighting gear. Then he pulled out a pair of handcuffs and cuffed Tina behind her back and to the boat." Hey! What about the bomb around my neck?" She finally asked.

Vinny chortled with excitement holding his gut while he laughed." You watch too many movies kiddo. Did you really think that thing was real?" The Gadget Man held his arm out so she could see his watch, " Hey, do you wanna watch yourself blow up?" He asked excitedly. Before she could answer he pushed every single button on his wrist watch. Tina's eyes got big thinking she would blow to smithereens. Absolutely nothing happened. She didn't even get shocked.

" How were you shocking me then?" She asked. Vinny laughed even harder and pulled a small key chain sized remote out of his pocket and pushed the button. Tina felt the shock jolt through her neck.

" Ouch!" She cried. Vinny pulled out a gag and some duct tape from a ruck sack and began gagging her.

" You know I always get a kick out of you blonds. You're so stupid you'll believe anything. This remote belongs to a

fart machine I purchased from a gag store for 10 bucks. It came with a black box meant to put under a sofa cushion then you push this button and the machine makes a fart noise. I ripped the transmitter out of the fart machine and hooked it up to Sparky's old shock collar. I had the remote hidden in my hand each time I pretended to push a button on my wrist watch. This is just an ordinary wrist watch."

Vinny looked up at the sky. The helicopter was coming. It was time to go. The Gadget Man looked at Tina and smiled. He heard a mumbling sound trying to penetrate through the duct tape over her mouth. She was trying to say something but Vinny had no time to hear her out." Your daddy is going to be here soon. Be sure to give him my deepest regards. You should've killed me while you had the chance." The Gadget Man took a bow and dove into the lake.

Carter saw the judge running toward the docks and caught up with him. A young couple in a sporty looking speed boat was just pulling into the docks giggling and laughing with one another. Carter whipped out his credentials and put a hand out signaling them to a halt.

" FBI! We need to use your boat. It's an emergency!"

The baffled husband looked at his wife for approval. She nodded and he tossed a rope out to them. " Hey like, sure, no problem man. Just bring it back in one piece."

Carter pulled the rope in as fast as he could. All the vigorous workouts in the weight room were paying off. In no time the couple was climbing onto the dock." We appreciate it." Said Carter watching the judge climb into the boat. There

was no time in talking the judge out of not coming along. The judge had his mind made up that he was going to be a part of this no matter what. Carter pushed the throttle all the way down and raced towards the helicopter already shining the spotlight on Tina.

The rain came pouring down as Carter got the boat cruising up to 50 knots. Rain drops pelted both of their faces stinging and feeling as if the drops were being shot out of a pellet gun. Within a minute they saw the skiff bobbing up and down in the water.

The Gadget Man was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER 56

The rain came pouring down from the sky beating down on their ponchos and splitting into tiny particles of precipitation as it touched down on the elastic. Tina felt a cold chill shiver down her back. She watched as a good looking curly haired man pulled a speed boat along side of her with her father in tow. The curly haired man was a little shorter than Steve but his burly frame made up for his height.

The speed boat pulled in closer. Her father was just 10 feet away, smiling. The same smile a father would show a daughter returning home from the AirForce for the holidays. She looked to her right and saw the flashing lights from the coast guard coming to her rescue as well. The Gadget Man's last words reverberated in the back of her mind. "*You should've killed me when you had the chance.*"

Something felt out of kilter. Something just didn't feel right. Maybe there was just one more surprise. The speed boat bumped lightly into the skiff and the judge stretched out his short legs and boarded the boat while almost falling into

the water. The first thing he did was give Tina a great big bear hug then he removed the duct tape from her mouth. A loud hissing sound came from the front of the boat and Tina had a terrified look on her face. The judge seemed to have no clue what was going on. Tina quickly identified the hissing sound and tried to push her father into the lake but she was still handcuffed to the boat. All she could do was shout a warning.

" Daddy it's a bo-" But it was too late. A white flash ten times brighter than a camera illuminated the front of the boat while a bang louder than thunder split the boat in half like a piece of firewood. A huge fireball erupted setting the judge on fire and thrusting them both into the water. The blast was so big it caught the speed boat on fire as well.

The time had finally come for Carter to play hero. He yanked his shoes off without even unlacing them and dove into the lake. The judge was nowhere to be found. Apparently he had sunk straight to the bottom of the sea. Carter was on the swim team in his younger days and was quite the avid swimmer. He spotted Tina floating on her back still handcuffed to a piece of the boat. He swam towards Tina with all his might battling the current. He grabbed her and held her head above the water while waving to the coast guard approaching.

The wiry sailor tossed a life preserver out to Carter and Carter tucked it under his shoulder. The speed boat became engulfed in flames and made a crackling sound as the boat slowly tore apart. The sailor pulled on the rope attached to the life preserver like it was a tug of war contest. Another sailor dressed in white and covered in more emblems than a boyscout came out to help pull Tina and Carter onto the boat. Carter was fine but Tina was unconscious and didn't look to be alive. They splayed her out on the deck and

Carter removed her handcuffs while they checked for a pulse. Miraculously there was a pulse but it was very weak. Tina's entire body was covered with lacerations and contusions. Carter put his CPR training to good use and began performing mouth to mouth resuscitation blowing deep breaths into her mouth.

At first it seemed she was not responding but with sudden amazement she ruptured a cough and water began spewing out of her mouth. She coughed once more and more water spewed from her mouth. The three men hovered over her with great anticipation like watching a newborn baby. They leaned over to hear her whisper "Daddy I love you" then her eyes rolled back behind her head and she passed out.

CHAPTER 57

Vinny shambled along the edge of Lake Michigan taking one last glance at the mayhem he had left behind. All he could see was a blazing fire and flashing lights. He pulled his flippers off and tucked them under his arm while walking barefoot to the Jeep.

When he got to the Jeep he detached the rickety old trailer from the Jeeps receiver then yanked the license plate from the back of the trailer. The Gadget Man grabbed a gas can from the back of the Jeep and doused the trailer with gasoline. He lit the trailer on fire and then drove away in the Jeep barefooted because he forgot to bring a second pair of shoes.

Carter was still hunched over Tina trying to find a pulse. She had one but she was still unconscious. Carter's two way bleeped on his cell phone and he could hear the agents inside the helicopter." Hold on, we've got something. There seems to be a boat trailer on fire over at the Lake Shore

Park."

Police cars raced to the site of the fire but the Gadget Man was long gone. All the evidence was going up in smoke.

Loud cheers erupted from Spottsdale River Penitentiary as inmates actually stood up and applauded at the breaking news they were watching on television.

" It's about time somebody took care of that ball breaking cynic." Shouted an inmate.

The news showed constant replays of the boat blowing up and catching on fire. Jake the Snake was eating his little Chi-Chi he had made one spoonful at a time. It tasted absolutely delicious dressed up with fresh jalapenos, chopped up tomatoes, and tortilla chips wedged along side of the microwavable bowl. Now that Jake the Snake had money he could cook his own meals and the Spanish guys showed him just how to do it. His Chi-Chi was so delicious it tasted just like taco bell.

Jake the Snake picked up his bowl of food and ice cold soda then walked over to the television to see what all the commotion was about. The words *Judge Thomas Anderson killed in explosion* raced across the screen. Judge Anderson was a well known judge throughout the prison and had sentenced nearly a third of all the inmates. People claimed he wasn't fair and extremely cynical giving the maximum penalties to just about every inmate that walked in his courtroom. It was common for him to shell out 1000 month sentences and then sit in his chair and laugh about it. Judge Anderson had ruined the lives of many inmates that were still

in the process of appealing.

As Jake the Snake watched the replays of the explosion, a smile ran across his face. He knew who had done this and would later black mail the teacher for more money. Evidently the correctional officers did not appreciate the celebration over the judge's death and announced a recall for a lockdown. As Jake the Snake returned to his cell in which he had all to himself, a tingling sensation of euphoria tickled through his rigid body. He may have a life sentence to do but at least he was going to be comfortable. Never again would he have to eat that nasty mystery meat bologna sandwiches. For the rest of his time in prison he was going to eat like a king.

CHAPTER 58

20 plastic bubble looking objects were spread out meticulously on the long mahogany table. Paul was wearing a special pair of glasses with an attached magnifying glass carefully inspecting each electronic device. Carter walked in holding two espressos from Starbucks and looking all bleary eyed from the night before. He had been up all night talking to reporters about Tina's rescue. He was the big hero of the night. Tina had been rushed to a hospital and she was in critical condition but she was going to make it.

Carter placed one of the cups from Starbucks on the table in front of Paul. Paul pushed it aside and continued staring down at the plastic bubble." No thanks. Can't drink coffee, it gives me the shakes."

Carter looked over the plastic bubbles spread out neatly on the table and shook his head." What in the world are those?" He asked.

" They're boosters. Evidently homemade but apparently very effective." Said Paul closely examining the contents of the booster configuration.

Carter scratched his head and sipped his espresso while watching Paul at work." Why did the kidnapper need to use boosters?"

Paul chuckled and looked up at him smiling." The F.C.C only allows the military and of course us to have long range wireless cameras and receivers. What you're looking at is basically a bunch of toys purchased off the internet. The Federal Communications Committee permits these toys because the range on these things is maybe 100 yards. Unfortunately the kidnapper bought about 20 of these toys and figured out how to make boosters so he could be a mile away and still get reception."

Carter picked up one of the plastic bubble boosters and looked at the batteries inside of it. He placed it back down and took a long sip of his espresso." So how exactly are these boosters configured?"

Paul poked one of the wires with a pair of tweezers." Oh, it's quite fairly simple. The perp attached the camera wire belonging to the transmitter right into the output of the receiver thus creating a booster. With the weight of the batteries inside I'm surprised these things actually float. He must've tossed one of these things into the lake every 100 yards as he moved further out to sea."

Carter scratched his curly blond hair once more as flakes of dandruff landed on his shoulders." So he must've spent a lot of money to obtain all this stuff. Whoever we're looking for is probably wealthy."

Paul shook his head." Not necessarily. Like I said earlier, these things are just supposed to be toys. On Ebay these wireless mini cams cost about 15 bucks each. Since the perp may have bought them in bulk he probably got them a lot cheaper provided he purchased them all at once. You're looking at \$200 worth of electronics. The batteries used to power them probably costs just as much."

It bothered Carter that Paul seemed to be a real know it all about everything but it also felt reassuring having a partner with a brain. Carter also wasn't very upset about Paul's sexual preference as long as he kept it to himself which he did.

Tina had not woken up yet but as soon as they got word that she was awake they would go visit her at the hospital. Surely she could be of some assistance with helping identify the kidnapper.

Carter walked over to the window and watched a construction worker have a beer with his lunch without the slightest care in the world." What about finger prints? Surely the kidnapper didn't put all those boosters together without leaving some prints. Did you check the batteries?"

Paul just shook his head before Carter even finished talking." He's too smart to leave prints. However I did find something rather interesting."

Carter rushed over to him and almost placed his hand on Paul's shoulder but quickly retreated. There was no need to arouse the suspicion of a queer." What is it? What do you've got?"

Carter's voice was full of excitement but Paul remained calm. He held the booster up so Carter could see." Take a look at this wiring. What do you see?"

Carter squinted his eyes and looked perplexed." Looks like regular wiring to me." He said feeling loss of hope.

" No,no. Look closer at the wires and the way they're fashioned together."

Carter looked again but shook his head." I still don't get it." He muttered.

Paul took in a deep breath and slowly let it out." 5 twists." He said," Every single time this guy twists wires together he makes exactly 5 twists in the wires. Not 4, not 3, but exactly 5 twists every time. I searched through the remnants from the booby trap that killed Travis. I found wires with exactly 5 twists. That has to be the kidnapper's signature."

Carter picked up another booster off the table and closely examined it. Paul was right. Every two wires twisted together had exactly 5 twists.

The door opened and an attractive red headed woman walked in the door. She was wearing a black mini skirt and a navy blue sleeveless blouse that showed her skinny little arms. She handed some papers to Paul." Ebay was extremely cooperative with us." Said the red head.

Carter wished he was wearing his *Men be three inches taller* shoes he had purchased out of the back of a magazine. Instead he put on his cocky smile and rolled his shoulders back as far as he could pushing out his chest

while sucking in his gut.

The pretty red head playfully poked his massive chest and took a step back." I heard you were the big hero last night." She said pretending to be impressed at his burly frame.

Carter put on his tough guy face and did a quick look over of her as well," It's just part of my job." He said still sucking in his stomach. Then he thought about how much more better this scenario would be if Paul wasn't so gay and would actually have feelings of jealousy. But Paul didn't seem to be the least bit jealous. Paul flipped through the documents while Carter and Emily made small talk. He stopped at one of the pages and stuck his index finger over one of the words." Uh-Oh!" Said Paul leaning over and reading the document more closely.

Carter had Emily's hand in his and was checking out her pricey diamond bracelet when he suddenly let go and walked over to Paul." What? What is it? What did you find?"

Emily, feeling forlorned, walked over to Carter who was already hunched over Paul and staring at the document. She quickly ran her elegant fingers through Carter's curly hair then left the room leaving her opulent perfume linger through the air.

" I think the Gadget Man might have a few more tricks up his sleeve." Said Paul feeling himself about to sneeze from Emily's exuberant amount of perfume still wafting in the air.

Carter picked up his espresso that had already become tepid." Please tell me not another bomb?"

Paul cleared his throat while flipping through more of the pages.” It looks that way. These are the order forms from Ebay where the 20 wireless cameras match the serial numbers we found in the boosters. The buyer also purchased 5 Bravo pagers and that's what I'm worried about.”

Carter finished the last few sips of espresso then lightly crushed the cup in his hand.” So who was the buyer and why are you worried about the pagers?”

Paul leafed through the pages and then handed Carter a black and white picture of an obese elderly man with all kinds of pimples growing on his face.” This is Lawrence Hertz. A disabled veteran stuck in a wheel chair and obviously not the kidnapper. I'm worried about the pagers because you can get them activated without proper identification. Over in Iraq terrorists are using cellphones and pagers to detonate bombs all the time. You can be on the other side of the world and still detonate a bomb. This is one thing the F.C.C can't do anything about.”

Carter gazed at the creepy looking fat man in the picture who wasn't even looking at the camera when the picture was taken.” So I guess we're going to pay this guy a visit?”

Paul stood up and opened a sanitary napkin to cleanse his hands.” That's exactly what we're gonna do.” Paul fished around in his pocket, pulled out his cellphone, and punched in some numbers.

“ Who are you calling?” Asked Carter.

“ We have to run this by Max first. Don't you remember what he told us?”

Carter rolled his eyes.” Yeah, yeah, whatever.” That was that weirdo Paul for you. Always had to play things by the book.

CHAPTER 59

The myriad cloud formations moving across the sky caused the sun to flicker on and off all afternoon. Paul and Carter stood on the porch of Lawrence Hertz's tawdry looking bungalow looking around at all the unfinished projects to the home. Some of the shutters were freshly painted and some were falling apart. Only half of the driveway had been repaved. Carter didn't even have the slightest temptation to horse play with Paul like he would've with Travis. Not after finding out Paul was gay. In fact as soon as the case was over he would tell Max to find him a new partner.

The front door slowly opened and the smell of mothballs emanated from the bungalow. Lawrence Hertz was wearing glasses so thick you would think he was blind. The lens in his glasses were so thick it made his eyes look like grotesque jaw breakers. You could play connect the dots with all the pimples on his oblong face.

Lawrence fumbled with the joystick on the arm of his motorized wheel chair.” What do you want?” He snarled while gazing at Carter's Doc Martin shoes.

Carter and Paul both flashed their credentials then Paul said,” May we come in?” Before Lawrence could answer Carter stretched out his sinewy leg, side swiped the wheel of

the motorized chair, and proceeded into the kitchen. Lawrence pushed down on the joystick causing the motorized chair to do a 360 and pursued Carter while wheezing like he was about to have a heart attack. Paul shrugged his shoulders and followed the two of them.

“ You can't just come strutting in here like you own the place! Let me see your warrant!”

Carter rolled up the sheaf of papers they had obtained from Ebay and slapped it against Lawrence's chest then dropped it on his lap.” How's this for a warrant?”

Paul was disgusted at the condition the kitchen was in. The floor was so sticky it nearly glued his burgundy wing tips to the floor. Dirty dishes were piled up everywhere.

Lawrence unrolled the papers and glanced them over. “I don't know anything about this.” He said shuffling through the papers and stopping at the one with his picture on it.

Carter continued to query while Paul surreptitiously snuck inside the den and conducted a search.” Who did you buy this stuff for?” Asked Carter crossing his arms and glowering at the handicapped man. He was debating whether or not Lawrence was a paraplegic or just too fat to be able to walk on his own.

Lawrence continued to play dumb.” Buy what? For who? You're not making any sense.”

Carter kicked the left wheel on the motorized chair while stubbing his big toe in the process in an attempt to shake up the fat man.” Don't try to thwart me! We know that this stuff was purchased from your computer using your

credit cards. Now you can either do this the easy way or we'll rip this place apart with such nullification that you won't be able to find a pair of matching socks!"

The thought of his home looking like the after-math of a giant pinata seemed to grapple his intellect. Loud thudding sounds came from the den from Paul vigorously tearing the place apart. Lawrence seemed to be oblivious to what was happening in the den. Perhaps with his old age he was hard of hearing.

The fat man nervously tapped the tip of the joystick with his thumb." Okay, you got me. I did purchase these items several weeks ago. These items are not illegal. I didn't break any laws so what's it to you?"

The noise in the den grew louder but Lawrence was still unaware. Maybe he had forgotten about Paul. Carter continued," These electronic gadgets were used in a kidnapping where several people died. We need to know who you bought this stuff for?"

The hairy pimples shuffled about the fat man's oblong face as he manifested a big clown smile." I'm afraid I can't help you with that." He said still smiling.

" What do you mean?"

" I've never met the buyer in person. He somehow found me and contacted me by phone. He said I needed money and he could help. I was instructed to leave the merchandise on the back porch and he would pick it up while I was sleeping. When I came out the following morning there was a little black bag full of money in the flower pot."

Carter let out a deep breath and relaxed a little bit.
" Didn't you suspect he was up to no good?"

Lawrence looked at him like a school principal getting ready to lecture a menacing student." Look mister....."

" Carter. Special agent Chris Carter." He cut in.

" Yes Mr.Carter, I'm a veteran of two foreign wars serving my country with great dignity. I got caught up in some friendly fire taking a bullet in the back of my spine paralyzing me from the waist down. Now my life is in shambles and the VA wont even send somebody out to help me go to the bathroom. I could care less if this electronic equipment was used to take out the president of the United States. I needed money and I've broken no laws."

For some reason Carter could understand where the guy was coming from. He knew of some disabled veterans missing a leg or an arm and instead of getting treated like a hero people just ignore them and forget about them." What about the black bag? Do you still have it?"

Lawrence pushed down on the joystick causing the chair to do a 360 and the motor made a whirring sound as he made his way to the cabinet under the sink. The escalating noise from the den grew louder and Lawrence finally figured out what was happening. He made a sharp left turn just before reaching the kitchen sink and made his way towards the den.

Carter followed after him also curious about all the commotion. He stood in the doorway completely astonished when he saw what Paul was doing. Paul had completely gone gung ho with the search ripping things apart and

throwing items against the wall he had found in the closet. Paul was bent over in the closet and threw a flashlight over his shoulder nearly hitting Lawrence in the face. Paul had no idea they were watching him tear the place apart. Carter was impressed that a man who was purportedly gay could be so aggressive. He had encountered a lot of homosexuals especially in college but they were always known for being wussy and non-violent.

Lawrence began to wheeze progressively louder holding his stubby hand over his paunch as if having a heart attack.” You have no right to be in here! I know what my rights are!”

Paul came out of the closet holding up a Caroline work boot shoebox that was taped shut with packaging tape.

“ Put that down right now!” Demanded Lawrence.

Paul tried to pry the box open with his feminine hands but was having difficulty. Carter still stood in the doorway watching the proceedings as if it was some kind of circus act. Paul bore down on the shoebox using his pearly white teeth to tear apart the tape. Then with what little strength the weakling had, Paul ripped apart the rest of the box and dumped the contents all over the floor.

When the pictures laid strewed all over the carpet it suddenly got very quiet. Carter gaped and felt a pang of nausea in his stomach. There lying on the carpet was hundreds of pictures of child pornography.

Lawrence backed up his motorized chair and began to stutter.” I....um.....uh....”

Paul jumped down his throat.” I hope you're not too attached to that motorized chair because the one you're gonna get in jail isn't going to help you get around provided that you'll be able to fit in it.”

Still there was utmost silence as Lawrence mulled over the thought of rotting in jail. He was unhappy with his health care now, wait until he sees what the healthcare is like in jail.

Ironically Carter's cellphone began to chirp instead of Paul's which made him feel back in the loop. Paul watched Carter's face light up like a Christmas tree as he talked to Max on the phone.” Yes, yes okay boss. We're glad to hear. We'll be on our way soon.” Carter folded shut his cellphone and dropped it in his perpetual pocket of his Docker's pants. He looked at Paul with festivity and tugged on the bottom of his vest revealing his expansive chest.

“ We've got to go. Tina's awake.”

CHAPTER 60

St. Augustine's hospital was a lot different from the more mundane community hospitals Paul and Carter were used to going in. Even the parking lot was freshly paved and the handicap markers painted in the handicap spots were not the least bit distorted.

Paul parked the Navigator under a shady maple tree surrounded with fresh mulch. St. Augustine's was a privately owned hospital inhabited with only the opulent people who yen the very best of treatment.

Carter was surprised when they set foot in the hospital and there was not that familiar pungent smell of dying old

people which was common in other hospitals. The employees milling around were natty to the tee and looked like they could cast on the “*ER*” television show.

Carter took the lead and approached the receptionist who was chatting on the phone while carefully inspecting each and everyone of her fingernails. A long curly strand of silky brown hair dangled between her lurid brown eyes and tickled the bottom of her nose. When she looked up and saw Carter she gave him a big Hollywood smile and lifted a finger suggesting to wait a second for her to get off the phone.

Carter waited patiently tapping his hand on the desk in perfect cadence. The receptionist delicately hung up the phone as if slamming it down would smash the phone to pieces. She ducked her head down then quickly whipped her head back causing the strand of hair to elude her face.

“What can I do for you guys?” She said with a smile.

Carter cleared his throat, leaned on the desk, and stood on his tippy-toes as if trying to make himself taller.” We're here to see Tina Anderson,” He said leaning back a little so she wouldn't think he was trying to look down her shirt.

Carter noticed a bronze colored name tag neatly pinned to her green silk button down shirt that said “*Lisa*”. The chair she was sitting in looked more comfortable than the one he used at the office. Lisa picked up the phone and pushed a button then static crackled over the intercom and he could hear her voice. She paged one of the nurses to the front desk then lightly put the phone down just as she did the last time.

Within less than a minute a short voluptuous woman

with short blond hair dressed in white scrubs came out to greet them. She was holding a clipboard and had a sullen look on her face. Before Carter or Paul had a chance to talk she looked them over both quickly, let out a sigh, and said “ Just follow me.” She turned around quickly without doing a double take and walked towards the elevator.

When they got in the elevator she pushed the #4 button then gazed over the clipboard intently.” I don't know how much use Tina is going to be to you guys.”

The elevator door closed shut and they gracefully ascended to the 4th floor. Carter shuffled his feet a little bit while admiring the glossy finish on the floor then looked up with a sincere face.” What do you mean?” He asked twitching his eyes from left to right.

“ She has an extremely bad case of amnesia. As it stands right now she has the mentality of a 5 year old child.” She said still staring at the clipboard to make sure she got it right.

Carter clenched both of his fists so hard that his fingernails dug into his palms. This was not good. They had gone through great lengths to solve this case and people had died. Now their only solid link to solving the puzzle might not be able to remember a thing.

“ How is her condition right now?” Asked Paul.

The nurse flipped one of the pages over the clipboard and slowly slid her finger halfway down the page.” She's very traumatized. She seemed to have developed some form of paranoia. Tina's scared of almost every television channel except for the Christian channel which she insists we keep

on all day. Today she ate her cake with a spoon because she's afraid of her fork.”

Paul jotted some of that down on his legal pad.” How is she going to respond to us?” Asked Paul.

The nurse tucked the clipboard under her arm and pushed up on her wire-rimmed glasses.” I would go in one at a time and talk in a very calm, subtle voice. If she sees you both go barging in there making noise she's liable to get scared.”

The elevator made a ding sound and the freshly varnished stainless steel doors opened quietly. The nurse lowered her voice to a whisper as she stepped out of the car.

“ Follow me.” She said waving her fanny as she walked.

There were beautiful paintings hanging on the walls of the hallway and the ambiance was ethereal as if walking towards the pearly gates of heaven. Everything about the hospital just seemed so new and pleasing to the eyes. Carter's nerves were shot. The very thought of Tina might not being able to remember anything clawed on his cranium like an eagle's claw. He leaned over and whispered into Paul's ear.” You go in and talk to her. I'll wait outside the door.”

The voluptuous nurse thought they were commenting on her so she flaunted her body even more. She stopped at room 405 and quickly peeped in the door to check on Tina. “ Looks like she's still awake. Have fun guys.” She pressed the clipboard to her chest and walked away waving her fanny in every direction.

Carter pulled his Blackberry from his vest pocket and fooled around with it while Paul quietly slipped inside. The first thing Paul noticed was pictures of crosses drawn in crayon. There were also pictures of rainbows and angels. Paul liked angels, he had a fetish for them.

Tina was sitting up in the hospital bed but she looked like a mess. Her face was still covered in lacerations and patches of hair had been removed where they must have operated. She was eating chocolate chip ice cream with a wide silver spoon while watching Benny Hin on television trying to sell some miracle water. Paul watched in awe as Tina acted like a 5 year old child pretending her spoon was an airplane and her mouth was the airport. Most of the ice cream was melted because making the airplane land in the airport was taking so long. Most of the ice cream had fallen onto the wooden panel that hovered over her lap. She seemed to be infatuated with the spoon. Tina made humming sounds as she guided the spoonfuls of ice cream into her mouth.

Paul walked over to the side of her bed. He rested his perfectly manicured hands on the guardrail of the bed." How ya doing kiddo?" He said softly trying to overlook her wretched state of condition.

Tina ignored him and seemed to be oblivious to him even being in the room at all. He waved a hand in front of her face to try to get her attention. Tina blinked a couple of times and then finally looked at him." Daddy!" She said all wild eyed and crazy.

Paul looked at her with concern as any father would do although he was not her father." No kiddo, I'm not your father but I need to ask you some questions okay?"

She nodded her head up and down vigorously like she was shaking out a tick. Paul clicked his pen and rested his legal pad on the guardrail." Do you have any idea who did this to you?"

There was a pause of silence and then an outburst. "Twees! Lots of twees! I run to da light!" Tina held both her hands out and spread her fingers apart as if to imitate the light.

Paul was bemused but wrote it down anyway." What light? What light are you talking about?"

Tina put her hands down on her lap and looked at him like he should know what she's talking about." He's gonna smash their wedding cakes and then steal the flowers from their graves."

Paul suddenly remembered what the nurse had told him. *Talk to her like you would a five year old child.* "Well that doesn't sound very nice." He said jotting more notes.

Carter stood out in the doorway but could hear everything being said. One thing for sure it was going to be a very long day. He checked his Blackberry for messages. Katherine. The woman he was dating from the fitness club had left him a message. As he scrolled down through the message something conspicuous caught his eye. When he looked up he saw a man wearing a hoody and thick dark sunglasses that looked just like the UNAbomber. The hooded man quickly got scared and took off running.

"He's here!" Shouted Carter and took off after him.

Paul dropped the pen and legal pad and followed Carter. The hooded man made a beeline for the stairs and Carter and Paul chased after him with Carter leading the way. Paul's burgundy wing-tipped shoes clanked like horse hooves as they raced down the stairs after the man in the hoody. The hooded man darted through a fire exit then ran through the parking lot.

Carter was gaining on him but Paul was lagging behind. Carter pumped his arms and legs as fast as they would go and sprinted across the parking lot. Just as the hooded man ran past a BMW Carter pounced him and wrestled him to the ground. A box of chocolates flew from the man's hands and rested behind the rear tire of a Hummer MV. Carter punched the hooded man in the face knocking off the sunglasses and nearly making the man unconscious.

“ Hold up, don't hit me!” Pleaded the man.

Carter cocked his fist back ready to hit him once more when Paul finally caught up. Carter eased up on him but kept him pinned to the ground.

“ Why did you run?” Asked Paul.

“ I dunno. I guess I got scared.” Replied the homeless man.

“ What are you doing here?” Asked Carter still thinking about hitting him once more.

The man coughed and tried to catch his breath. Some blood was trickling down the side of his lips.” Some guy paid me a hundred bucks to deliver a box of chocolates to some girl. I swear, I don't know anything.”

Paul walked over to observe the box of Russell Stovers lying on the ground.

“ Careful, it could be a bomb!” Warned Carter.

A dire thought suddenly entered Paul's mind and he shook his head in disbelief.” We've got to get back to Tina ASAP.” Said Paul, making his way towards Carter.

Carter still had the man pinned to the ground.” What's going on?” He asked more angrily.

“ Let him go.” Said Paul,” We've got to get back to Tina. This whole thing is a diversion.”

Carter reluctantly let the man go and followed after Paul who was already running back to the hospital. They felt relieved when they got back to Tina's room and saw her finishing the rest of her ice cream. Paul was still not convinced everything was hunky-dory. He quickly scoured the room and then got on his hands and knees and checked under the bed. Sure enough there was a big package with a blinking light.

“ We've got to get her out of here.” Said Paul standing up. Carter put his weight training to good use and cradled Tina in his massive arms while Paul held onto the IV bag. A nurse saw them leaving the room and came racing up to them.” What's going on? I'm going to call the police!”

Carter gave her a shut the heck up look and marched passed her.” Mam, we are the police! There's a bomb in there and you need to help evacuate the place.”

The nurse cupped her hands over her mouth and went running for help. Yes indeed, it was going to be a very long afternoon.

CHAPTER 61

“ Get that money! Yeah, get that money!” Said a bystander with a big Afro and an Afro pick still stuck in his hair. 22 year old Jamaal Thomas lowered the bar onto his chest for one more repetition and pushed with all of his might. He was used to jealous onlookers watching him all the time and the 315 pounds on his chest almost felt too easy. Next week he would max out on the bench press at 350 pounds. It felt good to be part of the 300 club while most of his friends struggled in the 200's range. Jamaal checked the position of his hands once more to make sure they were clear from harms way so he could safely put the bar back on the rack without losing a finger. One of his friends nearly lost a finger from not paying attention.

Jamaal sat up on the bench and wiped his sweaty face with a hand towel. He had no idea he was being watched.

The Gadget Man crouched beside the bushes and peered through the window. He did not like what he saw. Jamaal was no longer that little twerpy seventh grader with long lanky arms. By golly Jamaal had grown into a beast!

It was 12:15 pm and a lot of the business men were leaving G&R's Fitness Factory to make it back to work before their lunch hour was up. Vinny tightened the strings on his dark blue hoody to conceal every strand of his wavy long hair. The dark thick sunglasses he had on covered up his eye patch completely. He watched a roly-poly middle

aged man exit the back door of the fitness club carrying two bags of trash. The pudgy janitor propped a stick in the door to keep it from locking and then walked out towards the dumpsters.

Like a stray cat on the prowl Vinny slid through the exit door undetected. The Gadget Man crept down a long hallway heading towards the weight room when he caught a glimpse of Jamaal's dreadlocks in the corridor outside the weight room. Vinny quickly hid in the doorway leading into a racquetball room which seemed to be unoccupied. He could hear Jamaal talking to a woman who had the voice of a prima donna. He kept his body perfectly still to better listen into the conversation.

“ My friend Kalista is relaxing in the hot tub. She wants to know if you'll come join us?”

Jamaal wiped the remaining beads of sweat on his furrowed forehead with his Nike hand towel.” Aight, that's what's poppn. I just finished my workout. Give me ten minutes to change into my bathing suit and shower off real quick.” He said making his biceps bulge as he lifted his towel once more to wipe his face. The woman gave him a playful pat to the abdomen and turned around to walk away.” We'll see you out there Tiger.” She said with aplomb looking back at him once more as she walked away.

Vinny reached into his back pocket and put on his black leather gloves. It was about to get fun. He was about to seek revenge after 10 long miserable years. This was going to feel good, very good. Vinny surreptitiously followed Jamaal to the locker room while staying on the lookout for surveillance cameras. There didn't appear to be any. He paused at the locker room entrance for a minute and took a

deep breath. This was going to be difficult. Jamaal looked like a Gladiator warrior and Vinny worried about whether or not he could overpower him.

By the time Vinny worked up the nerve to step into the locker room Jamaal had already changed into his checkered swim trunks and was stepping into the shower. The Gadget Man fondled the 3 inch in diameter brass ring that he had fashioned into the loose end of a cable tie. Cable ties were often used to bundle up electrical wires or hold trash bags together. Sometimes police even used them as temporary handcuffs. Vinny had already formed the loop in the cable tie and drilled a hole through the loose end in which he inserted a 3 inch brass ring which he would use for leverage.

Other than Jamaal, the locker room appeared to be empty. Vinny hid behind one of the lockers and listened to the shower water turn on. Most people wash their hair first when they first step into the shower. They often close their eyes to keep the soap from burning their eyes. Jamaal sure had a lot of hair and there was a really good chance that that's what he was doing right now.

Vinny knew he would only get one shot at this and had to act quickly. He pulled the nylon ligature out of the front pocket of his hoody and wrapped his index and middle finger tightly around the brass ring. He tip-toed over to the shower and saw a silhouette of Jamaal bent over thoroughly scrubbing his long hair. Then the inevitable happened. Jamaal started singing a rap song that Vinny recognized from when he was in jail.

“ Try to catch me riding dirty....” Sang Jamaal.

The voices began to taunt the Gadget Man. *Go ahead*

and do it! You hate rap music. How much longer are you going to let him sing? Taunted the voice. Vinny took one last look around to make sure nobody was watching. He didn't have to look for cameras because it is illegal for surveillance cameras to be in a locker room.

The coast was clear. Vinny watched Jamaal's head bob down once again through the translucent shower curtain as if he were scratching out flees. He quickly pulled back the curtain and fastened the cable tie around Jamaal's neck then pulled on the brass ring with all of his might. The singing abruptly ended and Vinny felt a fist being thrust into his kidney right before he turned around and ran. Jamaal's eyes burned from the soap when he tried to open them to identify his assailant. He tottered out of the shower and looked around but everything was turning blue. Whoever it was was gone like dust in the wind but at least he had gotten one good jab into his attacker.

Jamaal couldn't breathe. In fact he couldn't even swallow. He started feeling dizzy and woozy and the floor tiles looked like they were spinning in a vortex. The cable tie was capable of withstanding 250lbs of pressure and clung relentlessly around his neck.

Nobody saw Vinny walk briskly down the long hallway heading towards the exit door he had entered earlier. When he got to the door he pulled a handkerchief from his back left pocket and wiped any possible prints he may have left on the door knob. Vinny felt a surge of exhilaration when he looked around and didn't see anybody watching him. He stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket and walked away whistling.

Jamaal tried to break the nylon ligature around his neck

with his bare hands. It was no use because it was bound too tightly to get a grip. A body builder wearing a black tank top and frayed jean shorts that were way too short and revealed his massive thighs, walked into the locker room.

“ Oh my gosh what happened?” He said rushing over to Jamaal. Jamaal was still pulling on the cable tie while dancing around in circles and grunting like a dog with a muzzle on it's mouth.” Come on, let's get you some help.” Said the body builder tugging on Jamaal's arm.

The body builder escorted him out of the locker room and into the hallway which led to the leisure room where the front entrance was. Jamaal's vision turned into one giant sketchy blur but he held onto the body builder's arm to help guide him along the way.

By the time they reached the leisure room Jamaal blacked out and fell to the floor.

“ Somebody help us! A man has a cable tie bound to his neck and he's choking!” Cried the body builder.

A pretty Asian woman working the front desk heard the cry for help and desperately rooted through the desk drawer until she found what she was looking for. The body builder noticed that a lot of Jamaal's hair was caught between the ligature. He yanked the strands of hair out of the way thus loosening the tension on the cable tie wrapped around his neck. It didn't seem to help much because there was still a lot of tension digging into his neck.

Mya, the pretty Asian, came running over with a pair of scissors. She accidentally punctured the skin when she cut loose the cable tie. Jamaal let out a cough and squirmed around on the floor. Then he sat up gasping to catch his

breath. Some gym members that were shooting pool dropped their pool sticks onto the pool table and huddled around Jamaal. Another burly bystander was on his cellphone phoning the police. Tiny drips of blood trickled down Jamaal's neck from the puncture mark made by the scissors.

Jamaal rubbed his neck and smiled because he had survived the garrote." I know who did this" he said," I know who did this."

CHAPTER 62

Later that night Jamaal trampled through the projects of the squalid neighborhood on the west side of Baltimore. He kicked beer cans as he walked along angry at just about everything. An eccentric looking man walked briskly past him holding a long flat blade screwdriver and a woman's pocketbook. Rain Gate projects was one of the biggest slums of the city. You could buy drugs right off your front porch and even a gun if you wanted to.

Jamaal scampered up the steps of Tyrone's two story complex apartment and rapped on the door vigorously like there was some kind of emergency. A blood shot eye peered at him through the peephole. The door slowly creaked open and the smell of Marijuana wafted through the air. The side of the doorway was splintered and cracked from when the police had raided the place a year ago. A 19 year old hottie wearing a brown corduroy jumper and stoned out of her mind answered the door.

" Is Tyrone here?" Asked Jamaal sounding completely out of breath.

“ They're all here.” Said the girl stepping to the side so Jamaal could get through. The girl in fact was Tyrone's sister, Shawna. Tyrone and Shawna were pretty close and guys knew to treat her with respect or they'd have to deal with Tyrone. You'd have to be crazy to meddle with Tyrone because he was affiliated with the Twisted Sevens. A violent gang in downtown Baltimore often talked about on the news.

Shawna saw the hideous scar around Jamaal's neck but she didn't ask questions. She's seen crazier things than that before. Jamaal admired the neon beer signs and black lights illuminating the living room as he headed towards his buddies who were sitting on the couch engaged in boisterous laughter and shouting. All three were transfixed to the 56 inch stolen Sony television while playing NFL Blitz on Sony Playstation2. Wiggles, the ringleader of the din, thrashed vigorously onto the controller like it owed him money. Tony was a little more quiet than the rest of the bunch slouching low in the sofa groping his tepid 40oz bottle of Colt45. Jamaal had to step in front of the big 56 inch television to get their attention.

“ Good load! What happened to you?” Asked Wiggles dropping the playstation2 controller to the ground like it was an empty Easter egg. Wiggles had grown tall but never really filled out. He was 6ft 3 inches tall but only 160lbs. He wore baggy FUBU jeans that were two sizes too big for him and hung halfway down his butt revealing his checkered boxers. The big long gold chain with a money symbol medallion the size of a fist wrapped around his neck clashed with his \$75 Banana Republic flowery button down shirt. The shirt was completely unbuttoned and showed his protruding abs. Tony was the fatter one of the bunch. He had become a devout Muslim wearing a black Kufi cap and sported a beard nearly a foot long. Tony had on thick black gangster looking

sunglasses that he never took off his face.

Everyone got quiet and listened to what Jamaal had to say. Jamaal pulled the nylon cable tie from his pocket and held it up by the brass ring. "Somebody tried to kill me while I was showering at the Fitness Factory!"

Wiggles jumped up from the sofa and grabbed the ligature so he could closely examine it." Man homey! They did you like that while you was in da shower? That's a cheap shot! Do you know who dunnit?"

Jamaal snatched the ligature out of Wiggles' hand. "Of course I know who dunnit. It was Johnny Littlesock. He must've found out I was messing around with his girl."

Tyrone sat in the middle of the sofa slumped low down mulling and reflecting back on the situation. He was always the brain of the bunch. His head was completely shaven bald and his furrowed neck looked like rolled out lines of dough all clumped together. Tyrone wore a red Iverson basketball jersey that was tore down the front revealing patches of chest hair that looked like curly fries from Arby's. The black Nike sweatpants he was wearing had a hole in the knee and his white tube socks had turned brown. After all, it was his place and he could walk around in socks if he wanted to.

"So how did you get the cable tie off your neck? I know you didn't break it with your bare hands." Said Tyrone picking a roach clip off the coffee table.

Jamaal tossed the cable tie onto Tyrone's lap nearly knocking the roach clip out of his hands." The receptionist saw me choking and came with a pair of scissors. Some other dude helped me get near the front door.

Tyrone pursed his lips and sucked really hard on the roach clip trying to get one last high.” Did the police come?” He said still holding it in.

“ Yeah, but I didn't stick around for that. You know how we do. When we have problems we deal with them ourselves.”

Wiggles jumped back up from the sofa and patted Jamaal on the shoulder.” You're finally learning big dog. Don't worry we're going to take care of this.”

Tony finally piped up.” We gonna cap him?”

Wiggles formed a smile so wide you could pop a frisbee in his mouth.” We gonna do more than cap him homey, we gonna spray so many bullets into his crib his joint gonna look like a giant piece of swiss cheese!”

Jamaal grinned smugly as he pictured Johnny Littlesock's home after they had shelled out numerous clips of ammunition into it. The very thought seemed to brighten his mood.

Tony chugged the last little bit of spume in the bottle and set the 40oz bottle down on the coffee table. He looked at the scar on Jamaal's neck then quickly averted his eyes to the big 56 inch screen television.” Hey not to change the subject or anything but what do you think of our new television?”

Jamaal turned around to look over the new boob tube. “Hey that's sweet, where did you guys get it?”

All three of the hoodlums had sly grins on their faces. Tony let out a belly laugh that sounded gangster while his jello belly bobbed up and down." Let's just say that the guy 6 houses down went on vacation and we decided to help ourselves." Said Tony clasping his hands over his beach ball paunch.

Wiggles jumped amidst them and waved his hands like he was directing traffic. "Come on guys, let's go get this Johnny Littlesock punk and light his place up. We've got to send a message and I say we do it now." He said while wrapping bony fingers around his 28 inch waist sending his flowery button down shirt tail flailing behind his back. Tony and Tyrone rose from the couch simultaneously and tugged on their pants which drooped back down again when they let go. Tyrone led the way as his entourage followed him into an anteroom which had a hidden closet.

They all stood before a giant blue quilt that Tyrone's sister Shawna had turned into a mosaic collage that hung on the wall. The big blue quilt made a screeching sound when Tyrone pulled it down from the wall because it was held up by velcro. When the big blue quilt fell to the floor a small closet was revealed. Tyrone opened the closet door and yanked on a chain hanging from the ceiling which turned on a fluorescent light. The inside of the closet lit up in a purple light.

The boys were awestruck when they saw the freshly polished weapons hanging from nails in the closet. Tyrone pulled out a Tommy gun that had a camouflage shoulder strap. He hoisted the weapon over his shoulder and spat out machine gun noises from his mouth while brandishing the Tommy gun to and fro pretending to be Rambo.

The others were impressed. They also reached into the closet and found a submachine gun to their liking. This is the way true gangsters did. Only a pantywaist would go running to the police for help. They had all stayed friends since 7th grade and each one of them considered themselves a hard core gangster.

Wiggles tucked a few magazine clips inside his waist band and finally buttoned up his shirt. "Let's go do this homies!" He said leaving his top two buttons undone. They didn't give each other high fives anymore instead they all clasped their knuckles together. Tyrone reached back in the closet pulling out black ski masks and passed them out. After they had everything they needed they re-attached the big blue quilt onto the wall to conceal the closet.

Tyrone led the way as they marched through the apartment and out the front door. They all descended down the porch steps and boarded Tony's 86 Ford Crown Victoria that was freshly painted black with tinted windows. Jamaal and Tyrone took the back seats and Wiggles took shotgun while big fat Tony got behind the wheel. Some of Tupac's greatest hits played on the CD player while they cruised down the filthy streets headed towards Johnny Littlesock's abode.

Johnny Littlesock stood next to a multicolored Dodge Neon holding a bag of groceries. The car used to be yellow but the hood and two doors had been replaced with parts from a junkyard since Johnny's ride had been in so many accidents.

Johnny Littlesock looked around debating whether or not it was safe to leave the trunk open with the left over groceries while he went inside to put the groceries away he

was carrying. That's just the way it was in the city. He could leave his car for a minute, put groceries away, and get completely robbed.

Johnny looked around once more and saw a black Ford Crown Victoria ease its way up the street. Something felt foreboding about the oncoming vehicle. The tinted windows slowly went down and Johnny saw men in ski masks. His street smarts kicked in and he dropped the bag of groceries and ran into the house.

A swarm of bullets penetrated the house almost nipping Johnny's foot as he ran inside. More piercing bullets struck the house creating a collage of wood chips and shattered glass. When Johnny got inside the house he immediately got down on the floor and placed his hands over his head. He could hear the boisterous laughter over top of the submachine guns.

Wiggles, always the ringleader, couldn't stay inside the car. He jumped out of the car and let out a relentless spray of bullets into the Dodge Neon until the gas tank finally ruptured and caught on fire. Then Wiggles took a few steps toward the house and continued shooting until every window was completely blasted out.

Jamaal didn't feel completely satisfied so he jumped out of the car and started running towards the house. Sirens began to wail and the boys shouted at him to get back in the car. Jamaal let out one last 5 second spray and reluctantly got back in the car. Johnny Littlesock's house looked like a tornado had ripped through it. Justice had been served. Or so they thought.

CHAPTER 63

The pretty Asian woman on television looked like somebody you'd find at one of those ritzy massage parlors. She looked very chic in her Aeropostle black t-shirt that couldn't be any tighter and her matching black spandex that proved she worked out. Even though she was the hero of the day Vinny did not like her. She had interfered with the Gadget Man's work and now she had the audacity to say on National television that this murderous attempt had been an act of cowardness and how could somebody attack someone in the shower. This was not supposed to happen. Jamaal was supposed to be dead and now this agnostic woman was calling him a coward on National television.

Vinny leaned back in the easy chair and groped the cold bottle of Chimay. One of the most expensive beers on the market. Close to a hundred dollars for a case that contained only 15 bottles. He had a nice chunk of change so now he didn't have to drink nasty Budweiser that gave him the runs.

The Gadget Man appeased his anger by thinking about how much fun it would be to kill the woman mocking him on television. The reporter said that the victim fled before police arrived and now he was wanted for questioning. Vinny wondered if maybe Jamaal had something to hide. He pushed down on the lever aside of the easy chair thrusting his legs to the floor. When he stood up he felt a pang of vertigo. He grinned and chugged on the bottle. Chimay was some pretty good stuff!

Vinny staggered over into the kitchen and rooted through the junk clustered on the kitchen counter. It was so hard to locate things when you're drunk. He picked up an old

sheaf of newspapers and watched two dice hop onto the floor. *Bingo*. He heard his back crack as he picked up the dice and headed back into the living room. He was getting old and he knew it.

Vinny cleared the coffee table with one swoop of his hand knocking an ashtray onto the floor while ashes and cigarette butts strewn all over the floor. It was time to finish playing the game. The escapades were not over yet. Soon the Gadget Man would show the public some of his finest work.

Vinny shook the dice with great enthusiasm blowing on his hand as he shook vigorously. *If I don't know my next move how will they?* He thought to himself. He tossed them on the coffee table and watched them fickle like the ping pong balls used in the lottery. One dice read "Guard" and the other read "booby trap". Vinny felt kind of disappointed because he really wanted to use his booby trap idea on one of those punk kids that ruined his life.

Gary Bowman was one of the guards that worked at Spottsdale River Penitentiary and Vinny had a lot of animosity towards him as well. When Vinny first came to prison he was a behavior problem and often flooded the toilets causing a torrent of water to go everywhere. The prison had had enough of him and placed him in a dry cell which is a cell that has no toilet or sink. Poor Vinny had to defecate into a big silver bowl.

Gary Bowman was responsible for giving him styrofoam cups of water to keep him hydrated. Not knowing of Vinny's innocence, the guard held a real grudge towards pedophiles. There was a chair in the hall outside of Vinny's cell that Gary used to stack on about 5 or 6 styrofoam cups of water to

taunt Vinny with that he never gave to him. Vinny had become severely dehydrated and his skin had become sticky and sallow from never getting to shower and from rolling around in his own urine.

One day a lieutenant walked by Vinny's cell and observed him lying naked on the floor covered in feces talking to himself and acting loopy. The lieutenant became concerned and had him transferred to a hospital in which he blacked out along the way. When Vinny woke up in the hospital bed he was hooked up to an IV and a catheter tube. The doctor told him he had become severely dehydrated and was just one hour away from death had the lieutenant not saved his life. For two weeks Vinny did not have the strength to get out of bed or even speak full sentences. He promised himself when he got out he would find the guard that teased him with the water cups and kill him.

Vinny pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket that still had writing on it from when he used to coerce Tina to roll the dice. The list said that Jamaal was supposed to die of strangulation. Obviously that didn't pan out too well. The list also said that Tyrone was to die in a fire. Any good arson would know that would have to wait until Christmas time.

The Gadget Man added to his list that Gary Bowman the prison guard was to die in a booby trap. Vinny picked the dice up and blew on them. This was getting fun. He could hardly wait to see what fate awaited for Wiggles the ringleader of the whole set up.

Before he started to shake the dice he felt a slight pricking sensation in his feet. It felt like a million needles were pricking him all at once. Jolts of what felt like electric shock ran up his legs and they began to feel numb.

Something strange was happening and he had no idea what it was. Was he having a stroke? Shingles maybe? But when it felt like Tinkerbell from Peter Pan was crawling up his nose and sprinkling fairy dust all around his brain he knew exactly what was happening. It was the voices!

Were they here to praise him or scold him? Suddenly it felt like 15 pairs of human hands were tickling him all over his body. Vinny fell to the floor rolling around like a pig in the mud. His fall caused his beer to be shook and the head from the beer shot out all over the place and got all over his shirt. He could hear the voices talking to him and cracking jokes that were outright hilarious. The Gadget Man laughed so hard that he ended up with hiccups. It was happening all over again and Vinny enjoyed the company.

CHAPTER 64

The service revolver felt so cold and frigid in his thick decrepit hands. Tiny saline tears trickled down his bulbous cheeks and then oozed down his quadrupled pimped chin. Lawrence Hertz gazed at the indictment sitting on his lap one last time. He had already read over it at least 6 or 7 times to the point where he actually had some of it memorized. There was no way he was getting out of this one. He was definitely going to jail.

Lawrence spun the revolving chamber with his thumb watching the cylinder spin around like a slot machine. Not that it mattered, he wasn't playing Russian Roulette because the gun was fully loaded with all 6 bullets. He had heard stories about what inmates do to pedophiles in jail. They steal their commissary and personal belongings. They set their mattress on fire and some pedophiles even get killed! Life was already hard enough for him living alone and being

a paraplegic. There was just no possible conceivable way he could survive in jail.

Lawrence took in a deep breath and used what little strength he had to slide open the glass sliding door and make his way onto the patio facing the back yard. As he sat in his motorized wheel chair the sun beat down on his populous face full of unwieldy pimples sprouting in the crevices of his eyes, ears, and nose. This was the perfect place to die. Right here on a Sunday afternoon in his own backyard. He desperately wished that he knew the mystery man's identity who paid him to purchase electronic gadgets off the internet. If Lawrence knew who the Gadget Man really was he would turn him in in a heartbeat in exchange for a lighter sentence. He had caught a glimpse of the Gadget Man's face one night when he stayed up really late but it was too dark outside to see well.

Lawrence looked down at his Swiss Army wristwatch. It was 12:02 pm. He wondered if the EMT would come close to guessing his estimated time of death. He spun the cylinder one last time and listened to the clicking sound which repulsed him. He jammed the barrel of the gun into his mouth and savored the sour metallic of the dusty barrel.

Lawrence closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. **Click.** Nothing happened and he was astonished. Not believing in superstition he pulled the trigger once more. **Click.** Again the gun did not go off. He tried to remember the last time the gun had been fired. He couldn't think back that far but he surmised it was about 25 years ago. Shaking with uncontrollable tremors and palms sweating profusely, Lawrence crammed the gun in his mouth once more and pulled the trigger. **Click.** The gun still didn't go off.

He began to weep like a baby without it's mother. They say that a bullet never lies and what were the odds that all 3 bullets were duds? Unless of course there was something majorly wrong with the gun? Using the sleeve of his shirt, Lawrence wiped the tears from his eyes and gazed at the patches of crab grass encompassing the patio. Something conspicuous caught his eye protruding from a patch of crab grass.

The wheelchair motor whirred as Lawrence pushed down on the joystick to investigate the unknown substance in his backyard. Neatly ensconced in the off-colored grass was a cigarette butt smoked all the way down to the filter. His tears of sorrow became tears of joy as he felt a sudden rush of exhilaration and his sobbing turned to laughter. The cigarette butt had to of belonged to the Gadget Man. Lawrence lived alone and nobody else ever came around except for his sister once a year but she didn't smoke. Surely forensic experts would be able to pull some DNA or even a print.

Lawrence went inside to find a pair of tweezers and a zip-lock baggie from the cupboard. He felt as though the angels in heaven were smiling down at him. Perhaps he wasn't going to go to jail after all. It was the Gadget Man that they were after not him.

Lawrence was having a problem. He was too old and fat to lean over and stretch to pick up the cigarette butt while staying in the wheelchair. He looked up at the sky and noticed an overcast was imminent and realized rain was on it's way. Then suddenly he had an idea. He went back inside and took a broomstick and then wrapped duct tape around the end of the stick with the sticky part facing out. Lawrence took the broomstick outside and poked the sticky end to the

cigarette butt and it lifted right off the ground. He sealed the plastic zip-lock baggie and headed back inside while the clouds loomed overhead.

The surge of happiness increased his appetite and he decided to celebrate his discovery in the back yard with a frozen pizza that could be cooked in the microwave. He pulled a frozen pizza from the freezer which had been sitting in there for months and let it thaw on the counter. He unloaded the service revolver and examined the bullets. Three of the bullets had a nick in the primer so the gun wasn't faulty after all. They say a bullet always tells the truth so perhaps Lawrence just wasn't meant to die.

After 20 minutes Lawrence could wait no longer. His stomach was growling and it was time to microwave the pizza. He placed the pizza on a circular piece of cardboard and wended across the kitchen floor towards the microwave.

When Lawrence opened the microwave door he heard a loud hissing sound that he immediately recognized from his earlier days in the ARMY. Before he could react a bright flash brighter than the sun erupted from the microwave and there was a bang louder than a grenade.

Metal shrapnel and debris shot out in every direction killing Lawrence immediately and destroying everything in sight. The blast was so big that it sprung Lawrence from his wheelchair and he lay dead on the kitchen floor next to a wheel that had detached. The kitchen began to catch fire and it spread rapidly. The cigarette butt in the plastic baggie burned up along with everything else.

Once again the Gadget Man was ahead of the game, and he was enjoying every minute of it.

CHAPTER 65

The air conditioner propped in the window hummed a melody that only a crazy person could decipher. The air conditioner was 10 years old and made a lot more noise than the newer ones but that's what made it so special.

Vinny believed that when the voices weren't trapped in his mind telling him funny things that they dwell and mingle inside his very own air conditioner. He had a brand new one in the barn but it did not provide the same amicable company and just seemed to be defunct.

It was mid September and the temperature outside was already cooling down but Vinny kept the air conditioner running almost all year round. *They deserve to die! They deserve to die!* The air conditioner continued to drone.

The Gadget Man held a tiny screwdriver in his hands that he used to use to fix his eye glasses. Of course that was not his purpose for the tool today because he had bigger things to attend to. Vinny used the tiny screwdriver to unscrew the screws from the Bravo pager which cost only 6 bucks off the internet. The pager was not activated but that's not what he needed it for. The Bravo pagers were one of the few pagers that you could not only set an alarm for a specific time, but also for a specific day. The pager was going to be part of a booby trap. Perhaps one of the greatest booby traps of all time that would baffle the F.B.I for all the years to come. Vinny never considered himself a professional and that's what made him so dangerous. It was already all over the news that there was a one hundred thousand dollar reward for his capture. By the time his spree was over, Vinny predicted that the number would be a whole lot higher.

Vinny had deftly removed the last screw from the pager when he heard the ping sound of stones being spat out from underneath tires. The hairs rose on the back of his neck. Someone was coming up the driveway and the Gadget Man had invited no one. Vinny quickly hid the pager underneath a newspaper on the coffee table and ran over to the window. Where was Sparky? It was Sparky's job to alert him of upcoming guests. For a minute Vinny had completely forgotten he had shot his dog.

He made a slit in the blinds using his fingers to peep out the window without being seen. A black Toyota Corolla came rolling into the driveway. Vinny's mind raced fluctuating from one thought to the next as he stared intently out the window. The car continued proceeding up the driveway. A pink flowery ornament attached to the antenna zig-zagged back and forth like a dog wagging it's tail. The pink spongy ornament signified that the Corolla probably belonged to a woman.

The black Corolla came to a halt and remained still while the chrome tires glistened in the sun. Vinny watched through the slit in the blinds quickly trying to decide what to do but no ideas came to mind.

Two minutes had passed and no one had gotten out of the car. Just as he walked away from the blinds to go get his gun he heard a car door slam. He ran back to his bedroom and grabbed his 9mm then checked to make sure it was loaded. There was an impetuous knock at the door so he tucked the gun behind his back inside his pants. He was stunned when he opened the door and saw a short woman looking in her late 20s or early 30s standing at his doorstep. She was holding a cellphone in one hand and a key chain

necklace decorated with the Greatful Dead Teddy Bears in the other. Key chain necklaces were old school and popular back in Vinny's youth when kids just got their driver's license and wanted to show off. They used to put their keys in their pocket and pull out the key chain necklace and let it hang down to their knees so everyone knew they had a car. Sometimes the girls even wore the key chain necklace around their neck.

Vinny did a quick look over of the woman standing outside his door. She wore a pink silky blouse and a pair of white dressy pants with a stylish pink and white checkered belt. She wore sandals revealing perfectly pedicured feet with pink toe nails. There was a moment of silence as she stammered looking for the right words to say.

“ Hi.....um.....uh....My name is Bridget. Bridget Macavar.” She extended a hand and gave Vinny a weak hand shake. Vinny placed his second hand on top of hers and got a thrill out of watching her eyes get big when she saw him smile and reveal his shark teeth. Bridget felt frightened and took a step back releasing her hand from his. Just like that the Gadget Man was in love.

He ran his long sausage fingers through his long greasy hair and wished he didn't smell so bad. ”So your name is Bridget, just like the Bridget Jones movie?”

Bridget was impressed that such a beastly looking man would take the time to watch a romance comedy movie. She felt a little more at ease and took half a step forward.” Yes, my ex-boyfriend thought I looked just like her.”

Bridget's hair was sandy blond and done up in a bun. Her face was cherub like and her skin was softer than a

baby's. She was shorter than Bridget Jones and maybe a little more plump but there was just something about her that made you want to snuggle up with her for hours. Vinny couldn't tell if it was love at first sight or infatuation. Bridget would be his new project. He would take her on long walks and have her eat his famous healthy chicken salads and soon people would think he's dating a movie star.

The reality sunk in. *What was this woman doing here and how did she know where he lived?* Vinny reached behind his back with his right hand and groped the 9mm neatly tucked in the back of his pants. Bridget continued stammering trying to think of the right words to say.

“ I...uh...I...I guess you're wondering what I'm doing here?” She finally said.

Vinny nodded his head and flicked the safety off of the gun. Bridget continued. “You're Vincent Young I presume?” Vinny smiled like a crocodile that just ate someone. *This was getting interesting.* She went on. “I used to be Drake's girlfriend. Drake Styer. Do you remember him?”

Vinny thought back but didn't have a clue who she was talking about. He shook his head no.

“ I think you guys used to call him Shaggy. He had long hair that draped over his eyes.”

The Gadget Man stood there in shock. He did remember Shaggy because he was his first cellmate at Scottsdale River Penitentiary.” Oh, you mean Shaggy Daggy the one who tried to blow up his doctor?”

Bridget rolled her eyes.” I wouldn't say blow him up. I

think he was trying to teach him a lesson.”

Bridget didn't want to argue with him. Instead she changed the subject.” Your brother patrols in the area I live in and he told me where I could find you.”

(Vinny's younger brother was a cop and Vinny was not very fond of him. The Gadget Man hated the law and believed if you wanted justice you went out and sought it yourself.)

Little tiny tears welled up in Bridget's eyes and she did her best to hold them back. “Is it okay if I come inside and talk to you about Shaggy?” She said sniffing.

The trailer was completely trashed and Vinny was too embarrassed to let her come in. “Oh we can sit here on the porch and talk.” He said while tossing the gun on the couch without her noticing and taking a seat on the porch.

Bridget sat down and quickly concealed her cleavage then picked at the grass. Vinny tried his best to play Mr.Nice Guy. “It's just that...well... I guess I feel partially responsible for his death. There's some nights when I can't sleep. Did he talk a lot about me?”

Vinny almost put a hand on her shoulder then quickly withdrew. “ I wish I could tell you but you're asking me to remember back ten years ago. He seemed like a nice guy but he definitely was kind of strange. So what happened between you two?”

It took all she had to hold back the tears and be brave. She missed Shaggy with all of her heart and just wanted to let it all out. “ I dunno. I guess I was young and stupid and

didn't realize what a great man he could turn out to be. My heroine junkie ex-boyfriend called me one night just two weeks before Shaggy was supposed to be sentenced. I didn't even have the decency to tell him I was leaving him and I think I broke his heart and maybe that's why he killed himself.”

Bridget couldn't control it and she began to cry. Vinny hated women that cried because that was weakness in his eyes but for some reason this time he didn't mind. He placed his rough hand on her shoulder to comfort her and she quickly stopped crying and let out a nervous giggle. “ I know you must think I'm crazy. You don't even know me and here we are talking about Shaggy.”

Vinny tried to look for the right words to say. “ It wasn't your fault. I think his mental illness was the leading factor leading to his suicide.”

Bridget seemed perplexed and began picking at the grass. “ What do you mean? What was he doing?”

Vinny reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Newports. “ Hold on just a second.” He said pulling a cigarette out and then lighting it. “ Would you like one?” He asked.

Bridget shook her head no. “ No thanks, I only smoke non-menthol.” She pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights and lit a cigarette for herself.

Vinny took a long drag and then turned his head to the side to exhale. “Our friend Shaggy was acting up right before he died. He was talking to voices. He squeezed toothpaste all over my face while I was trying to sleep. He even flushed

all my commissary down the toilet!”

Bridget looked shocked and cupped her hands over her mouth. “ Oh my gosh! Did you hurt him?”

Vinny had a sly grin on his face. “ I have to admit I was a little upset but I'm sure you can agree that his doctor in Chicago put him through enough. I would've killed that doctor if he damaged my manhood. You'd have to be crazy to get a surgery like that in the first place.”

The qualms Bridget had been struggling with for the past 10 years were dissipating into thin air. There was something about this beastly looking man that she was starting to like.

Just when the Gadget Man was starting to feel comfortable he saw something looming in the distance that made his heart beat wildly. A red Honda Accord with a sporty looking spoiler came making it's way up the street. Immediately Vinny recognized the car and felt like a deer caught in the spotlights. *This couldn't be happening, not now.* But it was happening. Vinny's parole officer was coming to check on him without notifying him first.

Bridget sensed something was wrong. “ What's wrong?” She finally asked, “ am I talking too much?”

Vinny flicked his cigarette into the yard and stood up while keeping his gaze on the oncoming vehicle. “ It looks like we have company.” He said running his fingers through his straggly hair. His mind was jerking faster than a jack hammer. *Should he run? Should he get his gun and shoot them both?*

Vinny's parole officer had the right to come into his home and conduct a search. Vinny had more than enough contraband inside his home to get him thrown back in jail. The Gadget Man thought it best to play it cool and sat back down next to Bridget.

The Honda pulled into the driveway and parked behind Bridget's car. A wiry man in a red Phillies T-shirt and tight blue jeans came out of the car carrying a clipboard. His dark brown hair looked like it had recently been cut like a Marine's. The parole officer came ambling over to them with an affable look on his face. Perhaps he was glad to see Vinny mingling with a woman and not being such a hermit with living in the middle of nowhere all alone.

“ Hello Vincent. Sorry for jumping in on you but I wont be long.”

Vinny tried his best to play cool and put on a show.
“ Hey no problem Mr.Johnson. Take all the time you need.”

Bridget started to get up but Vinny motioned for her to stay sitting down. She whispered into Vinny's ear. “ You sure it's okay for me to be here?”

Before Vinny could reply Mr.Johnson extended his arm and shook Bridget's hand, “ Hello, I'm Perry Johnson Vincent's parole officer. So you must be Vincent's girlfriend?”

Bridget smiled and looked over at Vinny who was tensing up with a ruddy complexion.

“ She's just a friend.” Hissed Vinny.

Mr.Johnson gave a cordial smile and pushed the

clipboard against his chest. “ Ah yes. I didn't mean to pry. Hey listen, you both can stay right here. I'm just going to take a quick look inside and then I'll be on my way. You seem to be doing well.”

Vinny smiled exhibiting his pointy shark teeth. He was trapped. There was nothing he could do except follow his parole officer into the trailer and take him out with his bare hands. *But what about Bridget?* She had a cellphone and would take off and call the police!

Just as Mr.Johnson placed his hand on the door knob a hideous ring tone pierced the air. At first Vinny thought the sound was coming from Bridget's cellphone but she didn't move.

Mr.Johnson took his hand off the front door and answered his cell. The Gadget Man didn't even realize it but his right hand was on Bridget's knee and he was squeezing hard as he watched Mr.Johnson take the phone call out into the yard.

“Ouch!” Yelped Bridget slapping his vice gripped hand.

Vinny immediately moved his hand and apologized.

“ I'm so sorry” he pleaded,” Just a nervous habit.” He said with his gaze still focused on his parole officer who was circling the yard and chatting. “ It's okay” Said Bridget, “ I guess I should be going now.”

Vinny finally looked at her with imploring eyes. “ Oh no, please stay, we have more to talk about.”

Mr.Johnson clasped his cellphone shut and stuck it in

his pocket. "Something just came up. My boss just called and I have to get going. I'll stop by next week. Be good." Said Mr. Johnson walking briskly to his car.

Vinny felt his heart rate go back to normal as the quiet Honda engine fired up and Mr. Johnson backed out of the driveway. Vinny lit up a cigarette and Bridget placed one in her mouth as well. He lit her cigarette for her and caught a whiff of her sweet perfume. "You smell nice." He said admiring her body and dressy clothes. "Thanks." She replied feeling a little embarrassed. She wondered why Vinny was so uptight when his parole officer arrived but now he was calm and relaxed.

"So what do you do?" Asked Vinny trying to rejuvenate the conversation.

Bridget blew a cloud of smoke up in the air. "I'm a psychiatrist. I have my own private practice." Bridget was holding a big secret from the Gadget Man. It just so happened that Shaggy had a life insurance policy that covered suicide and she was the primary beneficiary receiving nearly \$200,000.00 which she used for school and to set up her own private practice.

Vinny was impressed and was starting to like the impeccable Bridget more and more. "I used to be a school teacher but now I drive truck." He said lowering his head in shame.

"So what happened?" She asked with a quizzical look.

Vinny felt a sudden thud burrowing into his chest as the flashbacks taunted his mind. "Ahh... I don't really want to talk about it today, but hey, maybe we can go out for Sushi

sometime?”

Vinny read Men's Health magazines and recently read an article about tips for dating written by a woman. The article said that women were more apt to accept a date that was very specific versus just plainly asking a woman out to dinner. Vinny hoped that his Sushi trick would work. He never ate Sushi in his life.

Bridget blushed a little and watched him nervously adjust his eye patch. “ What happened to your eye?” She asked. Vinny let go of his eye patch and confidently laid a hand on her shoulder. “ I was thinking I could tell you on our date. So what do you say Bridget Jones?”

Bridget smiled and pulled a business card out of her pocketbook. “ Hey listen, I have to go and take my mom to her dentist appointment. Give me a call sometime.” She handed Vinny the card then quickly stood up. Vinny sat dumbfounded gawking like a teenage boy. It was love at first sight, he was sure of it. “ It was fun talking to you.” She said flaunting her hips as she walked towards her car.

Vinny sat on the porch awestruck watching her every move as ashes fell from his cigarette and onto his pants. The Gadget Man was back in business. Not the business of killing, but the business of love.

CHAPTER 66

Every redwood chair surrounding the long mahogany table in the conference room of the 13th floor was occupied. Max Trowell stood at the end of the table loosening his tie and unbuttoning the top button of his collar. He needed to breathe and the temperature felt like it was rising even

though it was only his blood pressure rising.

Max was not having a good day. His two boys were turning into hellions. Yesterday one of the boys held the family cat under the electric garage door while the other one pushed the button. It turned out to be a bloody mess. Max had to run the cat to the vet where it was pronounced dead on arrival. When he got home he took both of the boys into an empty bedroom and spanked their behinds.

Murmurs echoed throughout the conference room as Max tried to come up with an opening statement. The 15 Federal employees seated around the long mahogany table were all good looking people except for an old haggard man sitting next to Carter and wearing a red Beret.

“ Who are you?” Asked Max looking sharply into the old man's lurid eyes.

Carter stood up immediately and rested a hand on the old man's shoulder who seemed to be shook up by Max's blatant tone of voice. “ Mr. Trowell, this is my friend private investigator John Stiller. He's investigating the murder of Horace Burns which we feel might be linked to our suspect. I asked him to join us in this meeting.” Carter looked around at the other agents to tell if they had a problem with Mr.Stiller sitting in on the meeting.

Nobody objected so he sat back down in his seat. Max still looked upset and exasperated. He folded his arms and glowered at Carter. “ How come I never was told about the Horace Burns case?” He asked with a green vein throbbing in his forehead.

Stiller whispered “ How come this guy is so uptight?”

Into Carter's ear. Carter tried not to smirk and cleared his throat. "Sir, we've been extremely busy and I guess it slipped my mind. We're still not 100% positive there's even a link at all but..." Max interrupted him in mid-sentence and raised his hand to silence him.

"Okay, understood. Let's talk about what we know so far about this so called Gadget Man." He said loosening his crimson tie a little more.

Almost in perfect unison everybody seated at the table took a long sip of their coffee and picked up their pens ready to jot down notes. This was the part where Paul usually took over since he was always the smart one. Unfortunately Paul was not in today and everybody knew why. Today was Paul Newman's 33rd birthday and everyone suspected he was probably celebrating his special day with his queer boyfriend. Nobody had ever met or saw pictures of Paul's boyfriend but they all knew he existed.

Carter boldly got out of his chair like a lawyer getting ready to call out an objection. He waltzed over to the whiteboard and picked up a black marker. A persona had already been written out about the things they already knew or thought they knew about the Gadget Man.

Carter pulled the cap off of the marker and circled the word *5 twists*. Max began to pass out sketches of the Gadget Man that had derived from the help of the ex-city councilman and Steve's friend Bobby Fisher who spotted the Gadget Man at the races.

The sketches showed the Gadget Man wearing a hoody and big thick sunglasses. His eye patch had never become known.

Carter cleared his throat and sneaked a quick glance at his Doc Martins shoes. “ I thank you all for coming today. I'm sorry my partner agent Newman can't be here today. It's his birthday and I guess he's doing only God knows what.”

The whole conference room giggled except for Max. Max never caught wind of the rumors about Paul. Carter wiped the cocky smirk off his face and continued on. “ The good news is Tina Anderson has fully recovered. However, the amnesia she sustained is so bad she now has the mentality of a 5 year old child. She could be the only tangible evidence we have but she is of no help to us because she can't remember a thing. All she remembers is something about a lot of trees and running towards a light.”

Carter paused for a moment tapping the marker on his chin and looking at John Stiller. The private investigator gave him a curtly nod as if to say “ You're doing okay.” Carter pointed to the 5 twists on the whiteboard. “ This is what I want to focus on right here.” He said tapping what he circled, “ All the wiring configurations from the remnants of the devices we found always had 5 twists. Not 3 or 4 but always exactly 5. We've also concluded that by the way the wire was spun our perp is left handed. These 5 twists are believed to be some kind of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). This discovery was made by agent Newman upon close examination.” Carter paused again giving the note takers a chance to catch up. He squinted a little and couldn't believe what he was seeing. A young male agent with spiky hair and a chiseled chin was playing footsies with a cute blond seated across from him.

Carter thought about embarrassing them both but the blond was his friend. “ Oh yeah, before I forget. We also

presume that the perp is a smoker. Tina's clothes reeked of cigarettes when we found her.”

One of the agents raised his hand. He was a well groomed fledgling trying to make a good start on his new career. “ Were any cigarette butts found at any of the crime scenes that we could draw DNA from?” Asked the freckled agent.

Carter shook his head incredulously like he had just head a stupid question. “ No we didn't find any. I have a gut feeling that our perp may have once worked as an electrician or HVAC or even on telephones. He may have done some residential work that we could investigate to look for these 5 twists. I say we call around to different companies and inquire about any current or former employees that are tall, left handed smokers with a possible background.”

Carter paused again watching Max completely ignoring him and walking over to the window. “I think we should show this sketch to every company involving electrical wiring even the cable companies.....boss what seems to be the problem?” Carter was filling with ire as he watched Max off to the corner staring out the window.

The room got quiet and everyone focused their attention on Max who seemed intrigued by whatever was going on outside. “ Something weird is happening. Come check this out.”

Carter still felt thwarted but he reluctantly walked over to his boss. As he approached him he could hear car alarms going off and what sounded like an incessant horn growing louder.

“ The truck!” Pointed Max, “ Look at the truck!”

A huge U-Haul truck was zig-zagging down the street sounding a horn and bumping into parked vehicles while it came towards the FBI building. A few other agents stood up from the table and joined Carter and Max by the window to see what all the commotion was about. The big U-Haul truck looked like it was out of control and picking up speed.

Max folded his arms and squinted in disbelief as the sounding horn grew louder coming towards them. “ Who's driving that truck?” Asked Max resting his sweaty palms against the glass and leaving a smudge.

Carter gaped in horror. He could not believe what he was seeing! “ Sir, nobody is driving the truck. We have to leave here immediately!”

Murmurs echoed across the room as people shuffled around looking at each other with awkwardness as if someone might know what's going on.

Carter shouted while waving his hands. “ People this is an emergency! We're about to be attacked. Everyone must evacuate the building immediately!”

Just as the agents scrambled towards the door crushing each other and forgetting everything they were taught, the building shook like a violent earthquake. Then there was a pause like the calm before a storm. That's when bedlam broke loose.

Vinny sat in his Toyota Tacoma parked on top of a parking garage. He was completely enthralled. This was fun. The Gadget Man likes gadgets. A wire ran from his laptop

into the antenna mounted on the truck. This was the coolest most realistic video game ever! He had just crashed a stolen U-Haul truck into the FBI building by remote control using the joystick on his laptop. An idea he got while watching the television show "Myth Busters" when they used to rig up old police cars by remote control to perform experiments. Vinny had taken his project one step further and used a U-Haul truck. The U-Haul truck had a wireless camera mounted on the dashboard so he could see everything on his laptop. But that wasn't all. The U-Haul truck was full of enough explosives to take out the entire building!

"Do it now! Do it now!" Taunted the voices inside his head. Vinny's shaky index finger made it's way to the enter key on the laptop. "Hasta la Vista Baby!" He muttered to himself as he pushed down on the button.

A thunderous sound reverberated through the building. The building shook more. Lights shattered from the ceiling and fire broke out everywhere. Frenzied FBI employees ran down the corridor screaming only to run into an escape route blocked by fire. Then they ran in the other direction looking for a safe exit as debris and rubble fell on their heads. Carter was amidst the fury and panicking along with the others. He heard a woman crying from inside an elevator. She seemed to be trapped.

"Help me! Help me please!" She cried.

The elevator door was slightly ajar, maybe three inches open. Carter wedged his manly hands into the crack of the door and tried to pry the door open. It was of no use, he simply wasn't strong enough. He heard a clanking sound down the hallway of a water pipe falling onto the floor. *God is good*, he thought to himself. "I'll be right back!" He

hollered to the distraught woman. “ No,no, please don't leave me!” She pleaded.

Carter raced down the smoky hallway while taking notice that the frenzied crowd was depleting. *Praise the Lord they must have found an escape route.* Carter picked up the pipe and ran back to the elevator. The helpless woman was sitting down head in her knees crying. Carter rammed the pipe into the crack and pulled with great adrenaline force. Slowly but surely the elevator door began to open. A few more tugs and there was finally enough room for the woman to slip through. Carter grabbed her hand and led her to the crowd that was making a bee-line towards an exit.

A series of explosions erupted from underneath the building making a loud popping sound. At first Carter thought someone was shooting but then it dawned on him what was going on. The evidence room down below must have caught fire. Among the confiscated contraband was all kinds of ammunition, even some grenades the Feds had recently seized from a White Supremacist group in Virginia.

Carter's eyes burned as he tried to see through the black haze of smoke as he grasped the woman's hand leading her down a fire escape. The building had turned into an inferno that Lazereth had once described in the Bible. Carter could hear human screams of people sounding like they were trapped but he could not identify where they were coming from. His lungs were filling up with smoke that partially smelled like reefer and he needed to get out of the building before it was too late.

Vinny sat in the driver's seat gazing through his Bushnel binoculars watching the show on the roof top of the parking garage. His favorite song from the BloodHound gang

was playing on the CD player. “ The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire.” A song his Marine buddies used to play inside the tanks right before they blew something up usually to get the soldiers all jazzed up.

The Gadget Man watched the FBI building ablaze as Federal employees trapped on the 10th floor jumped out the window and splattered onto the streets. This was so neat and phenomenal. It was like 9/11 all over again! Fire trucks and ambulances encompassed the building trying to stifle the enormous fire while survivors eluded the building waving their hands frantically for some medical assistance from EMT.

Vinny squinted through the Bushnels with contempt watching survivors emerge from the edifice and out onto the streets. He was hoping for no survivors but he felt enlivened when he saw their faces covered in soot and blood. This was a big victory for the Gadget Man. He was wondering how he compared to Timothy Mcveigh when suddenly there was a knock on his window.

CHAPTER 67

Vinny dropped the Bushnels onto his lap and froze paralyzed with fear. Another knock tapped on his driver's side window. When he turned his head he saw a wild looking tenuous black man holding up a Budweiser can that had been cut in half. The homeless man looked like he hadn't slept in days and his head shook like an Alan Iverson bobble head.

Vinny cautiously pushed the down button to his driver's side window. “ Yes? What do you want?” Asked Vinny averting his eyes to the carnage he created up ahead. The

homeless man smiled and shook the can. There was a jingling sound as the man's hands shook incessantly.

“ Eh mon, like you got any bread for a brother mon?”

Vinny felt nauseated by the smell of alcohol wafting from the man's breath. The homeless man leaned inside the window making Vinny all the more nervous. Without saying a word Vinny fished in his pockets for some loose change amounting to \$1.35. He placed the coins into the Budweiser can almost cutting his grimy hands on the pointy edges of the can.

“ God bless you my brudda.” Said the man holding up a bottle concealed in a brown paper bag in the other hand. “ Would you like a swig brudda mon?”

The Gadget Man looked at him with disgust. “ No thanks, I don't drink.” replied Vinny still focusing on the burning building wishing the man would go away. The homeless man took a few swigs from the bottle and focused his attention on the burning building as well. “ It looks like something big is going down at the FBI building.” The homeless man said deciding to tarry against Vinny's wishes.

Feeling a little less threatened Vinny picked up the Bushnels and watched the frenzied crowd. Still staring through the binoculars Vinny said, “ Yeah, something big alright.” He said chuckling.

The homeless man rested his sticky right hand on Vinny's window sill and looked intrigued by the blaze. Vinny gave a furtive glance towards the man's hand and noticed his fingernails hadn't been clipped in months. He wished the parasite would leave but the homeless man wanted to hang

around and talk.

“ You know, I'm glad to see stuff like this. They should get the courthouse too.” Said the homeless man chugging at his bottle, “ They're all a bunch of crooks anyhow. I've got homies doing time in the pen. The Feds make them work for 12 cents an hour and then charge them \$2.65 for a loaf of bread. Who wants to work 10 hours for a measly loaf of bread?” Said the man trying to keep his drunken body from falling to the ground.

“ It would be 22 hours.” Corrected Vinny, “ They would have to work 22 hours.” Vinny was the math teacher, he should know.

The homeless man looked at Vinny with recognition. “ Hey mon, don't I know you from somewhere? And how do you just so happen to have a pair of binoculars?”

The Gadget Man tensed up and squeezed the steering wheel with all of his might. *If I don't know my next move how will they?* He thought to himself.

Vinny brushed off the comment with a mirthful chuckle. “ Aw, you don't know me. My name is Harry Sachs. I keep these Bushnells with me at all times because I'm a reporter.”

The inebriated man staggered backwards a little bit releasing his hand off the door and looking all bleary eyed. “ Well, I guess you should be down there reporting Harry Sachs mon.”

Vinny snorted a little bit wondering if the man would discover the humor in the fake name he gave him. He started up the truck relieved that the man had finally given

him room to breathe. “ It was good talking to you. I've got to get down there like you said.” Replied Vinny reaching for a pack of Newport.

The homeless man let out a belly laugh and pointed a bony finger at Vinny. “ You funny as sheed mon! You Harry Sachs mon!” The homeless man held onto his abdomen and then pussy footed along looking for his next victim to pan handle.

Vinny drove his truck down the winding slope exiting the parking garage and was greeted by a portly fellow with copper red curly hair munching on cheese curls. Vinny proudly held out his ticket with panache like he was showing off a report card to his mother. The garage custodian leaned over to grab the ticket then stopped midway realizing his hands were covered in cheese curl crumbs.

“ How long you've been here?” Asked the employee.

“ About 30 minutes.” Replied Vinny wondering where the conversation was going. The portly fellow not wanting to get cheese curl crumbs all over the ticket and currency, waved him through and continued nibbling on his favorite snack. The Gadget Man curtly nodded then made his way onto the frantic streets.

Vinny drove up the street and passed a newspaper vending machine that was engulfed in flames. He had hidden a self-destructing booster inside the newspaper vending machine designed to go up in flames after his mission was accomplished so there would be less evidence for the Feds.

Vinny made his way towards the FBI building like an old

man on a Sunday drive and noticed reporters taking refuge under a kiosk filming the entire conflagration. *Here I am,* thought Vinny, *you want to talk to the man behind it all? I'm right here.*

Dozens of flashing lights and chopping sounds of helicopters hovering over the FBI building made the scene look like 9/11 all over again. With what looked like almost all of the police force surrounding the blazing FBI building Vinny was half tempted to rob his favorite jewelry store at the far end of the city. With all the cops busy with the catastrophe up ahead he could probably get away with it.

A police officer with a thick bushy mustache the size of a boomerang was waving an orange baton and directing traffic. Other officers set up yellow tape cordoning the premises from passersby and persistent rubbernecks.

Moving at the speed of a parade, Vinny drove the Tacoma as close to the scene as he could get. A pregnant woman with dirty blond crimped hair was crying and rubbing the side of her head that had been charred leaving a big bald spot on her head. The Gadget Man picked the digital camera off of the passenger's seat and began taking pictures. He could hear the sounds of a standing ovation going on inside of his head. He wished he could take credit for all that had happened today. But this time the Gadget Man did not act alone.

CHAPTER 68

The 6X4 inch photograph was covered in fingerprints and even had a coffee stain on the corner of it but it was Bridget's favorite picture. BunBun sat between her legs nibbling on a carrot she was feeding him while tickling her

thighs with his whiskers. BunBun was hardly ever left in the cage and probably one of the happiest rabbits in the world.

Bridget held up the picture closer to her face and scrutinized it like it was one of those find 8 differences between two identical pictures that you find in the comic section of the newspapers. The picture was taken 3 years ago at an amusement park just two weeks before her and Brian broke up (her ex). She had won the tickets from a radio station when she accurately guessed the names of all 4 band members of the Beatles. The weather had been perfect that day at Hershey Park and Brian had been so sweet and kind that day devoting the whole day to her and hanging onto her every word like when they first met. If only she would have known that the only reason he was so calm and relaxed was because he was reminiscing about the girl he had secretly slept with the night before.

Bridget caressed the photograph with her thumb and tried to stare right into Brian's heart while he sat on a bench next to her looking content with his bulky arm wrapped around her and a big Hershey's chocolate bar mascot standing behind them. She felt the tears run down her cheeks as she only wished she could straighten that boy out. Brian had other problems too. He had a strong addiction to heroin and often stole her mac card to get money for his habit. He often became belligerent once he was doped up.

A knock came at her bedroom door startling her and causing her to drop the picture right on BunBun's head. The rabbit didn't seem fazed in the least bit and kept right on munching the carrot. An elderly woman's voice squeaked and quavered like a crone from an old folks home.

“ Honey baby doll. Don't you have a date with that

trucker guy.....oh what's his name?"

Bridget quickly wiped away her tears and tucked the photograph under her fluffy pillow. " Vincent." She replied, " His name is Vincent."

There was a pause and the faint smacking of lips suggesting that maybe her mother was eating a piece of fruit. " Oh, that's a wonderful name. A strong handsome name as a matter of fact. When you see him give him my highest regards."

Bridget looked over at her alarm clock which read 5:45pm. Vinny was an hours drive away and told her to be at his place at 6:30pm. It was no big deal. Her zippy sports car got her to places in record time almost always.

Bridget quickly donned a brand new pair of green dress pants and her favorite black satin blouse. She grabbed her cellphone and scampered out the door kissing her mother on the cheek on her way out. This was so surreal. She hadn't been on a date in 3 years and she didn't think Vinny was a bad looking guy.

Bridget used her dexterous driving skills to zip by poky cars and try to make up for some lost time. She chuckled to herself as she daringly passed a tractor trailer on a double yellow line just barely making it back to the right side of the road before an oncoming Camaro honked his horn in frustration.

She reminisced about Shaggy and what he would be saying to her right now if he were in the passenger's seat. Her driving used to scare him half to death. He was such a pantywaist. But she missed the little bugger. He was a

sweetheart and a good snuggler and thanks to him this date had been made possible.

When Bridget looked in the rear view mirror, to her dismay she saw flashing lights. *Oh no! Not now! Please don't ruin my date. I haven't seen anybody in 3 years.* Bridget dutifully pulled over on the right side of the road and smacked her hands against the steering wheel in frustration. She lit a cigarette to calm her nerves and waited patiently.

A tall blond hair blue eyed wiry man stepped out of a police car. He tugged his pants up higher around his waist and headed towards her car. It was time for the Bridget Jones wannabe to put on a flirtatious look and talk her way out of a speeding ticket. She took a deep drag from her cigarette and blew smoke in the air pursing her lips like a Hollywood star.

The police officer stood outside her window with his head down reading something in his hand with the brim of his hat obscuring his face. When the officer finally looked up Bridget felt a sigh of relief. The officer squinted his eyes and looked at her incredulously.

“ Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?”

Bridget let out a mirthful laugh and lowered her sunglasses from her eyes to size up the handsome cop.

“ You just pulled me over 3 weeks ago silly. Right in front of Wal-Mart on Rt.16. I'm on my way to go see your brother.”

Alvin's radio clipped to his belt chirped rather loudly and

he quickly turned the volume down. “ Oh Vinny? Hey you don't say. Him and I don't talk much since his detriment years ago. He has this thing about cops...”

Bridget glanced at her watch real quick. She was going to be late. “ It's okay. I intend to straighten him out.” She said making it even more obvious that she was checking her watch and in a hurry.

Alvin clicked his pen and placed it in his shirt pocket.

“ Well hey listen. You were doing 75 in a 40mph speed limit but I guess I can let you go with a warning. Drive more carefully next time and say hello to Vinny for me.”

Bridget tried to scrutinize Alvin's left hand to look for a wedding ring but it was obscured by his citation booklet. She would gladly accept a date from officer Young any day but she knew he was way out of her league. Bridget felt like she just swallowed an aphrodisiac when she felt the vibration of the big V-8 engine of the cruiser zoom past her. A little more wishful thinking as she watched Alvin speed off into the sunset. She told Shaggy once how excited she used to get when guys on Harleys would rev up their motors. Almost talked the poor boy into buying a motorcycle.

Bridget glanced at her watch which read 6:10pm. She would have to hurry up before the Gadget Man got upset.

CHAPTER 69

Parts to a doorbell and a bravo pager laid splayed out on the dusty work bench. Vinny was wearing two pairs of latex gloves just to be sure he wasn't leaving any fingerprints. He had purchased the doorbell from ACE Hardware for \$10.00 and paid cash of course. The doorbell

was completely identical to the doorbell belonging to Gary Bowman's home. The guard that had nearly killed him by dehydrating him in jail.

The Gadget Man was about to create the greatest booby trap of all time. The most enigmatic situation the police would ever have to deal with. Vinny stared at the LCD screen on his laptop which showed a view of his driveway. He would know the instant Bridget pulled into the driveway. He looked at his watch. It was 6:40pm. Where was the notable Bridget Jones? She didn't seem like the type to play head games.

Vinny put down the soldering gun and walked over to the big blue plastic trash barrel. To the naked eye the 50 gallon plastic drum appeared to be overflowing with trash but in fact the inside of it was hollow. He had specifically designed the trash barrel that way to hide contraband inside it.

Vinny popped off the top section of the trash barrel and placed some electrical gadgets inside of it that he didn't want his parole officer to find. Vinny always noticed that his parole officer never used to dig through the trash when he used to poke around. Hiding contraband amidst trash was something smooth criminals have been doing for years. The Gadget Man thought back in retrospect of how inmates used to hide things in trash cans and dumpster bins. The authorities never felt they were paid enough to dig through trash while conducting a search. They would stand outside the chow hall and pat people down on their way out hoping to find an extra milk or some vegetables shoved in their crotch while the trash crew guys were smuggling out 50 pounds of beef patties, 30 pounds of cheese, and 30 onions which they would later sell on the unit. A part of him felt nostalgic

realizing how much fun he had in jail at times.

Vinny placed the homemade top lid back on the trash barrel making it appear as though it was a regular trash barrel nearly overflowing with trash. He washed his greasy hands, locked up the barn, and went back inside the trailer.

It was 6:47pm and still no sign of Bridget Jones. The Gadget Man was growing impatient and decided to take the edge off things by finishing his dice game. He couldn't wait to see what was in store for Wiggles, the ringleader of his awful detriment.

As Vinny made his way into the kitchen in search of the dice he heard popping sounds of stones spitting out from tires. He raced back out to the living room and peeped through the blinds. The same pink flowery antenna ornament zig-zagged back and forth as the Corolla made it's way up the driveway.

Bridget parked the car and quickly got out slinging a bright orange plastic purse over her shoulder. Vinny laughed as he watched her shapely body wobble back and forth as she scampered up to his front porch and knocked on the door.

Vinny tucked in his tight black v-neck shirt into his dark black jeans and opened the front door with a sullen look on his face. Bridget looked completely out of breath but wasted no time in explaining herself. " I am so sorry...your brother..."

Vinny's face turned a ruddy complexion and his pupils looked like they were on fire. " You saw my brother?" He interrupted crossing his arms in a threatening way and taking a step towards her making her uneasy.

“ Yeah, he pulled me over. Why are you so mad?”

Vinny turned his head towards the barn averting his eyes so she couldn't read his thoughts and grunted. “ I just hate cops that's all.” He said without looking at her.

Not wanting to ruin her date but also wanting to defend Alvin, Bridget said, “ Well, he's your brother you should love him. Besides, he says hello.”

The Gadget Man didn't even look at her while he spoke. Instead he fished around in his linty pocket and helped himself to a cigarette. He moved to the side of the portal and waved her into the trailer. She boldly stepped inside and looked around like the place was a museum. Bridget had already passed stage one. Putting up with his crap. Most women would have been spooked by his monstrosity and taken off but Vinny could tell Bridget's past lovers had put her through lots of strife and she was probably used to it. He would be sure to take advantage of this manly behavior tolerance and see how much this Bridget Jones wannabe could take.

“ Just have a seat on the sofa.” Said Vinny, “ I've got to go in the kitchen and call the restaurant to let them know we're running late. I made reservations you know.”

Bridget plopped herself on the comfy sofa and lit a cigarette of her own. “ I am terribly sorry for being late, your brother must have a good hiding spot because I never saw him.”

There was a rustling sound in the kitchen that Bridget was oblivious to. “ Yeah, he's a clever one.” Muttered Vinny.

He was digging around in a sliding drawer of clutter underneath the sink. The voices congratulated him when he found the flunitrazepam and stuck it in his pocket. Flunitrazepam was a date rape drug of choice that Peter used to use all the time. Too bad Vinny had chopped his friend to pieces with a chain saw.

Vinny finally picked up the cordless phone and called the restaurant to let them know they were running late and to please hold their table. Bridget sat on the sofa in the living room with her legs crossed while observing her surroundings. She saw the dog's ear of a dirty magazine subtly poking out from underneath the coffee table. She thought about picking up the dirty magazine and reading it just to embarrass Vinny but she didn't know how he would take it. She had pulled this trick on Shaggy once when their relationship had first started. When Shaggy had gone upstairs to use the bathroom she was digging under the sofa cushion looking for her cigarette lighter and found a dirty magazine. Shaggy was so embarrassed when he came back downstairs and saw her reading it. She really didn't care one way or another what her boyfriends did in their spare time as long as they weren't cheating on her.

The Gadget Man was whistling a merry tune and shaking a set of keys inside the kitchen. Bridget rubbed her delicate hands into the sofa cushion and was surprised to find hands covered in dog hair. Then breathing in deeply through her nose she could even smell dog.

“ Do you have a dog?” She finally asked.

Vinny stepped out into the living room wearing a pair of sunglasses. “ Used to.” He said, “ But he got really sick a month ago and I had to put him down.”

Bridget brushed the dog hairs onto the floor from her hands. "I'm sorry to hear that. What kind of dog was it?"

Vinny completely ignored her question and looked at his wristwatch. "Come on lets go. They're expecting us." He said extending his massive forearm and helping her off the sofa. Deep down inside Bridget was impressed with his rudeness. He was confident and sure of himself unlike her past feeble-minded boyfriends that whined about everything.

Bridget followed Vinny out to the shimmery Toyota Tocomo pickup truck that looked like it had been recently washed and waxed. She was really surprised when Vinny opened the door for her and helped her get in. Vinny got in the driver's seat and started up the truck.

"Aren't you gonna put on your seat belt?" She asked.

"Absolutely not! My mother always made me wear it so I developed a hatred towards it." He slapped the gear into reverse and backed out of the driveway. While backing out he peeked at Bridget's car and was surprised at what he saw. Prominently displayed and perched on the back seat was a big fluffy pillow and Bridget's favorite blanket. Perhaps he wouldn't need the date rape drug after all.

CHAPTER 70

The inside of Vinny's truck was completely immaculate. He had spent most of the day cleaning everything Bridget would come in contact with even the bathroom toilet which took an extra long time.

Vinny kept both his hands on the steering wheel at the

ten and two O'clock position while a miniature cowboy hat the size of a ping pong ball dangled from the rear view mirror. Bridget sat in the passenger's seat with her hands folded on her lap trying to think of something to say to break the eerie silence. She glanced at Vinny to try and read his emotions but he had on sunglasses and she couldn't pick up any vibes. A thought came to her mind.

“ I liked the painting above the sofa in the living room. What was that in the pirate ship's mouth? A giant tomato?” She asked to break the silence.

Vinny scratched his chin reflecting back on what he considered a masterpiece. “ Yes, my friend Bill from jail had autism but he really knew how to paint. Every day he tried to convince us that pirate ships eat tomatoes and we never knew what he was talking about. Then one day he came up with this beautiful painting and I insisted on purchasing it from him.”

Bridget just giggled. “ Well, it's very peculiar if I must say.”

Vinny noticed that Bridget had an Irish accent that he couldn't tell was real or just made up to sound cute. With her rosy cheeks and sandy blond hair all done up in a bun Vinny felt a sense of euphoria. Bridget wondered if maybe Vinny preferred wearing sunglasses to cover up that hideous eye patch. Maybe she would ask about the eye patch on the ride back.

“ You know I get a lot of weird people that come to see me.” She said watching his reaction but he remained quiet and watched the road. “ This one lady patient of mine has paranoia like you wouldn't believe. She's absolutely

convinced that someone is trying to kidnap her children so she checks on them every hour all night long. The poor woman hardly gets any sleep. I could tell. She has dark bags under her eyes.”

Bridget looked at Vinny. He was clenching his shark teeth and looked perturbed. She went right on talking. “ Then there was this other guy convinced that every time he would see strangers laughing that they were laughing at him.”

Vinny pushed down on the gas pedal without even realizing it. He began a silent prayer to Jesus. *Please Lord! Make this cute garrulous woman shut up before I start to lose it!*

Bridget didn't seem to notice that they were gradually accelerating. She continued being quite the chatterbox. “Like, how could someone possibly believe that every time some stranger was laughing that they would be laughing at.....” Without warning Vinny clamped his huge hand onto that tender spot above her knee and squeezed with all his might.

“ Ouch!” Screamed Bridget trying to pry his hand off her knee. Once Vinny realized what he was doing he quickly released his hand. “I'm sorry.” He said playfully patting the side of her leg like it was an honest mistake.

“ What just happened?” She asked playing tough girl and holding back imminent tears.

“ It's just a condition I have,” Pledged Vinny, “ I lose control over my body when I'm exposed to incessant chatter.”

Bridget tried to rub the bruise out of her knee while contemplating what to do. Reminiscing about what her mother had told her about early signs of abuse Bridget finally said, "I think you should take me back to my car."

Vinny took the sunglasses off his head and looked at her with his big bulging imploring eye. "But it was an honest mistake. It won't happen again I swear! We've made it this far are you sure you want to go back?"

Bridget's gullibility was one of her biggest flaws. She stopped rubbing her leg and lightly massaged his shoulder. "No it's okay. I shouldn't have been talking so much. Maybe next time you could just say something and I'll shut up?"

Vinny sighed in relief because he was willing to kidnap the Bridget Jones wannabe if he had to. "It's a deal." He said with a cordial grin. It was going to be a spectacular evening. Bridget had just passed stage two, putting up with his abuse.

CHAPTER 71

The eerie glow from the candle at the dinner table made vivid shadows of Bridget and Vinny look like a puppet show on the stucco walls encompassing them. They sat in a secluded smoking section of Woky's Sushi Bar and Grille where it was quiet and nobody could disturb them. Bridget liked the Gadget Man but she still felt a little uneasy around him.

A long white table cloth draped over the table and Bridget kept her right hand in her pocket fondling her cellphone should an emergency break out. A young petite Asian woman with silky jet black hair made the long journey to their table in the back. She had a warming smile showing

her pearly whites and Vinny deduced that she obviously didn't smoke. Her perfectly symmetrical eyebrows suggested that they had just been waxed.

“ Are you guys sure you're okay back here? It's kind of dark. Do you need more light?”

Bridget looked over at Vinny awaiting his response. “Oh, we're vampires,” Kiddled Vinny, “ We like it dark.” He gave a mischievous smile showing his razor sharp shark teeth. The pretty Asian woman almost believed him when she saw him smile. She looked over at Bridget and smiled then handed them their menus.

“ Hey maybe we could start off with an aperitif.” Suggested Vinny.

“ Excuse me?” Asked the waitress.

Vinny wasn't surprised that she had no idea what he was talking about. “ A drink. What kind of beers you got? We're kind of thirsty.”

The Asian lady blinked a couple of times and then chuckled. “ Oh, we have Corona, Guinness, Amstel Light..”

Vinny cut her off. “ We'll both have a Corona thanks.”

She looked over at Bridget and she concurred by nodding her head. The waitress clapped her hand together and turned around abruptly eager to get away from the cloud of smoke Vinny was creating with his cigarette. The waitress scurried off and Vinny adjusted his eye patch like a proud war veteran. When he looked over at Bridget she quickly averted her eyes but he knew she was watching him.

“So I guess you want to know what happened to my eye?” He finally said.

Bridget was quick to respond. “ Oh, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to.” She said taking in a deep drag of her cigarette.

“ Oh, I don't mind talking about it. Happened while I was in prison. Some guy I squabbled with got me with a lock in a sock. A very common weapon used throughout the prison systems.”

Bridget honestly didn't care about Vinny's situation with his eye. With the heinous monsters she dated in the past, she was far from nit picky. She was just so impressed that a man who purportedly seemed to have his act together was interested in her. The age difference was not a problem either. “ Yeah, I watch the prison shows on television. It showed some toothbrushes with razor blades melted into them. How are the inmates able to make fire?”

Vinny grinned and put his cigarette out in the spotless ashtray. “ Batteries and bread ties usually. There's a lot of McGyvers in jail.”

The pretty Asian woman walked briskly towards them carrying two icy cold Coronas on a brown circular tray. Each one contained a luscious lime perched neatly on the tip of the bottles. She placed the beers in front of them and clicked her pen with great anticipation.

“ Are we ready to order?” She said in a chic voice.

They had forgotten to look over the menus but Vinny

quickly took over the situation. “ We'll both be having the Sushi and get us both a chicken breast salad with creamy Ranch dressing.”

Vinny had just scored big points with Bridget. She never had a date order her food for her but it was like Vinny read her mind. A chicken breast salad with Ranch dressing was one of her favorites.

The waitress tapped her pen on her note pad and smiled at Bridget. “ We don't have a chicken breast salad with Ranch but we have a chicken Ceasar salad which is almost the same thing.”

“ That will suffice.” He said concurring with Bridget who was smiling like a princess.

“ My name is Mia by the way. I hope you guys are enjoying yourselves.” Said the waitress.

“ We are.” Said Bridget placing her delicate hand over top of the Gadget Man's veiny unsuspecting hand. She was having a good time and falling right into Vinny's trap.

Just as Mia left to go fetch the food a swarthy looking couple in dressy clothes took a seat three tables away. This infuriated Vinny because he wanted the smoking section all to himself. Bridget assured him that it was okay and that the couple wouldn't be able to eavesdrop.

It almost felt like they were sitting at a campfire as they enjoyed the romantic evening and watched the candle flicker making their playful shadows contort on the wall.

The food came very quickly. Vinny knew that the

Chinese cooks never lollygagged. Bridget watched Vinny dig into his salad and she decided to start off with her salad as well. Vinny had his salad gone before she even managed to get in 3 bites.

“ Where did you learn to eat like that?” She said halfheartedly.

Vinny looked at her salad as if he was debating whether or not to eat hers as well. “ The service. I was in the Marines. They only gave us 5 minutes to eat.”

Bridget lightly poked a piece of chicken with her fork and popped it into her mouth. “ Well, it's very impressive.” She said with a starry look in her eyes.

“ Yeah, it impresses my mom all the time.” He said pushing his empty salad plate to the side and furtively glancing at his Sushi with disgust. He had never ate Sushi in his life. He slid a bowl of soy sauce in front of him and picked up a spoon. Bridget watched with great fascination as Vinny dipped his spoon in the soy sauce and began eating it like it was soup. He took a couple slurps of the soy sauce then slammed the spoon down on the table nearly causing Bridget to jump out of her seat.

“ This soup is horrible!” He said angrily.

Bridget cupped her hands over her mouth and giggled.

“ That's not soup silly that's soy sauce for your sushi!” She said sliding the sushi towards him.

Vinny's face turned flush red with a sheepish look. He pointed towards a dish of yellow mustard. “ Well then what's

this stuff for?"

Bridget couldn't tell if he was just trying to play a joke but suddenly realized he was serious. "That's wasabe sauce. They're both meant for your sushi to be dipped in."

Vinny was starting to feel really stupid but Bridget remained cool and collected. Then she winced from deducing what had just happened.

"You never ate sushi before have you?"

"No" Confessed Vinny lowering his head in shame. Vinny looked around to see if anyone was listening in. He weighed his options and decided to just come clean.

"I read an article in Men's Health magazine about dating. The article said that a woman is more inclined to accept a dinner date that is very specific verses just being asked out to dinner. Sushi was the only thing that popped into mind" He said dipping some sushi in the wasabe sauce and then inspecting it carefully.

Bridget snorted out a laugh then looked at him skeptically to see if he was serious. He was."Awe that's so sweet!" She said softly,"But seriously though. Those dating tips are to be taken with a grain of salt. It's always best just to be yourself. Women hate it when guys try to put on a show."

Mia swung by just to make sure everything was alright. For a minute Vinny wondered what it would be like to hook up with an Asian woman. They seemed so much more submissive than white girls.

Bridget finished her salad and then Vinny watched her

personal demonstration of how to properly eat sushi. Then the inevitable finally happened. Vinny had a hankering for another Corona. A few minutes later another one. Which eventually turned into another one yet. The Gadget Man didn't even realize it but he was getting drunk. He ended up telling Bridget Jones the story from way back when. At least she was starting to look like the real Bridget Jones.

Vinny was telling her about the part when he was at the Terrance Middle School parking lot in the back of a police car and an angry mob set his car on fire. Bridget yawned because Vinny had been droning on and on for quite sometime when she suddenly realized something. Vinny was becoming a garrulous person and it was working on her nerves! Then the witty Bridget came up with an idea as Vinny continued to chatter up a storm. Bridget stretched her arm under the table as far as she could and squeezed Vinny's leg as hard as she could.

The Gadget Man let out a yelp and kicked his leg at her and missed. Bridget giggled as she watched Vinny become disgruntled and look around the room to see if anyone had just witnessed what happened. Bridget was going to die. Maybe even right here and right now.

The other couple several tables away paid no attention to them and seemed to be indulged in a conversation of their own. Vinny glowered at Bridget but she went right on giggling and didn't feel the least bit threatened.

"What'd you do that for?" He asked in a harsh tone of voice.

She looked at him with sparkles in her eyes and cute little dimples on her cheeks.

"You were talking too much silly." She said handing him a

napkin because he had accidentally spilled some beer on himself while trying to kick her underneath the table.

The Gadget Man's perplexed look lingered a bit and then he let out a momentarily shark tooth smile. The animosity he had towards her vanished into thin air. Bridget had just passed stage 3. Mettle. And she sure had plenty of it.

Vinny looked at his wristwatch which read 11:30pm. While he did so, Bridget noticed the bite marks on his wrist from when Sparky had attacked him. Something seemed mysterious about the Gadget Man and she wondered if he was holding something back. Probably a lot.

Vinny rose from his chair and placed a 20 dollar bill on the table. Bridget grabbed it thinking it was supposed to go towards the bill.

"Did you want me to go up and pay?" She asked.

Vinny pulled on his trousers hitching them up a bit and did a quick look around. "No. That's the tip. I'll take care of the bill." He said reaching in his pocket and pulling out a huge wad of hundred dollar bills.

Bridget's eyes looked like they were bulging out of her head when she saw all the money in Vinny's hand. She grabbed her bright orange plastic purse and followed Vinny over to the cash register where he was already helping himself to a complimentary toothpick. *Had Vinny robbed a bank?* Bridget relinquished the thought and decided that maybe it was just an inheritance from a lost loved one. She was used to paying at least half if not the full bill on first dates. Vinny paid the bill then they wended out into the airy night with Bridget Jones tagging along hanging onto Vinny's back pocket.

As they walked out to his truck the Gadget Man suddenly stopped dead in his tracks like he had stumbled across a dead body. A pang of trepidation engulfed his body like a wave crashing down on him. Up ahead parked right next to his truck was a cruiser with a vigilant police officer sitting in the driver's seat watching his every move. There was no doubt about it. The notorious Bridget Jones had set him up!
If I don't know my next move how will they?

CHAPTER 72

Bridget nearly slammed into Vinny as he stopped dead in his tracks and turned back towards the restaurant. There was no way he was going back to jail. He had a stiletto knife hidden in his steel tipped boot which he would use to take people hostage if he had to. It was about to get interesting. Soon lots of cops would surround the place and the newsies and the rubbernecks would show up. His mother Theresa would probably see him on television.

As Vinny briskly walked back into Woky's Sushi Bar and Grille Bridget ran after him flailing her arms like she was surrendering. He would devise a plan. A master plan. Maybe they had propane tanks near the stoves in the kitchen that he could turn into a bomb. He was the Gadget Man. He could do anything.

"Wait!" Cried Bridget almost catching up to him. She grabbed his arm as he went to open the door.

Vinny vigorously shook her cherub arms off of him. "You set me up!" He shouted.

He opened the door and she followed him into the vestibule

where he stopped and placed his hands on his hips. He glowered at her and waited for a reply.

"Babe, you're paranoid and drunk. Nothing is happening."
She said with imploring eyes.

Vinny scrutinized her face carefully looking for any signs of deception. Quivering of the lips, averting of the eyes, or even redness in the face. A little trick he learned from his mother. Bridget showed none of these signs but kept her gaze fixed directly at him. She was telling the truth or else she was a really good liar.

Vinny peeked through the glass entrance doors and looked at the cop still sitting in the cruiser. The cop didn't budge but it looked like he was putting something in his mouth. *Maybe the pig was just taking a doughnut break?*

Vinny's jitters slowly faded away and he placed a hand on Bridget's shoulder. "I'm sorry...it's just...well..I'm on probation and I'm not supposed to be drinking. My friends used to tell me stories of their girlfriends setting them up. I didn't know what to make of this." He said taking his hand off her shoulder then a step back to search for signs of foul play.

Bridget gave him a reassuring look then crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Her patience was finally running thin. "Well, what are we gonna do? Are we just going to hang out here and wait until he goes away?" She said caustically leaving the ball in his court.

Vinny peered through the glass door again to get a look at what the cop was up to. The interior light was on in the cruiser and the officer appeared to be reading a newspaper. "That's exactly what we're gonna do." Muttered Vinny.

He wondered if she would go along with it. *Would she pass stage 4? Having patience?* He really doubted it.

Then Bridget came up with an indecisive idea. "Why don't you just let me drive? I'm more sober than an airplane pilot." She said holding her hand out for the keys.

Vinny mulled over the acquisition for a few seconds and then reluctantly handed over his keys. She smiled fervently like he had just handed her keys to a brand new Mustang Convertible. "Be careful with my baby." He said now recalling that Shaggy had once mentioned her reckless driving.

As they headed out into the parking lot Vinny flipped his hoodie over his long unruly hair and kept his gaze focused on the ground. Bridget walked in front of him and didn't take notice to his impromptu incognito attempt.

When they got inside the truck Bridget had to move the driver's seat up as far as it would go. As she started up the Tacoma Vinny noticed the cop put down the newspaper and give him a curious look. Bridget put it in drive and inched her way past the cruiser and out of the tight parking spot.

"See, that wasn't so bad." She said in her Irish accent as they exited the parking lot.

Vinny looked behind him and noticed the cop was following them. "He's following us." He almost stammered. His whole body began to shake convulsively especially his hands. Gosh, he really needed to control the incessant shaking of his hands when he got nervous. Professional killers usually learned how to control that. He felt like such a novice.

Bridget turned left onto the highway and went exactly the speed limit. The cop continued to follow and she thought nothing of it. But Vinny sure did! He shook like he had legions of demons trying to possess his body. He kept scratching his right ankle and she thought she saw something shiny. All she could think about was her mother's warnings and the foreboding knowledge that she tried to instill into her only daughter's introspective mind. *Please Bridget please....don't make the same mistakes I did. They'll never change and you can't change them.* She could hear her mother saying.

Her father used to come home drunk and beat on her mother. Then one day he just suddenly disappeared and they never heard from him again. She wasn't even sure her father was alive. Her mother always approved of Shaggy but he was just too easy. Bridget liked her men cocksure just like Vinny. But right now he was acting like a pantywaist and it wasn't exactly a turn on.

"What are you so worried about?" She finally asked, "I'm the one driving."

The comfort of her reassuring voice actually settled him down. He looked in the side view mirror and watched the cruiser merge into the exit lane. *Whew! The pig was finally gone.*

"Oh giddy! Looks like the doughnut eater is going for another snack." Said Bridget trying to be funny and stepping on the gas. It was her show now. Vinny was inebriated and she now felt that she had him wrapped around her little finger. She pushed down harder on the gas pedal as if she was driving her own car. Vinny gaped when he watched the needle on

the speed odometer climb past 80 mph. Now Bridget was the one acting like a child.

"Vroom! Vroom!" She muttered, "This truck has lots of Vroom!" She said excitedly as she began to weave through traffic. If the Gadget Man was sober right now he would be irate at Bridget Jones' carelessness but the alcohol in his body played it's role and made him a cheery person. He slouched down in the passenger's seat like any drunk would and placed a warm hand on Bridget's shoulder. She was now doing 95mph and loving every minute of it.

"We're having a good time aren't we?" He said slightly slurring his speech.

Bridget did a quick vice-grip with her hand right above his knee just not nearly as hard this time. "Yes we sure are." She said happily.

It was going to be a beautiful night and the Gadget Man had one last surprise for her.

CHAPTER 73

A couple wild rabbits raced up the driveway and towards the barn as if they were chasing their own shadows. The bright headlights of the Tacoma illuminated the grassy uncut lawn and reflected off of the bumper stickers of Bridget's car. Even in his drunken state of mind Vinny noticed the I LOVE DORKS bumper sticker. He wondered if she truly loved dorks or had to resort to them because the other guys just weren't all that interested.

Bridget parked the truck right in front of her car then quickly

jumped out and opened Vinny's door before he could even budge. She was proving to be a desperate woman and Vinny liked that because it meant she would have to believe all of Vinny's lies that he would tell her later. Bridget handed him back his keys and followed him up to the trailer. Evidently Bridget felt the date was not yet over. It wasn't.

Vinny could feel himself sobering up as he made his way to the trailer with Bridget tagging along holding onto his back pocket like a little harlot that just stumbled upon a man with 20 bucks. As the Gadget Man felt his body rejuvenating vengeful thoughts about his 7th grade students infiltrated his mind. *Should he keep Bridget? Would she deter him from his work?* It had been so long since he'd been with a woman that he decided to let his other head do the thinking. Then he wondered why she seemed so eager to spend the night. It made sense to deduce that perhaps after dating Shaggy Bridget felt that sleeping together was something to get out of the way so she wouldn't have to get disappointed later. He then chuckled to himself and smiled. He wouldn't disappoint her, oh no, he had a big surprise for her!

The Gadget Man unlocked his front door and immediately walked over to the refrigerator. Bridget followed. Now it was Bridget Jones' turn to get drunk!

Vinny opened the fridge and rummaged around for some ingredients to make a strawberry daiquiri, one of Cindy's favorites. Surely Bridget would have a liking for the fruity alcoholic beverage as well. Bridget went to use the bathroom but Vinny was not concerned in the least. He had spent nearly an hour cleaning the squalid place of business and the toilet bowl shimmered like a brand new nickel.

As Vinny watched the daiquiri ingredients vortex like a

miniature tornado inside the blender, he had thoughts of taking the blender apart. Perhaps he could configure a really cool weapon with it.

By the time Bridget finished using the bathroom and walked into the kitchen, there were two tall frosty tumblers filled to the brim with strawberry daiquiri sitting on the kitchen table. She didn't know it, but Vinny had overloaded them with rum. The Gadget Man graciously handed her one and he could tell by the look on her face that this was one of her favorites.

"Nice sign above the toilet." She remarked letting out a quick snicker. For a second Vinny forgot what the sign said *Step Closer It's Shorter Than You Think* Then it finally sunk in.

"Well, when guests come over I don't want to have to clean up any more mess than I have to." He replied solemnly. Vinny opened the sliding door in the kitchen which led to a patio where two cozy lawn chairs were set up next to a charcoal grill. Bridget took a sip of her strawberry daiquiri and followed the Gadget Man outside.

It was a beautiful starry night with each star emitting it's own unique scintillation. Stars were like humans. No two stars were completely identical.

Vinny held her beverage while the impeccable Bridget Jones sat down in the comfy lawn chair and neatly ensconced herself until she felt just right. He handed back her beverage and then did the same thing.

"This is just like being at the beach except that the panoramic view is kind of spooky." She whispered.

"Are you referring to the trees? He asked.

"Yeah, there's so many of them. Don't you ever fear wild animals could be hiding amidst them?" She said taking a long gulp of daiquiri.

Vinny slid his lawn chair over closer to hers. "Do you feel safer now?" He said breathing in deeply and taking a whiff of her sweet perfume. He guessed it was Love Spell but he wasn't sure. He wanted to reach out and touch her soft skin which he relished so much. It was so elegant and refined that it wouldn't even matter if she got bigger because more of her might even be a good thing. Other women didn't look good when they put on weight because then their skin got wrinkled and veiny.

The Gadget Man used to hate it when his big fat Aunt Patty used to wear those skimpy dresses revealing her obtrusive veiny legs and grossing him out. Bridget had pants on so he couldn't study her legs but judging by the tenderness of her dewy arms he surmised that the rest of her was without blemish and probably succulent. He mulled over whether or not he should place his hand on her leg. Bridget interrupted his train of thought when she pointed up to the sky excitedly.

"Look, a shooting star!" She said carefully pointing above the trees. Vinny wasn't surprised in the least. He saw stuff like that all the time. Then he suddenly remembered the big surprise he had for her impending.

"Hey, do you want to see something cooler than a shooting star? Do you like fireworks?" He said like an excited little boy.

Bridget took a few more gulps of her daiquiri. The beverage was strong but she knew how to handle her alcohol.

Unfortunately Vinny didn't know this. He predicted she'd be getting drunk pretty soon. She had been in and out of so many relationships that the bar scene had been a big part of her life and it took a lot to get her drunk. She set the daiquiri down on the patio and went for her Marlboro Lights.

"Do you mean like the real deal or the crap they sell at the store?" She seemed enthralled at the idea of real fireworks.

The Gadget Man coughed and chuckled simultaneously at the thought of trying to woo her with the childish crap they sold at the store. He fished in his pocket for his cellphone and then used his shark teeth to pull out the antenna.

"No, I mean the real deal cupcake." He said dialing numbers into the cellphone.

"Who are you calling?" Asked Bridget.

"I'm not calling anybody. Just watch over those trees over there." He said pointing his long sausage finger like Babe Ruth pointing to where he was about to hit his home run.

Bridget sat there feeling all loosey-goosey and entranced. Vinny was just full of all kinds of surprises. A whistling sound erupted from the trees and a tiny fireball flew high up in the sky over the trees then exploded mid air creating a spectacular show. Bridget gaped as the Gadget Man watched the reflection of the fireworks in her pretty blue eyes.

More fireworks launched into the starry night in perfect cadence illuminating the nocturnal skies making a beautiful performance.

Bridget looked over at him with utmost fascination. "How in the world did you do that?" She asked trying to watch Vinny's reaction and the fireworks at the same time. She had never been wooed like this before. This was a date she would never forget.

Vinny took a long sip of his daiquiri feeling its soothing effect. "It's just magic I suppose." He said suddenly debating whether or not this was a good idea. If Bridget knew his capabilities would she be able to link him to the Gadget Man? The story was still hot and all over the news. He wasn't too concerned over the sketch they had on him because it was way off but he didn't want to underestimate Bridget's intelligence.

The 90 second firework show came to an end and they could both smell a sulfuric smell wafting through the air. He looked over towards her lawn chair and noticed her empty beverage setting on the patio adjacent to the chair. Vinny stood up abruptly then almost fell back in his chair from the vertigo.

"Let me make you another drink." He said grabbing her empty tumbler before she could object.

She stayed outside and lit a cigarette while Vinny went in the kitchen to make her a drink. This time he added a little more rum to her drink than last time. The night was just beginning and it was about to get so much more exciting. Perhaps the strawberry daiquiri would turn out to be the perfect aphrodisiac. Vinny stirred the drink once more with a long spoon and then opened the sliding door to the back patio. He almost dropped the daiquiri right on the concrete when he couldn't believe what he saw. The lovely Bridget Jones was lounging on the lawn chair chatting on her cellphone completely oblivious that the Gadget Man was standing

behind her.

"Okay, I love you too. I'll be there soon." She said curtly like she was in a hurry to get off the phone.

Vinny squeezed the strawberry daiquiri in his hand with such tautness that the tumbler shattered and daiquiri oozed all down his hand and onto the concrete patio. Bridget became startled and nearly fell out of her lawn chair. The words "*I love you too*" kept running through the Gadget Man's head. *Did Bridget already have a boyfriend? Had she duped him just to have an entertaining night?* He clenched both of his fists and left over shards of glass cut deep into his palm. He would strangle her with all of his might. Right here on his very own patio. Something momentarily repelled him giving Bridget a chance to explain herself.

"Are you okay?" She asked looking very concerned.

Vinny pulled his shirttail out from his jeans and wrapped his bloody hand in it. "I'm fine. What happened?" He asked in a demanding tone.

Bridget tried to shove the cellphone into her front pocket but struggled a little because her pants were so tight. There was a prominent bulge by the time she squeezed it in.

"It's my mother. She fell down and she's hurt badly. I'm afraid I have to go." She said ruefully looking him over. She admired his perfect stature and wished it didn't have to end like this. The Gadget Man felt relieved but saddened at the same time.

Bridget arose from the comfy lawn chair and gave Vinny a great big bear hug then whispered into his ear. "I had a great

time." She whispered. They stayed embraced for a while and then Vinny lifted his head off her shoulder and did something he hadn't done in a good while. He planted a sloppy kiss right on Bridget's lips and she seemed to enjoy it.

He suddenly pulled back and gazed into her sparkly eyes for a moment and watched them twitch back and forth like she was reading him just like a book. A few more ashtray kisses were exchanged and this time Bridget pulled back.

"Ummm...if we do this much longer I'm not going to be able to leave." She said still clinging to him.

"No, no. It's cool I understand." He said patting her shoulder with his left hand. His right hand was still coiled up into his t-shirt. "Let me at least walk you to your car. Are you sure you're good to drive? Do you want me to come with?"

Bridget lovingly detached his affectionate hand from her shoulder and tugged on the sliding door. "You can follow me sure, but I definitely have to get going."

Vinny followed her like a lost puppy following a convivial stranger. When they reached her Corolla Vinny gladly opened the driver's side door for her. She gave him a peck on the cheek and got in in a hurry.

"When will I see you again?" He said with hope in his eye.

"Oh, I definitely want to see you in my office. Free of charge Mr.Handsome sir." She gave him a flirtatious look then started up the car.

Vinny winked at her then helped her shut the car door. Bridget moved the car quickly down the stony driveway

creating a cloud of dust. The Gadget Man waved to Bridget as numerous thoughts ran through his evil mind. *You're mine now Bridget Jones. I own you and you're the Gadget Man's property now. I love you Bridget, Bridget my psychiatrist.*

CHAPTER 74

The look on Fred Marvison's face showed that he was winning. In fact, the more he smiled the more certain the agents were that he knew something. At least Carter anyways. Paul seemed to have a deadpan look on his face since early morning. It was as if he were lost in another world. Carter deduced that maybe Paul and his mysterious boyfriend were fighting and that's why Paul was acting up. The interrogation room seemed to grow smaller as Carter stared deeply into Fred's feverish hazel eyes while his smile grew bigger.

"So I hear they call you Jake The Snake is that correct?"
Asked Carter.

Fred slithered his pointy tongue and looked at him all wild eyed and crazy. "Yeah, that and other things as well." Said Jake The Snake leaning back in his chair. His long copper red unkempt hair dangled over the back of his chair. A bluish colored adder with two tiny fangs bulged prominently on the inside of his right veiny forearm. These people were here to see him and he knew he had them just where he wanted them. One thing was for sure, he was definitely on top and he was going to come out of this like a champion chess player.

Paul finally piped up and said his first words of the day. "What other things? What other things do they call you?" He

asked inquisitively.

Jake The Snake wanted to raise both his hands towards the ceiling to give some body language with his reply but his hands were cuffed in the back. Instead he just shrugged his shoulders and listed his head to the side.

"They call me Jehovah because I am the chosen one." He said trying to be sincere but it wasn't working.

Carter smashed his fist onto the graffitied wooden table right where someone had scratched a picture of a knife. "We're not in the mood for games Mr.Marvison. We know there's nothing wrong with your head and you shouldn't even be on the psychiatric block."

Jake The Snake's smile vanished and he had a surprised look on his face. *How did they know he was malingering? Wait a minute. They didn't know, they were bluffing. All cops lie.*

The alligator smile quickly returned and the hit man held his ground. "I've got what you want and I told you what my conditions are. Now do we have a deal or not? Oh, and I want it in writing." Said Jake looking all around trying to spot anyone who might be ear hustling.

Carter crossed his arms and glowered at him while waiting for him to finish. Then he picked up a Manila folder and leafed through some papers inside and pulled out what he was looking for. He squinted at the affidavit and then cleared his throat.

"Mr.Marvison, it says here that you're linked to 4 different homicides contiguous across the U.S which unfortunately

only one of them could be fortified against you. You're also a suspect in 10 armed bank robberies. Do you really think the information you have for us is substantial enough for us to let you back out on the streets?" Said Carter squeaking his voice at the end of his question.

Jake The Snake slithered his tongue back and forth while contemplating Carter's question. "Oh I think I do." He said reassuringly, "I know who the Gadget Man is and I know how bad you want him. My conditions will be met Mr.Carter." He said with confidence.

Carter's patience was growing thin and he didn't know how much more he could take. He looked over at Paul who just shrugged his shoulders like he was stumped. Jake The Snake noticed a pack of Eclipse chewing gum sticking out of Paul's shirt pocket and waited for Carter to look back at him with those fallacious eyes of his. Jeez, he was so good at this.

"I'll tell you what you can do for me in the meantime." Said Jake breaking the silence. They both looked at him but said nothing. "The prison doesn't allow us to have chewing gum. I've been craving a piece of chewing gum for the past 6 years."

Paul looked over at Carter who nodded saying it was okay. He reached into his shirt pocket and plucked out several rectangular squares of peppermint chewing gum and plopped them onto the dusty table in front of Jake.

"Here, have several pieces." Said Paul being careful not to touch the dusty vandalized table.

Jake The Snake looked at them both caustically. "Now how

in the world do you expect me to get those into my mouth? My hands are cuffed behind my back." He whined. He felt like he was losing now.

Carter shook his head and raised his eyebrows. "We're certainly not gonna loosen your cuffs. If you want them you're gonna have to bow your head down and pick them up with that snaky tongue of yours....Jake The Snake." Replied Carter. He looked at Paul and they both started laughing. They could be good at this game too.

Jake lowered his head and licked up one piece of gum at a time. The chewing sensation was euphoric. Better than tasting chocolate mousse for the first time.

The agents waited awhile and then Carter finally spoke. "Now we gave you something. Now you give us something."

Jake chewed vigorously like a cow chewing cud. "Ha! I'm not giving you nothing until I see my full pardon in writing."

Carter lost it and leaped over the table and had Jake The Snake in a headlock within seconds. The hit man accidentally swallowed his gum from the startling maneuver. There was nothing he could do but bite down on Carter's arm which he did but the agent didn't seem to notice and kept squeezing. Paul jumped up and tried desperately to pry Carter's relentless headlock apart before he ended up leaving marks and they would both be in trouble.

A guard standing outside the interrogation room heard the clamor and rushed to Jake The Snake's aid but didn't help him in the least bit. Instead he punched Jake in the gut and then kicked him really hard in the shin. It was dirty cop time. It always went down like this.

"You can't do this to me!" Shouted Fred, "I have rights. I want my lawyer!" He demanded.

Carter finally let go of him and raised his hand signaling the guard to stop. The burly guard seemed to still be on a power trip. He pulled Jake The Snake out of his chair by his hair and led him to the door.

"This interview is over. This guy is giving you too much trouble. You'll have to come back at another time." Said the guard pushing Fred towards the door.

Paul and Carter looked at each other dumb founded. "Wait! We're not done with him!" Shouted Carter.

Jake The Snake burst out with laughter as he got escorted out the door. "Show's over you Docker wearing pigs! Jake The Snake wins again. If you want the Gadget Man you will collaborate." He said over his shoulder which he used to scratch his chin.

Their mission had failed. Jake The Snake wanted unreasonable requests. Time was running out.

CHAPTER 75

The ambiance of the crazy block was so serene and somber you wouldn't even know the psychiatric unit contained inmates.

It was only 8pm but all the crackpot inmates were already sound asleep. Evening meds were always administered promptly at 6:30pm every day. The powerful antipsychotic and antidepressant medications had inmates conked out by

8pm almost every night. Everyone was asleep but of course Jake The Snake. He had only taken his meds 4 times in the whole year that he had been on the special block. Usually he slipped his meds under his snaky tongue and even drank water to make it look like it was going down. The nurses were required to do mouth checks but never checked under the tongue.

Jake The Snake walked into his dank cell and sat on the bottom bunk. Nobody lived on the top bunk and for the past 4 months he had managed to keep it that way. Most of the \$1000.00 he received for killing the Catholic priest had been frittered away on commissary. He had only 96 dollars left. But that didn't matter. Soon he would be home Scott free. He had the Feds by the cajones. They had to let him go. The Gadget Man was a very wanted man and there was already a handsome reward for his capture. But would they really let Jake the Snake go in return? He reflected back on some movies he watched that emphasized that the U.S does not negotiate with terrorists. Was this pretty much like the same thing? What if they found the Gadget Man before he got a chance to reveal his name?

Fred squirmed around on his mattress then shoved his hand under the mattress groping for a girly magazine. As he was looking down something conspicuous caught his eye in the shirt pocket of his jumper. He reached in the pocket and pulled out a note. How in the world did it get there?

Jake The Snake quickly unfurled the note and held it out steady just a foot below his copper red goatee shaped like a Brillo pad. The note said:

I know what you're doing you bootlicking rat. Don't make a stupid move. You should be smart enough to know that they

can't and won't help you. If you want out be out in the rec yard by the west gate at precisely 7:30am. Use your head Jake The Snake and don't screw this up.

Fred's mind raced a million miles a second. Who could have stuck this note in his pocket? A clever inmate? One of the federal agents? The ruthless guard? Jake The Snake broke out in a cold sweat mulling over the fact that the Gadget Man might have some kind of inside connection. How else did Vinny know that he was ratting him out? Jake The Snake wasn't known for being a snitch. He had kept all kinds of secrets from the police his entire life. This situation was entirely different. The information he had on the Gadget Man was his only ticket out. One of the first things you learn when you come to prison is you have to look out for number one. Yourself.

Fred walked over to the oblong window to his cell that was maybe 4 inches wide. The clouds looked heavy and it was snowing a little bit. He heard the jangling of keys and then a bustle outside his cell door. The startle made his heart skip a beat and he quickly turned around. Jeez, it was just the guards doing a census count. That meant it must be 9pm.

Jake The Snake decided to celebrate what could be his last night in jail. He grabbed his microwave bowl and emptied two 3.5 oz packets of fish mackerel into it. Then he added some mayo and jalapeno rings and mixed it together with his plastic spork until it looked like a goulash. He then dug out a sleeve of saltine crackers from his locker and splayed individual crackers on the desk making a small assembly. He carefully placed little scoops of the fishy mush on each cracker. He stopped for a second and laughed out loud. He couldn't believe what he was doing. Possibly tomorrow he could be eating steak and lobster.

The food he was preparing was considered a delicacy throughout the prison. Next he grabbed his half-used bottle of Picante sauce and squirted out little dabs on each cracker which gave each treat a little zing.

Jake The Snake popped one of the delicious treats into his mouth and savored the flavor for a while before he finally chewed it up and swallowed it. He knew he wasn't going to be able to sleep tonight so there was no point in even trying. The same thought of his ex-wife ran through his mind over and over. *Sue, Sue, I'm leaving the zoo, and guess what? I'm coming to kill you!*

He relished the rhyme that he repeated over and over in his mind. Tomorrow was going to be so much fun. Get ready people. The Hit Man is coming to town.

CHAPTER 76

"Stay on the sidewalk snitches!" Shouted the correctional officer while laughing at the same time. He tried his best to be the funny man, other correctional officers did it too.

Correctional Officer Carmon really had no idea if all the inmates walking up to breakfast were really staying on the sidewalk or not. The fog was so heavy you could barely see someone standing right in front of you. The prison was always uptight on foggy days and usually kept the compound locked down until the fog cleared. They still had to let prisoners out for meals so they could march up to the chow hall but they kept close watch.

Some of the inmates snickered as they trudged up the slippery sidewalk. The true rats remained silent. They didn't

think Correctional Officer Carmon's joke was that funny.

Jake The Snake blended in with the shivery crowd all the way in the back keeping his head down and keeping pace with the entourage. He looked at his wristwatch which read 7:25am. The inmates continued to pussy foot up the hill towards the chow hall so they could fill their morning appetite then go back to bed. After breakfast the inmates were to report back to their units so a morning fog count could take place. Just as Jake The Snake pushed the indiglo button on his watch to check the time he could hear Correctional Officer Carmon shouting into his radio.

"Man down, man down. All units respond there's a man down on the sidewalk."

The adrenaline rush surged through Jake The Snake's chest like a heart attack. It was show time. The Candy Man had pulled through after all.

The startled inmates halted as they were instructed to as correctional officers came running from every direction. The 350 pound Candy Man laid sprawled out on the sidewalk twitching his arms and legs as if demons were inside him.

The jingling of keys grew louder as correctional officers came running from every direction. It was standard procedure that any time an inmate was down on the ground all personnel had to respond. Even if it was just an inmate having a seizure, and that's exactly what this purportedly was. Jake The Snake had paid the Candy Man 3 bags of Royal Mix hard candy to feign a seizure on his way to breakfast. The Candy Man usually got seizures 3 times a month and it was common amongst other inmates. The sprinting respondents knew it was probably just a false alarm

but they still had to do their job nonetheless.

While a throng of staff employees hovered over the jiggling 350 pound Candy Man Fred slipped into oblivion undetected. *This is so much fun* he thought to himself as he scampered through the fog and into the yard by the west gate. What he was doing was very stupid. If the escape plan didn't work he could catch an out of bounds charge and be placed in solitary confinement, or the SHU, the box, the hole, or even the bucket as the black people called it. It was no big deal to Jake The Snake. The maximum penalty for an out of bounds shot was only two weeks in the SHU which usually resulted to only 4 or 5 days.

Fred traversed away from the sidewalks and trudged through the 7 inches of crunchy snow towards the west gate. It had been foggy almost every day this week but today it was exceptionally foggy for a Saturday morning. Jake The Snake looked around to make sure he wasn't being followed. The coast was clear and he prayed that the Gadget Man's plan would work. No, Jake The Snake never prayed and didn't believe in God. He only hoped that the plan would work. He glanced at his Timex. 7:29am. He crossed his fingers and hoped this wasn't some stupid prank to get him in trouble. In about 30-45 minutes they would do the fog count and figure out he was missing. He felt his stomach start to growl. He never missed breakfast and was missing out on some pretty good flap jacks. Not to mention how cold it was outside.

Jake The Snake inched closer to the fence wondering just how close he was supposed to be. 3 large snowmen the inmates had built seemed to be spying on him.

Fred listened intently expecting maybe to hear a helicopter or an explosion at the fence or even anything. Everything

remained eerily quiet and he could barely see a thing. He looked at his watch again. 7:31am. *No, no, no! Please don't let this be a prank!* All of a sudden way out in the distance he heard a loud thunk sound. Not like a shot gun but maybe a sound of exploding air. The sound was muffled and sounded like it came from far away. A few seconds later he heard a faint thud sound just 20 yards away from him. *What in the world was this?*

He walked over to where he thought he heard something and saw a hole delved in the snow. *What was this? A meteorite?* Jake The Snake reached down and picked up a heavy white rubber ball. He felt lucky to have discovered it because it blended in so well with the snow looking like an ordinary snowball.

Fred carefully inspected the rubber ball which was slightly bigger than the balls they used to play bocce ball. He looked a little closer and noticed suture marks where the rubber ball had once been two halves. When nothing else happened Jake The Snake surmised that the white rubber ball was his ticket out of prison. Perhaps it contained a cellphone so he could get further instructions for an elaborate escape. Maybe even a gun because it was kind of heavy after all.

Jake The Snake looked at the 3 large snowmen and came up with a pretty good idea. Every winter he had always observed that the bottom portion of a snowman was always the last thing to melt away. The grass would turn green but there would always be the bottom sphere to the snowman which always melted last but usually made it to the next storm. He realized the chances of him getting caught trying to sneak back to the unit were very high. It would be hard to smuggle the white rubber ball back to his cell at this particular time because if they caught him being out of

bounds they would surely do a search.

Jake The Snake walked over to the 3 snowmen and picked out the biggest one. The one that was sure to melt last. He tightened his fingers together on his right hand forming a claw and used his hand to dig a hole right in the middle of the bottom sphere to the biggest snowman. *This is such a genius idea* he thought to himself. Then he rammed the white rubber ball directly into the core of the big snowball.

As he patched the hole back up with snow his hand went numb and turned crimson red. In fact just as he was finishing up he couldn't feel his right hand at all. As he was putting on the final touches of frosty the snowman he heard a soft humming sound of a motor and then the soft glow of headlights. Oh no! He had almost forgotten that every 5 minutes a white SUV with a guard on board with a shotgun drives around the outside perimeter of the double razor wired fence.

Jake The Snake quickly ducked behind the snowman and carefully shifted his body to avoid detection as the SUV slowly crept past. He looked at his watch. It was 7:42am. Maybe he had time to run back and make it to breakfast. He patiently waited until he could no longer see the tail lights of the SUV and then he trudged through the snow making his way towards the sidewalks. His hands were still wet and freezing cold and he couldn't even make a fist.

Fred was surprised when he planted his foot on the sidewalk undetected. He stomped his feet hard on the sidewalk knocking off loose snow from his steel tip boots. For some reason every prison required inmates to wear black steel tip boots. He could never understand why.

As he trekked up the sidewalk to the chow hall a rock song was going on inside his head. *Wanna love ya, wanna touch ya, wanna bug ya, stupid girl.* He was having flashbacks of his ex-wife Sue. Sue, *Sue, I'm soon out of the zoo and I'm coming after you!*

Jake The Snake cupped his right hand behind the door handle to the chow hall since his hands were so numb he could not squeeze them yet. He yanked on the door but the door didn't budge. Crap! He had forgotten that on foggy days they keep the doors locked until everyone is done eating and then let them go back to the unit all at once. This was not good. It meant he couldn't even go back to the unit because that would be locked as well. He was stuck on the compound and as of now he was out of bounds.

"Hey! Hey you!" A voice shouted from amidst the fog. Jake turned but saw no one. Then, like an optical illusion, a big burly guard appeared from the fog. It was Correctional Officer Bennings and he was the biggest prick. There was no talking his way out of this one.

Bennings came marching towards him with a shrewd look on his face like he had caught somebody red handed."What ya up to Jake The Snake?" Said Bennings approaching him like a teenage punk that returned his daughter late from a date.

Fred took a step backwards and felt his heel bump into the door."um...I was last one out the door and just stopped to tie my shoes. When I looked up everyone was already locked in the chow hall." Said Fred with guilty written all over his face.

The Correctional Officer let out a boisterous laugh and took a step backward giving him space to breathe. He really didn't care what he was doing but he did definitely want to take him

to the hole. He looked at his watch and laughed some more.

"Yeah, I'll bet. Does it take you 15 minutes to tie your shoes?"

Jake The Snake didn't answer. Bennings pointed his finger down the hill. "Your unit is down there. I could've sworn I saw you coming from that direction." He said pointing to the west gate.

"Um...That wasn't me sir. Must've been somebody else. It's awfully foggy out here." He said crossing his fingers behind his back.

Bennings circled his index finger motioning for him to turn around so he could pat him down. Jake The Snake obeyed and spread his arms out wide like he was trained to do.

"Look, I don't believe your petty story." Said Bennings patting him down, "If you just would've been honest with me I would've unlocked the door for you and you could be eating pancakes." He said digging through his pockets. Jake The Snake was clean but the Correctional Officer reached for his handcuffs anyway. "You're out of bounds so I'm taking you to the SHU. You've been there plenty of times so you know the drill."

Jake The Snake slowly lowered his hands and placed them behind his back. The SHU was no threat to him. It was basically a Bed And Breakfast. As the Correctional Officer dragged him by the elbow up the hill towards the Special Housing Unit Jake The Snake giggled to himself. This was no big deal. He'd be out of the SHU in 5 days and then he'd escape from prison. *Sue, Sue, it's just me and you. Can you guess what I'm gonna do?*

CHAPTER 77

5 days felt like 5 years as Jake The Snake poured the sugary concoction of sugar packets and toothpaste onto the sandblasted window. The criminals were always one step ahead weren't they? Most of the cell windows in SHU were sandblasted so inmates couldn't see out of them but someone had developed a special potion that seemed to solve the problem.

As the sun baked through the sugary crystals smeared on the window making it transparent Jake The Snake gaped in disappointment. He could see the green grass and most of the snow had melted. He placed his palm against the 4 inch wide window and felt an icy chill. This was good news. It was still very cold outside. Hopefully the snowmen hasn't melted completely.

The inmates in the SHU weren't allowed to wear wristwatches but Jake The Snake guessed it was about 9am. The morning meds were always disbursed at 8:30am and it felt like a good half hour had gone by since he'd flushed his meds down the toilet. Any minute the guards should be pounding on his cell door telling him to pack up and get ready to go back out into the general population.

Suddenly he heard a faint scratching sound on the floor and he quickly turned around. Lying just inside the cell door was a 3x3" piece of floor tile attached to a micro thin piece of unravelled thread from a bed sheet. Things like this happen all the time. This was how other inmates passed around notes, magazines, or even contraband. They would carefully unravel thread from their bed sheets and then tie it to a piece of floor tile that they had kicked up from the floor. Then they

would kick the piece of floor tile under their cell door to another cell door across the hall. If the prison didn't have tiled floors they would use the tiny soap bars that you find at hotels.

Fred walked over to the door of his cell and pressed his fiendish face against the bulletproof glass window. Across the hallway looking at him with Kermit The Frog eyes was a big bald headed Muslim with an unkempt beard nearly a foot long. The Muslim gave him a thumbs up from behind the glass and Jake The Snake knew what to do. He picked up the piece of floor tile and gradually pulled on the line watching it grow thicker and thicker. A People magazine slid through the door as Jake The Snake pulled the remainder of the line like he was pulling in a fish from a pond.

Jake The Snake returned the thumbs up to the Muslim guy then took a seat on the bunk bed with a mattress full of crumbs and other food particles. Unless they wanted to eat their meals on the floor, the bunk bed was basically the dinner table.

Fred's face lit up when he saw the front page of the magazine. There was a poorly drawn sketch of the Gadget Man and a three hundred thousand dollar reward for information leading to his capture. Wow! The Feds must want him pretty bad! Unfortunately inmates were not allowed to earn commission while incarcerated so he could never collect the three hundred thousand bucks. Besides, Jake The Snake wanted out of jail altogether.

Fred quickly rifled through the People magazine looking for the story about the Gadget Man when he was startled by the pounding on his cell door.

"What are you doing in there?" Shouted a Correctional Officer, "Looking at those girly magazines?"

Jake The Snake stood up from the bed like a private would in the ARMY. An exhilarating rush surged through his stoic body.

"Am I going back out onto the compound?" He asked excitedly.

The Correctional Officer looked down at a clipboard. "Yeah you pinhead. Pack your stuff. Hurry up lets go."

The Correctional Officer walked away and Fred knew he'd be back in 5 minutes. Obviously there wasn't much for him to pack up because the BOP (Bureau Of Prisons) only allowed SHU inmates to have books, magazines, a few commissary items, and hygiene products.

Jake The Snake packed his few personal items into an empty pillow case then included a 3 page article about the Gadget Man that he ripped out of the People magazine. He stood impatiently behind the cell door holding the sack over his shoulder like Santa Clause. They weren't allowed hot water in the SHU so he was having a caffeine fit. As soon as he would get back to the unit the first order of business would be making a hot cup of instant coffee. Jake The Snake felt his snaky tongue whirligig around his lips. He could already taste the Maxwell House.

CHAPTER 78

The hairy plan had turned out well. The 4 pound white rubber ball was unlike any Christmas present Jake The Snake had ever received in his life. Fred had no problems

retrieving the white rubber ball from the what was left of the snowman and smuggling it back to the unit.

It was 9pm and he patiently waited for the nosy guards to make their rounds so he could cut the ball open with the razor blade he extracted from a shaving razor. He had the dank cell all to himself as always but at least it wasn't freezing cold like the cells in the SHU. The second Correctional Officer that passed was the slick one that Fred always had to watch out for because he always held his keys so they wouldn't jingle alerting inmates that a Correctional Officer was coming.

When the coast looked clear Jake The Snake unveiled the heaping bed sheets on his mattress and got to work on the rubber ball with the razor blade. It seemed to be as easy as cutting a tomato.

The first thing he saw was bubble wrap so he knew the contents inside had to be important. Fred carefully unwound the bubble wrap and a 9mm Glock and a cellphone plopped onto the bed. Jake The Snake unfurled the bubble wrap a little more and an extra magazine clip of ammo and a piece of paper with a phone number also plopped onto the mattress. *So was this his ticket out of jail?* He was hoping for something that would require a little less effort on his part. Maybe a helicopter with armed men that had UZIs and grenade launchers to help him escape but this seemed like an arduous task.

Fred laughed out loud when he suddenly realized that this was the Gadget Man's scheme and not some undereducated bumpkin. The Gadget Man had proved to be a perfectionist and his master plan would surely pull through.

Jake The Snake picked up the cellphone and dialed the numbers on the piece of paper. When he had entered half of the numbers he suddenly snapped the phone shut. *No, not yet. It wasn't time to call the Gadget Man just yet. There was someone more important to call first wasn't there? Of course there was.*

Jake The Snake flipped open the cellphone and punched in some numbers he knew by heart. He had tried to make this call numerous times in prison from the phones the inmates were permitted to use and were carefully monitored but the recipient would never accept the call. Fred could still hear the little bionic woman's voice that lived inside the telephone echo in the back of his mind. *This call is from prison. To accept the call dial 5. To reject this call dial 77.* His heart would fill with rage when he would hear the two beeps of 7 being pushed into the phone. Just a 60 second call was all he ever wanted from her.

Jake The Snake pressed the cellphone against his filthy ear listening to the dial tone. After 5 rings a woman's sluggish voice finally answered the phone. "Hello?"

Fred suddenly became paralyzed with fear. He tried to open his mouth but the words just wouldn't come out.

Sue you sound so great Suzie loo. Can you guess all the bad things I want to do to you? You sound like I woke you up. Maybe you should get some sleep Suzie Sue. Sweet dreams Suzie loo.

"Hello...Hello...Is somebody there?" Said Sue both annoyed and spooked. Fred couldn't believe he was being such a pantywaist. He had the gumption to walk up to the warden one day and tell him what an arrogant prick he was but when it came to talking to his ex-wife he was totally

speechless.

"Who is this? Is this some kind of joke?" She said in a valorous voice.

Jake The Snake remained silent enjoying the petulance in her voice. He dropped the cellphone right on the mattress when a loud whistling sound nearly deafened his right ear. *Ouch! Man did that really hurt!* He thought to himself rubbing his ear. When he picked the cellphone back up all he heard was a dial tone. Evidently Suzie Sue had hung up. He rummaged through the heap of bed sheets looking for the piece of paper with what was probably the Gadget Man's phone number.

We're just full of games aren't we Suzie? Wait until you see the fun I'm going to have with you!

CHAPTER 79

The phone number did turn out to belong to the Gadget Man. When Jake The Snake first dialed the number an operator came on and said the number had been disconnected. That's when he knew the number had to have been written in some kind of code. He entered the digits in backwards and wallah! Jake The Snake was connected to the notorious Gadget Man. They spent most of the night going over every detail of the elaborate scheme to bust Fred loose. The Gadget Man. The perfectionist.

It was very close to 10am. The overly medicated, demented, inmates were already drinking their stale coffee and walking around in circles like Zombies. Jake The Snake wanted to say goodbye to the few friends he had but he knew that wasn't a good idea. When it really came down to it, everyone

was a rat, even the hardcore gangsters who complained about snitches the most.

Any minute Miss Peabody the prison psychiatrist would arrive on the block to do her weekly check ups on the feeble minded inmates. Boy did he have a big surprise for her!

Miss Peabody was an attractive woman in her early 40's with a taut body of an avid Olympic swimmer. She had the looks and she knew it. She was always dressing too provocative and flaunting her body to taunt the inmates. Her long silky ebony hair made her look absolutely stunning.

When Miss Peabody arrived on the pill block at precisely 10am inmates crowded around her like a swarm of bees with their frivolous questions that they could probably answer themselves. She looked garish as usual wearing a hennaed pantsuit made of possibly leather that clung to her body like suction cups.

Miss Peabody seemed to be in a foul mood and rolled her eyes at the stupid questions the nutcases were asking probably only hanging around to catch a whiff of her sweet perfume.

Jake The Snake stood aloof groping the 9mm in his pocket watching Miss Peabody as she managed to shoo away the inmates and unlock her office door. This was going to be so much fun. Her bad day was about to go from zero to sixty in a nanosecond.

The crowd tapered off as she allowed one inmate to enter her office and sit in the comfy swivel chair to get some free therapy. The inmate sitting in the swivel chair was a newbie and Fred surmised he was probably telling the psychiatrist

his life story about how his father used to make him stand in the corner while he tossed beer cans at him. Inmates fabricated stories all the time. Anything they could conjure off the top of their head to hopefully get the 5k2.0. A downward departure. Only stupid people went to jail. Smart people went to hospitals where they could gawk at pretty nurses all day and didn't have to work. Whatever stupid story they could come up with. Monkeys with wings. Pink flying elephants. Brass bells that clanged incessantly in their head. Psychiatrists soaked that stuff up like a gullible jury.

Fred smacked the side of his head realizing that he had to snap out of his reverie and get down to business. Without the slightest rue Jake The Snake pranced into Miss Peabody's office and fired twice lodging two bullets into the inmate's chest. The inmate's head dropped down abruptly like he was bowing his head to pray. Miss Peabody gaped in horror and covered her hands with her mouth as rivulets of dark blood trickled all over the freshly buffed tiled floor.

Jake The Snake wasted no time digesting the shooting and walked with audacity towards Miss Peabody and grabbed her by the hair pulling her up from the chair. Fred's left arm squeezed tightly onto a fistful of Miss Peabody's long ebony hair as he quickly led her out of the office while jamming the cold barrel of the 9mm into the side of her neck.

The Correctional Officer that was on duty hid under a desk in the office like a coward.

"Ouch! Somebody please help me! Get this man off me" Screamed Miss Peabody. Jake The Snake dragged her across the compound by the hair and headed towards the main gate.

Ironically none of the underpaid Correctional Officers wanted to be Heroes and most of them found a place to hide. Jake The Snake kept the gun rammed into the side of Miss Peabody's neck as they trotted towards the main gate.

As they were running Jake saw his shadow in front of him slowly grow longer. He knew what was happening. As he quickly glanced behind him a big brawny African inmate was in mid air closing in for the tackle. Miss Peabody was his wannabe girlfriend whom he enjoyed flirting with every day. Jake The Snake was not going to take his secret crush away from him right out from under his nose.

Fred spun around fast and put two in the inmate's chest. Miss Peabody's secret lover dropped to the ground cursing as he went down. Jake The Snake was flabbergasted when he witnessed the short red headed lieutenant quickly unlock the front gates and then run away. *Was it really going to be this easy? Were all the haughty guards really just a bunch of wussies?*

Inmates that did acts of heroism could get some time knocked off their sentence so he wasn't surprised that desperate inmates might try to intervene. Jake The Snake laughed out loud when he had no problem waltzing through the front gates and noticed that the control room was completely empty. Maybe these people weren't so tough when you put them on stage.

When Jake The Snake made it out to the parking lot Miss Peabody was still screaming. He loosened his grip on the fistful of her hair he was holding and hoped she would shut up a little. An old familiar sound that he recognized from prison escape movies infiltrated the air. The piercing sound of the alarm was almost deafening. He wanted to cover his

sensitive ears but he obviously couldn't. The snipers in the control tower would shoot him for sure if the muzzle moved even a couple inches from Miss Peabody's neck.

"Where's your car? Where's your stupid ride sister?" He yanked her head up so she could see where she was going. Miss Peabody pointed to a black BMW M3 freshly waxed and shimmering in the sunlight.

"Unlock it on our way over," He said, "Come on let's move!"

The pain in her scalp throbbed in excruciating pain as she fished in her tight leather left pocket for her keys as Jake The Snake continued yanking her hair and leading her towards the BMW. Miss Peabody pushed the unlock button on the key chain remote and the yellow turn signal lights flashed making the BMW prominent amidst the other showy sports cars. When they got to the driver's side door he ordered her to open it then plopped down in the driver's seat without taking his left hand off her hair and his right hand pinning the gun to her neck.

Fred pulled Miss Peabody onto his lap and waited until she shut the door before he slid into the passenger's seat. When he looked up he saw lots of black-and-whites speeding down the thoroughfare coming in towards his direction with wailing sirens. Fortunately Miss Peabody's zippy car had tinted windows which would help him out tremendously.

Jake The Snake looked up at the control towers which consisted of uniformed figures all pointing rifles right at him. The pigs were closing in on him and it was about to get ugly. *Show time* He thought to himself, *I love it when it's show time.*

CHAPTER 80

The cold muzzle of the 9mm being pushed into the side of her neck felt like an icicle. Miss Peabody duteously raced towards the impromptu barricade the police had set up at 60mph. Wow! The car salesman was right. The BMW M3 really could do 0-60 in 4.3 seconds. She let off the accelerator for a second but Jake The Snake pushed the gun harder into her neck.

"Don't let off the gas. Speed it up a little sister." Said Jake The Snake all wild eyed and crazy. He hasn't felt a rush like this since he broke into his ex-wife's apartment to try to kill her. Unfortunately the police were waiting for him and that's how he got apprehended.

Miss Peabody closed her eyes and pushed down on the accelerator. *Jeez, this was sheer madness. This was suicide!* The black top parking lot was now behind them as they sped down the gravel road at 65mph headed towards two unoccupied cruisers parked in a V-formation blocking off the road. Several uniforms took refuge behind the cruisers with their guns drawn ready for just about anything. Miss Peabody said a silent prayer as she aimed the hood ornament into the niche of the adjoining police cars. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she visualized her \$65,000.00 car get smashed to pieces.

When they were just 18 yards away, as soon as Jake The Snake saw the cops jump out of the way he shouted at the top of his voice. "Brake!" He commanded.

Miss Peabody slammed on her brakes with all of her might creating an enormous dust storm making them almost invisible. The BMW stopped unscathed just inches from the

crotch of the barricade. The wheezing officers choked and coughed on the billowy cloud of dust they had created. There was so much dust from the 15 yard skid That the police couldn't even see their own vehicles.

A gust of wind passed through and eroded the dust storm and every single officer gaped at what they saw. The two cruisers had been pushed aside creating a hole just big enough for the escapees to worm their way through. An angry officer pushed the talk button on his hand-talkie radio.

"All units respond. We do not have the subjects. Subjects somehow managed to coalesce into the barricade and push their way through right before our very eyes!"

Officers jumped into the cruisers and joined in on the chase peeling out in the gravel creating dust storms of their own.

Jake The Snake laughed out loud as he prompted the distraught spinster Miss Peabody to kick it into 6th gear once they reached the highway. He knew a lot about cars and was well aware that the BMW M3 could do 160mph without a problem. They had a pretty good head start but he knew it was almost impossible to beat the radio.

The BMW whizzed past poky cars on I-92 until two tractor trailers traveling side by side forced them to slow down.

Jake The Snake turned around and saw an enormous motorcade of black-and-whites flashing their bubble gum lights. *Improvise, improvise, improvise!* He thought to himself. He glanced at the grassy side of the highway which was littered with broken bottles, blown out tires, diapers, and God only knew what else. If they tried to drive around the tractor trailers through the grass they'd blow a tire out for

sure.

A miraculous spectacle happened and the two dusty tractor trailers drifted off to the side leaving an opening in the middle like Moses parting the Red Sea.

"Step on it sister!" Shouted Jake The Snake practically spitting into Miss Peabody's ear. She quickly down shifted to give the car more power to slither through the gap before it would close.

The sudden jolt of increasing speed caused Fred's neck to whip back into the head rest like taking off in an airplane. The sound of screeching metal pierced the air like a train slamming on it's brakes.

Jake The Snake's window shattered scaring the spaghetties out of him as the walls of the trailers closed in on them wedging them like a sandwich.

Fred watched awestruck as the needle on the speed odometer quickly descended. He quickly groped around in his pocket fumbling with the cellphone and pushed the send button. While he listened to the ring tone he looked up and noticed a helicopter looming overhead. It was time for the great scheme. It was time to call the Gadget Man.

The phone was answered on the third ring and Jake The Snake was greeted by the sound of munching popcorn. The munching sound grew louder and Fred could also make out a slurping sound of what sounded like beer being consumed. Vinny had still not yet spoken into the phone.

"Hey it's me Jake The Snake. What the heck is going on? You sound like you're sitting down watching a movie?"

There was a sinister laugh into the phone and Jake The Snake felt his stomach drop and bile rise into his throat. Something just didn't seem right about the Gadget Man.

"In a sense I am watching a movie you crazy fool. I'm sitting here watching you on television!"

The adjoining tractor trailers slowed down simultaneously and came to a complete stop leaving the BMW wedged in like sardines. Everything was starting to look helter-skelter as numerous police vehicles surrounded the scene. There was more creepy laughter into the phone and Jake The Snake squeezed the Motorola with all of his might. *Why was the Gadget Man laughing at him? What was the next part of the plan?*

"So what do I do now?" Asked Jake The Snake, "I'm kind of jammed up."

"Oh yes I see that." Replied Vinny watching them live on television from an aerial view probably from the helicopter looming over them. "It looks like they got you pinned in there pretty good. Hey, guess what? Right now the whole world is watching you and in about 20 seconds they're going to find out what happens to rats." The Gadget Man let out his grisly Dr.Evil laugh. "Goodbye Jake The Snake." He said and hung up the phone.

Fear surged through Jake The Snake as he put down the phone. He watched Miss Peabody break out in a cold sweat and shake convulsively like she just shot somebody.

"We gotta get out of here now or we'll get blown to smithereens!" Said Fred pushing on his passenger door. The

door wouldn't budge and the side of the dusty trailer seemed to be laughing in his face. They were trapped and soon millions of viewers watching their tube would see them get blown up.

"What's going on? What's happening?" Pleaded Miss Peabody starting to cry.

Jake The Snake didn't answer but looked up instead. Hallelujah! Miss Peabody's BMW was equipped with a sunroof. "Open the sunroof!" He shouted, "Open the bloody sunroof."

Miss Peabody hastily pushed down on the button that opened the sunroof. The seconds it took to open felt like hours as Jake The Snake impatiently waited for the glass panel to slide open. He surmised that he had about 13 seconds left. Jake The Snake slapped his muddy boot onto the console and poking his gun out first hoisted himself through the sunroof.

The Gadget Man laughed uncontrollably when he watched Jake The Snake get stuck in the sunroof like Santa Clause getting stuck in a chimney. This was rich. This moment was priceless. He was surprised the police didn't shoot him down right then and there.

Miss Peabody pushed on Fred's buttocks as hard as she could trying to squeeze the hit man's potbelly through the sunroof. A shot rang out nipping Fred's right shoulder and he plopped himself back into the BMW. Jake The Snake screamed in pain holding the wound then feeling traumatized when he saw the blood on his hand.

Miss Peabody looked at him with despair in her imploring

hazel eyes. "Please, we don't have much time. I can make it through the sunroof. There's no reason for us both to die." She said letting the tears run down her face.

Jake The Snake said nothing and beat his fist into the roof in frustration. They probably only had another 8 seconds. Miss Peabody continued on. "Please! I have children. Don't do this!"

Jake The Snake managed to snort out a laugh despite their predicament. "You don't have children! I know everything about you!"

Miss Peabody looked shocked that Fred knew all about her. Then she recanted. "Fine, maybe I don't. Screw it. We'll both die if that's what you want." She said crossing her arms as a matter-of-factly. Miss Peabody's form of ruse actually worked and Jake The Snake placed the 9mm on the dashboard.

"Make sure you tell my mother about this. She'll be proud." He said helping Miss Peabody slide through the sunroof.

"I will. I promise." She said pulling her other leg through and getting her bearings. As she stepped onto the trunk and onto the ground she heard a loud hissing sound from underneath the BMW like air leaking out from a tire.

Miss Peabody ran between the two tractor trailers and out of harms way when she heard someone call out to her.

"Wait!" Shouted a voice.

She turned around and saw Fred's head poking out of the sunroof. "The Gadget Man, his name is...."

The ear splitting sound was unlike any explosion Miss Peabody had ever witnessed in her life. It all seemed to happen so fast. Nothing like the way it did in the movies. A huge explosion erupted from underneath the BMW creating an enormous fireball causing the BMW to levitate as shrapnel and debris scattered everywhere. The blast was so big it bore a hole into the sides of both the tractor trailers.

Miss Peabody felt a wave of heat from the deadly explosion but made it to safety just in time. There was no doubt about it. The hit man was a goner and probably no one would miss him. Except of course his mother.

Paramedics rushed to Miss Peabody wrapping a blanket around her and swiftly escorting her inside an ambulance to check for internal bleeding. She insisted that she was okay. After signing a refusal to get checked out even further, Miss Peabody demanded a phone call. She was not impressed at all with the way the guards at the prison dealt with Jake The Snake's daring escape. A lot of them were going to lose their jobs. And how did Fred get a gun in the first place?

There was a loud but courteous knock from outside the ambulance doors. A disheveled paramedic opened the door and Miss Peabody saw a short brawny man with blond curly hair and a skinny fellow that had characteristics of a metrosexual. The dressy agents flashed badges and the handsome curly haired man spoke first.

"Miss Peabody, I'm special agent Carter and this is detective Newman. Would it be okay if we asked you a few questions?"

CHAPTER 81

The only one who seemed to be watching was the man on the moon. Vinny occasionally believed that there was a man on the moon watching him but tonight he didn't care and besides the moon was thousands of miles away. The man in the moon could stare at him all night long for all he cared.

The Gadget Man cruised his Tacoma truck along while playing his favorite Michael Jackson song "Smooth Criminal". Gary Bowman's tidy bungalow seemed to be isolated compared to the homes flanking the forlorn narrow street. A child's big wheeler sat in the front lawn covered in Power Ranger stickers.

Before getting out of the truck Vinny glanced at his watch. It was 3am and he just wanted to do what he had to do and then go home and get some sleep. He had spent nearly an hour on the phone earlier with Bridget doing the late night pillow talk thing.

All the lights in Gary Bowman's home were out and that was a good thing. Vinny expected that and knew the vainglorious prison guard had to be at work by 7am. The Gadget Man did his homework. He even knew about his son Evan and that explained the big wheeler in the yard. Evan lived with Gary's ex-wife Linda but Gary got to have his little buddy stay with him every other weekend.

Vinny cut the smooth quiet engine and took a moment to assimilate the plan. Dressed like a cat burglar, and reeking of cigarette smoke, Vinny held the keys two inches from his face and smiled with delight. Jeez, he was getting good at this. The keys remained stagnant not making the slightest jingle and Vinny was impressed that the shaky hand syndrome was gone. Not only that but his heart rate was normal and not racing like an Irish race horse.

Coalescing with the darkness in his complete black attire, Vinny skittered alongside the truck and reached in the back and pulled out his tools. The huge duffel bag looked like something a hockey player would be lugging around. The heavy end abutted the ground as Vinny set foot on Gary Bowman's property.

A bright sensor light turned on and nearly blinded him. Vinny quickly dropped the duffel bag and raced directly towards the sensor light as fast as he could. Wearing black leather gloves, he carefully unscrewed the bulb until it went out. He surmised that the sensor light had only been shining for maybe 10 seconds before he tended to it. *Get in and get out,* He thought to himself, *Gotta do what the dice say.*

The Gadget Man went for his trusty screw driver and dexterously removed the screws from Gary Bowman's doorbell. When he completely removed the doorbell all that was left was two wires in a spacious socket. Doorbells were not nearly as sophisticated as people thought. When you push a button to a doorbell all you're basically doing is completing a circuit.

Vinny rummaged through his duffel bag until he found an exact duplicate of the doorbell he just removed. Except of course the doorbell he was about to install had been modified and had a Bravo pager attached to it making it possible for the doorbell to ring without the button being pushed. The whole booby trap idea was a crapshoot but if it panned out just right law enforcers would talk about it for all the years to come.

Within minutes the new duplicate doorbell was installed and it was time for the hard part. The hole in the ground. Terra

Firma.

Vinny reached in the bag and pulled out a battery operated drill the size of a jackhammer. The enormous quiet drill had a 3.5 foot spiraled screw that dug holes in the ground with accurate precision. The Gadget Man positioned himself roughly 10 feet away from the front door of the bungalow and began drilling a hole in the grass setting the drill on the slowest speed to make less noise. By the time he was finished he was standing before a 3.5ft symmetrical hole 5 inches in diameter. It felt like someone was patting him on the back as Vinny took a brief few seconds to admire his handy work. The perfectly bore hole looked just like a hole on a golf course other than of course it was a lot deeper.

The Gadget Man frantically pulled on the 3.5ft homemade metal object that had scales running down the side and a piece of sod exactly 5 inches in diameter at the top. Vinny positioned the front face of the object facing the front door and carefully shoved the device into the ground. Next he pulled a black trash bag from his duffel bag and gathered up all the loose dirt and rocks from the digging of the hole.

By the time it was all said and done it was nearly impossible to tell that something was lurking inside the ground. The piece of sod on top of the device blended in perfectly with the rest of the yard.

Vinny packed all his tools into the duffel bag along with the trash bag full of small rocks and dirt. Moving quickly like a stray cat, he loped back to the Tacoma and tossed the duffel bag into the back of the truck.

When he had the truck in gear and was about to let off the brake he suddenly remembered something. Shoot! He

almost made a costly mistake.

Vinny jumped out of the truck and ran towards the sensor light. As he screwed the bulb tight again he thought to himself. *Maybe, just maybe, I'm becoming a professional.*

CHAPTER 82

Santa Clause ambled through the squalid neighborhood of the Rain Gate projects in Baltimore carrying Christmas presents and whistling the tune to Jingle Bells. It was the night before Christmas and the Yule-tide air couldn't have been more crisp.

The Gadget Man ho-ho-hoed to himself when the voices reminded him what a naughty Santa Clause he was. The Santa Clause outfit he had on was surprisingly comfortable and kept him warm.

It was 1am and Rain Gate projects seemed to be deserted except for a few stray cats tipping over garbage cans. Vinny guessed that most of the Christmas lawn ornaments were probably stolen from upper class homes. Evidently the outdated Christmas lights the residents had wrapped around the stanchions on their porch were probably not stolen.

It was almost as if he had every right to be there as Vinny clambered up the steps of Tyrone's apartment and fished around in his furry pocket for his plastic loid. All the lights in the two story complex were out except for the soft glow of the Christmas tree in the living room. This was good, good, good.

As Vinny picked the lock without any difficulty a Christmas poem ruminated in his head. *Twas the night before*

Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except for of course the notorious Gadget Man. "Ho-ho-ho..." He muttered under his breath. He gingerly stepped through the front door and looked around. It was eerily quiet except for the gurgling sound from the fish tank and a pricey 56" Sony television running a demo of a football video game in the next room.

Vinny pushed the start button on his wristwatch. In 5 minutes he would be in and out. He briskly walked over to the 7ft Christmas tree in the corner which was radiant and glowing. He almost laughed out loud when he saw the vent in the wall just 3" inches from the star mounted on the top of the pine tree. The chintzy blue light special Christmas lights wrapped around the tree was going to make his evil plan more plausible.

The Gadget Man wasted no time snooping around looking for cookies and milk. He placed the two presents on the ground under the tree and reached in his furry pocket and pulled out his leatherman pocket knife. Vinny used the pocket knife to cut tiny subtle slits manipulating the cheesy Christmas lights making them faulty. A further investigation might confirm cheap Christmas lights as the start of the fire.

After tweaking the wiring just a tad, but not too much to make it look intentional, Vinny popped the top of one of the presents he brought in. Inside the box was a towel and a sponge. He grabbed the sponge and sponged out all of the water underneath the tree in the water basin and squeezed the sponge over the carpet releasing water onto the carpet. It didn't matter. There wasn't too much water in the basin to extract. The red basin was mottled from deterioration and the circular bracket inside it supporting the trunk of the tree was rusty.

Vinny took the towel and wiped dry the inside of the basin. He looked at his wristwatch. One minute and 45 seconds had passed. Vinny swirled the towel around the trunk of the tree one last time until the inside of the basin appeared to be bone dry. He tossed the towel and sponge back into his box and replaced the top lid which had a red bow on top.

The Gadget Man looked up for a split second feeling almost as if someone was staring right at him. He jerked his head to the right and saw a big black man with a shaved head and a chin-strap beard staring right at him. A shiver ran down his spine but he took comfort in knowing the man leering at him could not hurt him. The trio in the family picture on the wall looked so incomplete to Vinny. Tyrone stood behind his mother and sister like a giant grizzly bear with a hand on each one of their shoulders.

The Gadget Man took a quick break to check out the fatherless photo. Even though ten years had elapsed, Vinny knew the big guy in the picture was Tyrone from the glazed look in his eyes. *Jeez Tyrone, you're always getting stoned aren't you? Not a day that goes by that you don't get high. It's been that way since 7th grade hasn't it?*

There was a bustling sound from upstairs and Vinny froze not moving an inch. He groped the 9mm in his Santa costume while a million thoughts entered his mind all at once. There was more clatter coming from upstairs but he was quickly relieved when he heard the sound of water running through pipes. No big deal. Probably just someone that drank too much eggnog using the bathroom. He looked at his watch and noticed that four minutes had passed. No way to make the five minute deadline. That was just too bad. He was definitely going to finish the job.

The Gadget Man started to feel sweat transpire on his chest and armpits from wearing the wooly Santa Clause suit. When it got quiet again Vinny immediately returned to his project. He plopped the top off of the other package and pulled out a bottle of pure grain alcohol. He wanted to use gasoline but gasoline could leave traces and this had to look like an accident.

He unscrewed the cap then poured the alcohol into the basin supporting the tree. This was outright genius. Christmas trees caught on fire all the time from faulty Christmas lights. This incident would get written off as an accident real quick.

Vinny emptied the entire bottle into the basin then threw the empty bottle back into the neatly wrapped box. Next he pulled out a candle that had a hole drilled into it near the bottom. Because Tyrone was such a pothead, there was already a lot of candles encompassing the living room. This was good, good, good. Nobody would notice the extra candle he planted on the window sill especially since he removed the one that was already there.

The Gadget Man pulled out a 12ft cord of toilet paper that had been meticulously twisted together making it look like a long piece of string. He bunched up the string of toilet paper and dropped it onto the basin submerging it in grain alcohol. He left one end in the basin and pulled out the other end of the string of toilet paper once more making it pointy and slid it into the hole drilled into the candle. The line fit in snugly and stayed in place.

Vinny put the lids back on top of the packages he brought in and hoisted the boxes up to waist level. He looked at his watch which told him 7 minutes had passed. He had already

broken one of his rules but he knew that kooks who consistently abide in their own rules always ended up getting caught. Vinny lit the candle with a bic lighter he had in his pocket and then walked out the front door.

At approximately 7am Tyrone's apartment would go up in flames. Vinny knew this because he was the Gadget Man.

CHAPTER 83

Car horns were blaring the jingle bells tune and angry motorists were shaking their fists in the air at the blockade looming up ahead.

A green Toyota Tacoma pick up truck was parked catty-cornered right in the middle of the Franklin Bridge with its 4-way lights flashing and blocking traffic for nearly a mile. It was 6am on Christmas Day and the chilly air in Philadelphia made a cup of hot chocolate taste 10 times better.

"Why don't you go home and open presents you idiot?" Shouted an angry motorist trying to make it home before his kids awakened Christmas morning.

"Maybe he doesn't have a family." Chided another motorist.

Vinny ignored the insults and clung to the cup of hot chocolate like it was a newborn baby. He could already hear a helicopter flying overhead. It was only 29 degrees and maybe a little cooler with the wind chill and Vinny looked like a moron leaning against the other side of the guard rail wearing only his boxer shorts and a homemade pair of angel wings.

"If you're gonna jump then jump! Some of us have families to

get to." Shouted a woman who really didn't care. Nobody really realized it but the kooky suicide jumper dressed in angel wings was in the process of creating the perfect alibi.

"He's not going to do it. He just wants to be on television." Shouted a teenager boy sitting in the back seat of his folks minivan.

Everything was going according to as planned. Vinny had driven from Baltimore to Philadelphia in just a few hours and even had time to dispose of the evidence left over from the job he pulled at Tyrone's house. Even the Santa Clause suit had been stuffed into a black trash bag and tossed into a dumpster. If he took one step forward he'd be a goner for sure and it might take them a while to find his body in the river.

The Gadget Man had no intentions of jumping off the bridge but he was hoping the police would soon show up so he could warm up in the back of a police car. He didn't have much hot chocolate left in his styrofoam cup and his bare feet had gone numb from the cold. His teeth clattered incessantly and he accidentally bit his tongue a few times.

Vinny glanced at his wristwatch which read 6:10am. In 20 minutes things were about to get interesting. A few skimpy vehicles managed to muscle their way around Vinny's truck and cross the bridge. But now all traffic was blocked because a tractor trailer needed to get through and obviously couldn't.

Vinny heard the chirping sound of a siren being turned on then quickly shut off. He turned around and watched a portly black man getting out of a cop car and carrying a megaphone. The retired looking cop looked concerned and

couldn't believe what he was seeing. A few news vans pulled up and began filming. Vinny was already on live television if anyone was really watching.

A crackling sound of static blasted from the megaphone and a weary voice came over the speaker. "Hey man, what gives? We're all here watching you. Do you want a coat or something?" Said the cop unzipping his coat and taking a few steps forward.

"Don't get close to me! I'll jump!" Warned Vinny. He had to play this out at least a little bit.

The big man droned on. "What's bugging you playa? Got nowhere to go on Christmas? Ain't nobody gonna make you do anything you don't wanna do." Said the cop inching his way a little closer and pulling his droopy drawers higher around his 48" inch waist.

"Don't think I don't know what you're doing." Protested Vinny, "I'll jump!"

The clever cop did a good job of covering up his impatience. He tried hitting it at a different angle. "Do you know why I'm working this Christmas morning, do you?"

Vinny didn't answer but he was listening. The cop continued to inch his way forward like a snail. Angry motorists were still honking their horns and shouting out their windows.

"Why don't you jump? You got wings." Shouted a man in a black Mercedes Benz. The cop ignored the motorist and continued talking.

"I've got no family to celebrate Christmas with. My wife and

kids died in a terrible car crash when they got hit by a drunk driver last year." Lied the cop hoping his ruse would work. "But I still press on. You got to man. Think of the people that will miss you if you're gone."

The officer carefully placed the megaphone on the ground and took a few steps closer with both of his hands out. Steam seemed to be vaporizing from the top of his neck. Vinny opted to continue playing it out.

"Nobody loves me! Ain't nobody gonna miss me when I'm gone." Persisted Vinny as a matter-of-factly.

It was all the big man could do to keep from rolling his eyes. He was only a few feet away from Vinny now and continued to inch his way towards the jumper while slowly removing his coat. He kept his left arm concealed in the coat. The Gadget Man felt like laughing at how well he was playing this off.

Camera men moved in closer to catch the Christmas morning footage. This made for a great story. Angry motorists continued honking their horns.

"Don't come any closer!" Warned Vinny, "I'll jump."

The patient cop slowed down but made subtle steps closer.

"Hey man, I'm just giving you my coat. It's freezing outside."

Before Vinny could do anything the cop took one big stride toward him holding out his coat. The sudden motion did almost cause Vinny to jump off the bridge. As soon as Vinny stretched an arm out to grab the coat, like a great magician, the witty cop clasped a handcuff around Vinny's wrist.

"Gotcha!" Muttered the big man smiling. When he peeled his

coat off with his right hand his left hand was already cuffed.

"Hey you tricked me!" Shouted Vinny.

Cheers erupted from the crowd. The retired looking cop was getting a standing ovation.

"Take him to the lunny bin! He can celebrate his Christmas there!" Shouted a red headed woman in a car loaded up with Christmas presents.

The voices dared Vinny to jump off the bridge anyway and take the big guy with him. He kind of looked like the cop from that movie Lethal Weapon.

The Gadget Man reluctantly followed the big guy to the nice warm police car still idling. The camera crew zoomed in on him focusing on his homemade wings. Vinny couldn't even feel his feet or hands as he ambled towards the cruiser.

The cop removed the handcuff from his own left arm and cuffed up Vinny's hands behind his back. Then the nice officer removed Vinny's wings and helped him into the back of the car. The newsies shouted out questions but the Gadget Man ignored them. Vinny canted his neck towards the left and glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard. It was 6:25am. In 5 minutes the show was about to begin.

CHAPTER 84

Gary Bowman stood in front of the cappuccino maker in his bathrobe whistling "Happy birthday Jesus." He wasn't a religious man but this Christmas he thanked God that he got to have Evan with him. Only once in a blue moon did he refer to his son as Evan and most of the time he just called

him "Buddy".

It was 6:30am and Buddy was sound asleep in the first bedroom down the hall hopefully having dreams of sugarplums and not naked women at his early age. All the rookie correctional officers were working today for that double time so they could earn brownie points with their superiors and help make those expensive mortgage payments for the house they just bought. Even quadruple time and an extra weeks vacation would not cause Gary to miss Christmas with Buddy. Unfortunately the Gadget Man knew that. Gary Bowman never worked on Christmas.

The cappuccino machine whistled loudly as Gary twirled the coffee mug in a circular motion under the spout watching the machine create a foamy froth. He wondered if the hissing sound was waking up Buddy. It didn't matter anyway. In about 10 minutes he would wake up his son to open presents under the tree. He really had to twist his ex-wife's arm to get Buddy on Christmas and he wanted to enjoy every second with his only child.

Gary placed the two mugs of steamy hot cappuccino next to each other on the counter then rooted around in the fridge for some whipped cream. His mug of course said "#1 Dad" and Buddy's mug had an alien on the front because Buddy was always into that kind of stuff.

After he put more than enough whipped cream in each mug he peppered Evan's mug with cinnamon. The hot beverages needed a few minutes to cool down to the perfect drinking temperature so Gary decided to leave the cappuccinos on the counter and go check on Buddy.

The bedroom door was already open so Snowball the cat

could come and go as she pleases.

Buddy's mopy hair covered his eyes as he tossed and turned underneath the Power Rangers comforter. Snowball was nestled behind his head guarding the precious child like he was one of her own. Evan tossed and turned a few more times and then rubbed his eyes.

"Daddy!" He exclaimed. Fluttering his eyes and then picking out eye buggers with his pinky finger.

"Hey Buddy, Merry Christmas!" Said Greg leaning on the doorway. "I made you a cappuccino the way you like it with cinnamon sprinkled on top."

Evan squirmed around a little more in the bed. "Mommy doesn't want me to have caffeine." He said and then yawned.

"You let me deal with Mommy. It's Christmas and we're gonna have fun."

Just then the doorbell rang. Gary felt like his heart was about to explode. This couldn't be happening, no, not on Christmas. If it was Linda at the door trying to get her son back for the holiday he would tell her to get lost and slam the door in her face.

"Somebody's at the door daddy. Maybe it's Santa Clause!" Said the kid excitedly.

Gary tightened the rope around his bathrobe and furled the top of the robe to conceal his hairy chest.

"Santa Clause was just here last night so it's probably

mommy. You just stay here and hang tight and I'll go see what she wants." He said backing out of the doorway.

"Okay daddy." Said Buddy teasing the cat with the little man he made with his two fingers.

Gary slipped his bare feet into his black felt slippers and moseyed over to the front door. When he opened the front door a cool gusty breeze tickled the hair on his legs. It was still fairly dark outside and a bit windier than usual.

Gary was shocked when he saw nobody standing on his porch. Instead he heard the tune of "Jingle Bells" chiming from maybe 10 feet in front of him. He squinted his eyes and saw what looked like some type of mailbox post about chest high without a mailbox perched on top but rather a piece of sod.

The jingle bells song continued to play and he saw what looked like a tiny red LED light illuminating just below the piece of sod. *What on earth was this? Had one of his friends sent him some kind of strange Christmas present?*

Gary walked cautiously towards the device that was prominently sticking out in the front yard. When he got within a foot of the device the little red LED light flickered and 3 shots rang out quickly.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

In the blink of an eye the device quickly retracted to the ground as if there was nothing ever there. Gary fell to his knees and then collapsed to the ground holding his hands over the wounds in his chest.

His brave son came running out in his red pajamas barefooted and ran towards his father. Evan looked around desperately hoping to identify the shooter or at least catch a glimpse of a license plate. There was absolutely nothing. Gary managed to roll around on his back and look into his son's imploring teary eyes.

"Daddy what happened?" Asked Evan nearly choking on his words.

Gary did his best to conceal the bloody wounds with his hands to prevent traumatizing his only son. The boy continued weeping.

"Buddy, I love you." He said in a whisper. Before the boy could say anything Gary's eyes rolled back into his head and he died instantaneously.

The bravery Gary had instilled in his boy slowly started to take effect. Evan wiped away his tears like a big boy and ran inside to phone the police. Christmas was ruined for the Bowman's and the Gadget Man was miles away patiently awaiting for what was about to happen next.

CHAPTER 85

If the ghost of Christmas present was staring through the window of Tyrone's crib he would surely wake everybody up inside and warn them what was about to happen.

It was 6:45am Christmas morning and the white candle perched on the window sill burned at a steady pace. What was about to go down would throw investigators off for all of eternity. Vinny had changed his modus operandi. There were no gadgets involved in this caper. Just a simple candle

that Vinny was using for a 5.5 hour fuse. It was pure genius. No electronic timers left behind for investigators to find amongst the relics of the conflagration.

The Gadget Man didn't know the exact second or exact minute Tyrone's abode would be ablaze but if his calculations were correct Tyrone's apartment would catch fire between 6:30am-7:00am. A precise measurement had been marked near the bottom of the candle where he drilled a small hole to place his homemade wick. The wick was made up of twisted toilet paper soaked in grain alcohol that would also leave no evidence behind. The hot wax that had melted down the side of the candle had locked the papery wick into place and kept it from sliding out.

At 6:46am it finally happened. The papery wick was now near the very top of the candle because the candle had melted down as the hours passed. The half inch flame on the candle flickered a few times back and forth towards the direction of the wick like something being struck by a magic wand. Even though the papery wick had been saturated in grain alcohol, as the hours passed much of the wick had dried up.

The string of toilet paper slowly caught on fire and the flame crept it's way down towards the basin under the tree igniting faster on the levitated string. Had the homemade fuse never been levitated properly there was a small chance the fuse could've burned out before ever reaching the tree. Since the stringy toilet paper was levitated the flame moved quickly down the cord and reached the basin full of grain alcohol.

A big whoosh sound erupted from the basin and the Christmas tree caught fire quickly like all Christmas trees do. The hastily decorated 7ft. Christmas tree burned like a giant

blow torch spewing vicious flames into the ceiling charring up the paint and spreading across the room like something from an Indiana Jones movie. The fire moved like it was on a competitive Easter Egg hunt destroying everything in its path.

Tyrone was upstairs sound asleep captivated in a dream where he was dancing with a marijuana joint that was as big as his Christmas tree. After the ballroom dance he intended to smoke the entire joint all by himself. It was a beautiful dance and the walking, talking, joint had a cute little voice just like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

After the cute little dance Tyrone pushed the 7ft. joint onto the ballroom floor like it owed him money. The talking joint shrieked and Tyrone pounced him and pulled out his favorite cigarette lighter.

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you." He said feeling no remorse at all. Tyrone lit the talking joint's head on fire and began sucking on where his toes would be if he had toes. The crowd on the ballroom dance floor cheered and egged him on while Tyrone took a long pull filling his tainted lungs with marijuana.

Tyrone tossed and turned in his bed coughing. He believed the coughing came from his dream. The dream felt so real and there wasn't much weed out there that could still make Tyrone cough.

Suddenly everything in the dream went black and Tyrone woke up coughing. He rubbed his eyes which were already tearing up from the smoke. *Wait a second. The coughing wasn't from the dream.* He thought to himself.

Tyrone became alarmed when he breathed another breath of Christmas morning air and choked on smoke. *Oh no! This couldn't be happening! Smoke meant there was fire!*

He panicked, threw the covers to the side and jumped out of bed coughing and wheezing. Tyrone had no shirt on but he was still decent because he had on his flannel pajama pants. He staggered towards the bedroom door and hunkered down as more smoke filled the room. He kept listening for sirens but heard none. Maybe all the firemen were home for Christmas or maybe they were just running late.

Tyrone exited his bedroom and headed for the stairs. The hat rack in the foyer had fallen onto the bottom of the stairs engulfed in flames. There were flames everywhere creeping up and down the walls and ceilings and even the wooden rail along the stairs. There was absolutely no way to make it down the stairs without getting torched.

As Tyrone watched his favorite velvety hat catch fire he suddenly remembered something. Shawna! He had totally forgotten about his sister. There was no need to worry about his mother because she worked the graveyard shift at the gas station down the street and wouldn't be home for another half hour.

More billowy smoke infiltrated the air and it was getting hard to see. Tyrone dashed towards Shawna's room which was only a few strides away. He turned the knob but the door was locked. Shawna never trusted his hooligan friends and feared one of them might try to make a move on her while she was sleeping and they were stoned.

Tyrone didn't have time to search for a screwdriver to open the door so he beat on the door with his fist. Nobody

answered. It was like nobody was in there at all. Tyrone heard strange creaking sounds of things falling apart downstairs. He took a few steps back then lunged towards the door like a NFL linebacker and thrust his right shoulder into the door.

The chintzy bedroom door swung wide open and he was inside. Shawna looked graceful as a kitten nestled up to its mother sound asleep. Tyrone hovered over her and pushed on her shoulders vigorously trying to wake her up. He tried and tried but she wouldn't respond. The toxic smoke had made the 19 year old beauty unconscious putting her in a deep slumber.

Tyrone didn't realize it but Shawna was already dead. Time seemed to be running out and the place was going up in flames. He reluctantly administered mouth to mouth on his sister but got nowhere with it. He jumped when he was startled by a pounding sound from the window. He felt so relieved when he saw the fireman standing on a ladder and tapping on the window. *Praise the good Lord. Nothing like a brother looking out for another brother on Christmas morning.*

The fireman motioned him over to the window by waving his glove at him. Tyrone opened the window and the fireman quickly pulled off his oxygen mask and placed it over Tyrone's mouth so he could catch his breath. The fireman clambered through the window and rushed over to Shawna lying peacefully on her bed.

When Tyrone regained his strength he helped the friendly fireman pick up Shawna and carry her towards the window.

As the three of them slowly made their way down the ladder cheers and clapping erupted from bystanders and nosy

neighbors. Even though it was cold outside and Tyrone didn't have his shirt on, he really couldn't feel a thing.

An ambulance pulled up and the back doors swung wide open. Tyrone helped the fireman carry Shawna towards the ambulance. Paramedics quickly pushing their Christmas cookies to the side, waited impatiently in the back of the ambulance hoping to rescue the poor girl. They allowed Tyrone to stay in the back of the ambulance and sit next to his sister. The ambulance blared its siren and they sped off to the hospital.

The paramedics worked on Shawna as if she was the president of the United States. They knew if they could save this girl it would make a good Christmas story.

"Is she gonna make it?" Asked Tyrone demanding an answer from his tone of voice. One of the paramedic guys wearing thick lensed glasses and holding up an IV bag finally spoke while the others brushed off the question.

"We're doing everything we can. We won't know until we get to the hospital." He said using his free hand to push up on his glasses which were drooping down his nose. Another paramedic was warming up the defibrillators and rubbing the iron plates together. Tyrone had to turn his head while they zapped electric shocks into Shawna's chest trying to bring her back to them. The situation wasn't looking good and Tyrone had a feeling she was already dead. He still didn't give up hope and knew the hospital was only a few minutes away. Once they rushed her inside the hospital better physicians and doctors would be able to assist her.

The ambulance stopped abruptly and Tyrone knew they weren't at a red light. The doors swung open and just like a

magic trick the gurney and Shawna disappeared before his very eyes.

Tyrone jumped out of the ambulance and ran after the paramedics that seemed to be kidnapping his sister. When he scampered through the doors of the emergency room, visitors sitting down looked at him like he was crazy. He tried to follow the entourage down the hall but a big Burly security guard stepped out in front of him and blocked his path.

"Where do you think you're going son?" Asked the security guard.

"Hey man, move out of the way that's my sister!"

Tyrone got ready to push the man out of the way if he had to.

"I'm sorry kid. Nobody's allowed beyond this point."

Tyrone watched the security guard unstrap the top of a black leather holster carrying a can of mace. He had learned from previous run ins with the law not to mess with a man holding pepper mace. Jeez, if that stuff didn't really burn the eyes.

"They'll come get you when they're ready. Please take a seat with the others." Requested the guard.

Tyrone glanced at the seated crowd gazing at him like he was Houdini about to pull a rabbit out of a hat. Tyrone grumbled some racist remarks under his breath inferring something about crackers and reluctantly took a seat with the others. It seemed like everyone was still staring at him but he refused to find out and remained staring at the freshly buffed tiled floor.

Ten minutes later he looked up and a skinny old doctor with graying hair was looking at him with a somber look on his face. Tyrone could tell by the look on the doctor's face that it was not good news. The doctor had trouble keeping eye contact and kept staring down at his clipboard while he spoke.

"I'm terribly sorry. We did all we could but there was nothing we could do. Shawna was DOA....Dead Rival."

The doctor meant to say "Dead on Arrival" but found himself stammering.

Tyrone lowered his head almost into his lap and did something he hadn't done in ten years. Tyrone wept like a baby.

CHAPTER 86

The tiny buoyant marshmallows gradually became smaller as the steamy hot cocoa took its affect. The chocolate vapors permeated with the toxic fumes from the Newport cigarette in Vinny's left hand.

Christmas couldn't be any better for the Gadget Man as he sat giddy in the smoking room of Philadelphia General Hospital. He could feel the effects of caffeine and nicotine all at the same time. He felt fortunate that the Behavioral Health Unit he was on actually had a smoking room that even had a television. Yes, technically he was incarcerated but hospitals were a hundred times better than jail and a whole lot safer. Besides, once a head doctor cleared him he'd be back on the streets probably in a week or two. Maybe even in a few days.

Vinny sat on his blue rubber chair alone in the smoking room watching the television intently as News channel 6 tried to cover exclusive coverage of both tragic Christmas morning stories. The news talked about the fire at Tyrone's and then it also mentioned the morning murder of Correctional Officer Gary Bowman.

When the Gadget Man saw Tyrone's face on the tube he hastily threw his styrofoam cup of hot chocolate on the floor. *Why is that hellion still alive? What would it take to get rid of these brats?*

Tyrone was being interviewed by a pretty brunette with starry eyes and wearing a Santa Clause hat. He looked disheveled and didn't even bother to thank the fireman that saved his life and at least tried to save Shawna. Instead Tyrone was outraged and acted like the world owed him something. *What an ingrate.* Vinny thought to himself taking a deep drag on his Newport. Tyrone also had a worried look like he had something to hide and Vinny knew exactly what it was. Probably all the drug paraphernalia that Tyrone didn't want the police to find when they would conduct an investigation.

Vinny felt kind of stupid wearing a hospital gown of bed sheet like material that left substantial parts of his body exposed. It didn't really matter too much to him. He caught glimpses of other patients milling around in the same goofy blue and white striped gown.

There was a polite knock at the door and a dark curly haired nurse wiggled her index finger motioning for Vinny to exit the smoking room. The Gadget Man had noticed a sign earlier posting the smoking room hours but didn't think the hospital employees would enforce them on Christmas. *Did these*

people really think they could tell him when he could smoke on Christmas?

Vinny didn't put his cigarette out but rather kept it lit and poked his head out the door. The heavy nurse was wearing her hospital whites that hugged her bulbous bottom like a static cling. She had a name tag that read "Rhonda" with a Lunny Toon sticker plastered to it. It figured that all of the pretty mental health workers wouldn't be working on Christmas.

Vinny was full of ire and gave the nurse a saucy look. "What? If you think I'm putting my cigarette out on Christmas you're crazy!"

Rhonda giggled, rolled her eyes and waved her hand simultaneously as if Vinny was no threat at all. "I don't care what you do. But you do have a visit." She shot back.

Vinny regained his composure and felt like a moron. Rhonda took a deep breath and held it then poked her head into the smoking room. As she pulled out she exhaled. "I see your hot cocoa made its way onto the floor." She said caustically.

Vinny stubbed his cigarette out then stood in the carpeted hallway. "That was an accident. Let's go do this visit." He said adjusting his fringed gown. He did not want the nurse checking out any parts of his body. Vinny deduced that it was probably his mother Theresa coming to visit him. Ever since he got out of prison for a crime he didn't commit Theresa paid special attention to him and let him get away with murder. Heh-heh, murder. If only Theresa knew he had done that plenty of times. Since Alvin was the youngest he was always the spoiled one growing up. Mark and Theresa paid Vinny very little attention growing up. Theresa used to

teach a Sunday school class and paid more attention to them than she did her very own children. In fact she even used to give the prizes from the cereal box to her Sunday school class. Vinny used to get so pissed when he'd dump out the whole box of Lucky Charms and the prize wasn't there.

The Gadget Man tried not to laugh when he followed Rhonda down the hall watching her elephant butt teeter back and forth like a seesaw. Rhonda was by no means attractive. But to Vinny, her cute little walk was almost a turn on. Maybe the Gadget Man was falling in love with fat chicks. Amish people used to say the women with wide hips could bear many children. Thus they sought out the big mammas.

Rhonda guided Vinny to a comfy room full of fluffy sofas that had been sequestered from the others. Before they entered the room, Vinny could smell the scent of his favorite perfume Love Spell wafting through the air. The sweet aroma told him exactly who was waiting for him. It was hard to fathom how she had managed to track him down.

When he entered the room he saw the lovely Bridget Jones wannabe sitting on a brown leather sofa wearing a skimpy red dress that revealed her moist dewy thunder thighs that men would kill for. Her hair was done up just like Vinny liked it looking like she had two cinnamon swirly buns plastered to the back of her head. Bridget even had on her sexy spectacles that made her look ten times smarter than she really was. She was holding a bag from Subway and had an imploring look in her innocent eyes as if to say *How did I hurt you baby?*

There was an eerie silence in the room as they waited for Rhonda to put her nose back on her face and leave the room

so they could be alone. Bridget broke the silence and popped a question.

"Has he been behaving?" She asked the nurse.

Rhonda giggled a stupid laugh and waved her hand. "Aw...you know....it's Christmas, he's doing alright." She said slowly backing towards the door but not wanting to leave.

The Gadget Man hadn't spoken a word yet but spread his arms out suggesting he wanted a hug from his boo. Bridget quickly got up and the two of them embraced while Vinny squeezed one of her butt cheeks to make her more alert while still holding a pack of Newport in his other hand.

"I brought you your favorite. An Italian sub from Subway." She whispered into his ear.

While they remained hugging, the nurse quietly slipped away and left them alone.

"Thanks, I have something for you too." Said Vinny unlocking the hug and reaching into the pack of cigarettes.

Bridget giggled then pushed away the pack of Newports he was digging into. "Honey, that's very thoughtful but I think these people would freak out if they saw us smoking in here." She said drawing an "S" on his chest with her index finger. To her he was her superman, but she still seemed puzzled as to why he would want to jump off a bridge when their relationship was going so well.

Vinny pushed her hand away and continued to dig inside of the pack of Newport. His face filled with gleam when he finally found what he was looking for. He had something

hidden in his hand and he instructed Bridget to close her eyes. She was a little skeptical as to how Vinny had managed to smuggle something into the hospital.

"Okay babe, open your eyes."

When Bridget opened her eyes Vinny was down on one knee holding out a beautiful 18 carat diamond engagement ring and grinning from ear to ear. Bridget didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This was so bizarre. No guy she ever dated had ever proposed to her except for of course Shaggy but even he had only insinuated it.

Vinny finally spit the words out. "Bridget, you're the closest thing I'll ever get to Bridget Jones and I like you a lot.... Will you marry me?"

Bridget had to put her hand over her heart from the shock. She hadn't felt like this since her uncle Louie got her the bicycle she always wanted for Christmas when she was just 8 years old. Little tears of joy trickled down her cheeks. She stared at the diamond ring then looked into Vinny's eyes trying to see inside his soul. His eyes were dark and mysterious like there was a hidden key behind his pupils that unlocked a whole different world. She wanted to learn more of that world because it fascinated her.

Bridget gladly accepted the shiny ring then quickly grabbed Vinny's free hand and kissed it. "You already know my answer sweetie." She said then gave him a big bear hug.

The Gadget Man tried to play stupid and unlocked the hug once again and left both of his hands on her shoulders while feigning a serious look.

"You never answered my question." He said keeping the serious look.

Bridget stretched out her delicate hands and played with his rosy cheeks forcing a smile on his face. "Of course I'll marry you silly." She said bussing him quickly on the lips and focusing back on the \$5000.00 ring.

Just like the new television show "To catch a predator" a throng of people came flooding into the room with one person carrying a video camera and wearing his ball cap backwards. Theresa stormed into the room like she had a winning lottery ticket and gave Bridget a great big hug.

"Congratulations daughter in law." Theresa said excitedly.

A few others walked into the room and when Bridget saw Alvin she quickly figured out that this must be Vinny's family whom she never met. A real pretty brunette woman in her early forties introduced herself as Vinny's older sister Dayna. Alvin was still in his police uniform because he had just got done working the night shift. Bridget knew Alvin but everyone else she had never met but she noticed Mark looked a lot like Vinny.

The Asian kid wearing a New York Yankees cap backwards and holding the video camera assured everyone to go about their business and pretend he wasn't there. He claimed he was filming the event to enter into the "Most creative marriage proposal of the year" contest and Vinny would most likely win some money.

Bridget didn't know how to handle all the excitement but she started by going around and giving everybody hugs.

"I can't believe you did this." She said hugging Alvin the longest.

Vinny already had his answer that he had rehearsed the night before. "I had to make sure you loved me. And what can I say? You came through." He said with smugness.

The cheery crowd was quickly interrupted by a raging psychiatrist standing in the doorway. The balding shrink with orangish red cropped hair on the sides waved his hands while he shouted.

"What's going on here? You people think you can use my hospital for a marriage proposal?" He then crossed his arms and shot darts of fire with his eyes at everyone.

Alvin raised his hand signaling that he would take care of the infuriated doctor. He closed the door behind him as he took Dr.Green out in the hallway and had a lengthy chat with him.

Vinny and his family took seats on the sofas and made pleasant chit chat with their soon to be new member of the family. Bridget's own family only consisted of her and her mother so she was more excited than an orphan about to get adopted by a rich family. The Young's were having a very Merry Christmas indeed and Bridget liked the sound of "Bridget Young".

Meanwhile.....

Somewhere high in the heavenly realms of glory the guardian angels of Gary Bowman and Tyrone's sister wept in sorrow. Because of the Gadget Man's crafty scheme, their Christmas had been ruined.

CHAPTER 87

Buddy sat on a cold steel chair while gritting his new teeth that had just come in two weeks ago. He desperately yearned for his mother but the big scary looking cop insisted that they needed a one on one conversation.

Evan's mother Linda waited in another room more nervous than a boss about to lay off his employees. She hoped and prayed that Evan wasn't giving him more information than he needed and mentioning her occasional drug use.

It was Buddy's first time in a police station and his eyes seemed to look everywhere but at the officer.

"I'm officer Shinds. What's your name buddy?" Said the oversized cop leaning back and locking his hands behind his head. Wet spots the size of pancakes were under each armpit and a rancid bodily odor wafted in Evan's direction.

"That is my name." Replied the kid kicking the floor with his new Nike High tops he had gotten for Christmas.

Shinds leaned back further in his swivel chair and smirked politely. "I know, I know, but I need your real name okay?" He said clicking a pen.

Evan gritted his teeth some more and stared at a truncheon hanging from the wall. He wondered if the cop had ever beaten anybody with it. "Evan Bowman. My name is Evan Bowman and I attend Freelance Elementary school. I also play kickball..."

Shinds raised his hand and smiled. "Whoa, whoa... I don't need all that but thanks for sharing." He looked down and

riffled some papers on his desk. "Evan, I know this is going to be hard for you and I hate to open old wounds but I need you to tell me everything that happened Christmas morning."

Little tears welled up in Evan's eyes and the cop took notice and offered him a Kleenex. "It's okay buddy, just tell me everything you remember."

Evan bowed his head like he was about to pray while the mop of mussy hair on his head dangled over his face and covered his eyes. He slowly raised his head back up and began to speak.

"My daddy was making us cappuccinos and then he decided to check on me while I was still in bed. Suddenly the doorbell rang and he told me to stay put while he went to see who was at the door. He thought that maybe it was mo..."

Buddy quickly stopped himself realizing what he was about to say and then continued on.

"Somebody was at the door and they shot my daddy." He said wiping tears from his face with the Kleenex. Officer Shinds was jotting down notes and keeping his eyes off of the lad. Shinds had had a great Christmas and this was hard for him too. Gary Bowman wasn't a cop but he was still an authority figure which made the police force feel like they had lost one of their own.

Officer Shinds unbuttoned the top button near his neck collar allowing him to breathe. "Who were you saying your dad thought was at the door?" Shinds questioned.

Evan paused and gritted his teeth hoping that any minute Linda would spring in and end the interview. He had already

lost his father and didn't want to lose his mother too. Buddy heard terrible stories about kids in foster homes. Before he could reply the phone on Officer Shinds desk rang startling them both. The officer raised his index finger to pause Evan and then picked up the phone on the second ring.

Buddy kicked his Nike sneakers into the floor using his time to change his story. He really didn't know if maybe his mother had something to do with this.

Shinds twirled his finger around the spirally cord and spoke into the phone. "Okay, and what was the name of that waitress?" He said clicking his pen and scribbling on a yellow pad. A congenial smile sprouted on the officer's face and he winked at Evan. "Okay thanks lieutenant that makes my day." Said Shinds pushing back on his swivel chair. The smelly cop hung up the phone and smiled at Evan.

"Look kid, a waitress at Lindburg Diner has confirmed that she served your mother and her boyfriend breakfast before seven O'clock on Christmas morning. We needn't worry about your mother."

Buddy sighed in relief and regained his composure. He finally felt like he could look the scary looking cop in the eye. Officer Shinds continued on.

"So after you heard the shots what did you do?" He asked taking a quick sip of stale coffee.

"I ran outside to check on my daddy." Evan said matter-of-factly.

"That was pretty brave of you. You didn't hide under the bed?" Shinds asked squinting his dark brown eyes.

Evan answered quickly. "No I had to check on my daddy."
He said staring directly at the cop.

Shinds jotted some notes on the yellow pad and then looked back up. "From when you heard the gunshots, how long did it take you to get outside?"

Evan paused to stare into space and then looked back at Shinds. "I dunno, maybe 10 seconds. I ran out barefoot."

"And what did you see? Any squealing of tires or persons running down the street?"

"That's why I ran out so fast. I was hoping to catch someone but all I saw was my daddy laying in the yard."

Shinds had to use short hand to keep up with what the kid was saying. He suddenly got an idea and pulled out a tape recorder then pushed the record button. Suddenly there was a pounding at the door startling them both.

"You said you'd only be a minute, Buddy are you alright in there?" Said the voice behind the door.

"Oh, it's okay for you to come in now." Shouted Shinds.

The door swung open and Linda walked in wearing a pair of dark blue shapely Levis and a white laced blouse. Her long brown frizzy hair ran down her back almost to her waist. The brown and tan cowgirl boots she had on were prominently covering the bottoms of her jeans and almost came up to her knees. She looked like she was ready to try out for Nashville Star, a country singer's contest. Linda's high-rise boots clanked on the floor tiles as she pranced towards them.

Officer Shinds stood up quickly and nearly knocked over his own chair.

"Let me just get you a chair." He said walking towards a chair in the corner that was cluttered with junk including a yellow raincoat all bunched up in a ball. Before Shinds could clear off the cluttered chair Linda stood behind Buddy and began rubbing his shoulders.

"No, it's okay. I'll just stand." She insisted.

Shinds quickly returned to his comfy swivel chair and took a seat. Linda continued to rub Buddy's shoulders while the officer spoke.

"So let me get this straight," The officer pressed on, "Your father was making cappuccinos, the doorbell rang..."

Linda cut Shinds off.

"What? Cappuccinos?" She looked at Buddy, "I told him I don't want you drinking that stuff, it'll stunt your growth."

The cop scratched his head at the clincher and clicked his pen a few times. "Let's change subjects." He said quickly, "Buddy, did your father ever mention having any enemies?"

All the attention was on Evan now and the shoulder massage came to a lull while Buddy ruminated.

"Um... A long time ago we were fishing. My daddy warned me never to stay in a classroom alone with just the teacher. He said some teachers are really bad. Daddy once mentioned that he watched over a teacher that did bad things to little boys after class and the teacher had

threatened him for some reason."

Shinds jotted Buddy's statement down quickly then looked back up at him. "Do you know why this teacher threatened your father?"

The boy shook his head no.

"How long ago was this and what was the teacher's name?"

Buddy shrugged his shoulders and Linda quickly started rubbing them again. He began biting the cuticle on his thumb when a light bulb went off in his head.

"Oh...wait...I remember now. I think it was last summer...no...the summer before that. And he said the teacher was a math teacher." Said Evan perking up like he answered the million dollar question.

"You're doing a good job honey." Assured his mother.

A subtle smile crossed Shinds face as he circled something on his yellow pad.

"Well, that should help narrow it down a little bit. You sure you don't remember the teacher's name?" Queried the officer while clicking his pen in frustration.

"I don't think daddy ever calls people by their real name. He had a nickname for everybody. He said everybody in prison called him the Teacher."

Shinds quickly wrote that down and circled it also. Linda finally decided to put her two cents in.

"What did they find at the crime scene?" She finally asked.

Shinds leaned way back in his chair and thought to himself. *What do you care lady? You divorced the poor guy.* He raised his arms to place them behind his head then quickly withdrew realizing that his armpits stunk.

"Well, uh... All they really have right now is 3 brass shell casings they found in the yard next to the body. They dusted the doorbell for prints and found absolutely no prints at all which really doesn't make much sense. Do you use the doorbell often?"

Linda gave a surprised look like she didn't understand how she fit into the picture.

"I use the doorbell all the time when I go pick up Buddy."

Shinds grunted and quickly jotted more notes. "Well, that's kind of weird that we never found your prints on it. The killer must've wiped it clean after he pushed the button." Said Shinds clicking the pen some more while mulling over the situation.

A chirping sound came from Linda's purse and she quickly dug through her purse and answered her Nokia cellphone. While she was on her cell a loud swooshing sound erupted from underneath officer Shinds chair. The cop tried to look surprised like he didn't know where the sound came from. Evan was quick to recognize the sound and burst out with laughter while Linda continued chatting on her cell.

"Ke-hee-hee-hee," laughed Evan, "I think you sharted man! You better check your oil and make sure you're not leaking!" Said Evan feeling even more elated.

Shinds turned red in the face but could not hold back his smile. A big happy meal smile emerged onto his face and he laughed along with the boy. Linda had a peevish look on her face and gave them both dirty looks.

"We'll be there soon Erik. Love you too Hun. Bye Bye." She said and pushed the end button on the keypad.

The cop felt better that he had Buddy cracking up. Apparently farts amused the boy and they gave each other a high five. Linda stood up and pinched her nose with one hand and pulled Buddy out of the chair with the other.

"We have to go. Are you finished with us?" She said in a saucy tone.

Shinds nodded curtly while letting out a few more snickers. Buddy held his mother's hand as they headed towards the door.

"Hey mom you remember when dad used to fart like that?" Said Buddy full of mirth.

Linda turned around to give one more nasty look to Shinds who sat back easy in his chair still gleaming.

"This is why I no longer date authority figures. You're all pigs!" She said and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 88

It didn't take long for the Gadget Man to get released from the hospital. In the end it cost Vinny a hefty thousand dollar fine and a two hundred dollar towing fee for his creative

marriage proposal. Vinny had signed a 72 hour notice as soon as the cops dragged him into the hospital and Bridget picked him up 3 days later. The frigid trailer felt so desolate without Sparky or Bridget around to bring the home to life. The Gadget Man really didn't care. Even though Sparky was dead and Bridget was at work Vinny was having fun. The air conditioner that he ran all year long provided him with more than enough company. Bridget always griped about the AC getting run in the winter time but she had learned to bring lots of blankets.

Vinny sat comfortably in the brand new black leather recliner with the built in motorized massager and guzzled down an icy cold Corona which provided warmth. He carefully read the Baltimore Sun newspaper carefully paying attention to all the details. The article went into great explicable detail telling the story of the tragic fire at Tyrone's abode on Christmas morning. Evidently the Gadget Man's manipulative plan had worked. The article mentioned that the investigators believe the fire was an accident due to faulty Christmas lights which set the Christmas tree ablaze. *"People should be really cautious when putting up a Christmas tree because they have no idea just how inflammable they really are."* A chief inspector quoted in the article.

Vinny let out a chuckle when he read that part. He took a long sip from the bottle when a familiar whir came from the air conditioner reminding him of the past. The 4 trouble makers in his 7th grade class were the root of his problems. The reason he could no longer teach and had to drive a stupid big rig truck. To make matters worse he was technically 0 for 4. Tyrone and Jamaal were still alive despite the adversity bestowed upon them.

Vinny sprung from his comfy chair as if Publishers Clearing

House was standing on his front porch with a million dollar check. He ran to the kitchen and dug through the knife drawer until he found the special dice he was looking for. How had he forgotten about the game? As he held the dice in his hand he thought about how much fun it would be to have Bridget roll the dice. While it sounded fun he couldn't let the Bridget Jones wannabe find out about his incognito life he was living. Besides, she was infatuated with the deceit that dwelled in his chinky eye which seemed to be one of his biggest assets. Bridget knew there was a mystery in his eye like maybe he was a super hero like Batman or Superman.

Vinny snapped out of his daydream and rushed into the living room nearly spilling his beer. He sat Indian style on the floor in front of the coffee table and blew on the dusty dice. After 2 or 3 strokes he released the dice onto the coffee table and the dice bounced around like Mexicans entering the U.S.

When the dice settled down one dice read "Tony" and the other read "Kidnapping". The endorphins pumped through the Gadget Man's body and left him feeling euphoric. Playing the game was an indescribable feeling that was even better than...well you know.

As Vinny jotted down the answers to his baneful dice game he heard a loud knock at the front door. Why did it seem like every time the game was being played someone tried to intervene?

The Gadget Man mulled over that thought as he peeked through the Venetian blinds. He saw a uniform standing outside his front door and to his dismay it was not his brother Alvin.

Vinny quickly tossed the Baltimore Sun under the high-tech and relegated the dice into the tight front right pocket of his jeans.

When he answered the door he was accosted by a portly looking cop with a missing button on his uniform right at the tip of his belly. Vinny put on his best amicable smile and gave the pig a quick look over.

"Can I help you officer?" He said in a sweet tone.

Officer Shinds wasted no time with friendly greetings. "Are you Vincent Young?" He said trying to look inside the living room.

Vinny widened himself to prevent the nosy cop from peeking inside. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Is there a problem?"

Shinds tried to sound professional. He used his guttural tone of voice. "Would you mind telling me where you were around quarter til 7 on Christmas morning?"

Shinds whipped out a pen and a pocket sized note pad while waiting for a reply. Vinny tried his best to take the edge off things.

"Would you like to come in officer?"

The cop stared right into Vinny's eye patch as he thought the invitation over in his mind. Vinny didn't look like an innocent man and who knew what tricks he might have up his sleeve once he got the cop inside. On the other hand it was extremely cold and windy outside.

"Sure." The cop finally relented and followed him inside.

The first thing Officer Shinds noticed when he entered the trailer was the painting on the wall above the couch.

"Is that a tomato inside the pirate ship's mouth?" He asked holding a fist underneath his chin.

"Yes, it's one of my favorite paintings." Replied Vinny motioning with his hand for the cop to take a seat.

Shinds quickly sat down and his jelly belly dilated making it look like another button might pop off his shirt. He turned his head to the right and noticed the air conditioner running and scrunched up his face.

"Jeez, it's no warmer in here than it is outside." He commented.

Vinny took a seat in the recliner and gave the pig a look as if to say *Let's get to the point.*

Shinds clicked his pen and cleared his throat. "So anyways, like I was saying earlier. Would you mind telling me where you were a little before 7am on Christmas morning?"

The Gadget Man couldn't hold back his smile and Shinds saw his shark teeth for the first time. "Um...I believe I was on the news." He said enthusiastically.

Shinds didn't even jot down his reply but rather looked at him quizzically as if maybe Vincent was playing some kind of joke. "I'm investigating a homicide Mr. Young. One of our own was shot down in cold blood. Why on earth would you be on the news Christmas morning?"

Vinny snapped his fingers twice and sprang from his chair. The startle caused Shinds to reach for his gun holster. Vinny softly pumped both his hands as if he was double dribbling a basketball signaling the cop to settle down and relax.

"I just have to get something from the kitchen. I'll be right back." Said Vinny reassuringly.

Shinds mellowed out and reminded himself that he had his bulletproof vest on under his uniform. In about 2 shakes of a lambs tail the Gadget Man cavorted into the living room proudly flourishing a yellow piece of paper.

"What's that?" Asked Shinds musing.

Vinny handed the citation to the officer. "This was my Christmas present from one of you guys!" He said enthused.

The cop's strident attitude seemed to eradicate into thin air when he read the time on the citation. His lips curled up forming a smile when he read the part about Vinny only wearing his boxers and a pair of angel wings. The Gadget Man patiently awaited the officer's response. Shinds couldn't help but chuckle.

"You know, I think I remember this now. I know the cop who arrested you. Didn't this pan out to be some kind of zany marriage proposal?"

Vinny stood tall with lucidity in his eye. He adjusted his eye patch before he spoke. "Yup, we set a date for May of next year." Replied Vinny while plopping himself back into his favorite recliner.

Shinds looked at his wristwatch then jiggled around on the

sofa cushion as if he was about to get up and leave.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. You still haven't told me what this is all about?" Said Vinny pushing a button on the side of the recliner which levitated his feet.

Shinds glanced at his Swiss Army watch once more while debating whether or not he had time to explain his visit. "Gary Bowman was shot in cold blood right outside his home just before 7am on Christmas morning. Gary was a Correctional Officer at ScottsDale River Penitentiary where I guess you did some time at."

Vinny cut him off and feigned an indignant look on his face. "So how do I fit into all of this?" He said fuming.

Shinds quickly tried to explain himself. "Well...um... I did a little digging and found a complaint you filed with the BOP while you were incarcerated in which you claim Bowman had allegedly tried to dehydrate you by keeping you from water. I also interviewed his son and he mentioned that his father had once talked about having beef with a math teacher. All the fingers pointed to you and we know you had motive Mr.Young." Enunciated Officer Shinds trying to justify his prying.

Vinny listened intently and massaged the side of his noggin with his index finger like a doctor or smart lawyer would do. "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you officer. I found God and I don't hold grudges anymore. My empathies go out to the Bowman family but I have a wedding to worry about."

Shinds quickly arose from the sofa and handed Vinny back the citation then cleared his throat. "Yes, I realize that and I thank you for your time." He said while looking astonished to

see his own breath. *What kind of an idiot ran the air conditioning in the winter time?*

The two shook hands and Vinny opened the front door for the smelly pig. As Shinds shimmied through the front door Vinny could've sworn he heard a rumbling sound. *Perhaps the smelly cop had left a farewell present?*

The Gadget Man stood at the doorway and watched the cop sidle into the driver's seat of the cruiser then slam the door with authority. Vinny reflected back on his interview with Mr.Piggy rehearsing the previous conversation in his fiendish mind when he heard the phone ring. It took him a while to find the cordless phone until he finally discovered it tucked under his jacket on the sofa. He answered it on the 4th ring.

"Hello?" He said sounding out of breath.

"Hey it's me. Are you behaving on your day off?" Said a chic voice into the phone.

Vinny knew exactly who it was but he decided to be a wise guy. "Hey Julia, what are you up to girl?" He said cupping his hand over his mouth and stifling a laugh.

"Julia? Who in the world is Julia?" Said a voice into the phone about to cry.

"I was just playing with you Bridget Jones. What's my sweetheart up to?"

There was a sigh of relief into the phone and then a snort. Bridget could be such a sucker sometimes. "I'm over at the office and it's kind of lonely over here." Said Bridget scratching the back of her neck.

"Why don't you come over?" Suggested Vinny.

"I can't. I'm expecting a patient at 3pm so I'm just going to be bored until then."

Vinny finally got what she was hinting at. "Oh, so I guess you want me to come over to your office?"

Bridget made kissing sounds into the phone. This was her way of being cute. A few dirty thoughts entered the Gadget Man's mind as he fished around in his pocket for his keys. Bridget's boring day no longer felt so boring when she heard the sound of keys jingling into the phone.

"So what do I get if I come over there?" Asked Vinny dangling his keys next to the phone egging her on.

"You'll get an extravagant head examination! Now get over here silly!" Bridget hung up the phone.

Vinny donned his favorite jacket and skittered out the door. He could hardly wait to bring some little gadgeteers into the world.

CHAPTER 89

Vinny laid sprawled out on his back on top of a long dark brown leather lounge chair clicking his black brogans together wondering if it would take him back to Kansas. He didn't really want to go to Kansas because he was quite happy where he was currently at smelling Bridget's sweet perfume. Love Spell. She had finally got it right and wore Vinny's favorite perfume at his request.

The clinic which Bridget rented was kind of small but very cozy. The Picasso paintings hanging from the freshly painted wall looked like they might be worth a small fortune. There was a small window on the other side of the room which usually did a good job of illuminating the cubbyhole but Bridget had the blinds closed plus Vinny's jacket hoisted over top of it to block out as much sunlight as possible. Vinny hated sunlight and claimed it made him sneeze.

"Come on, let me kick off my boots." Declared Vinny.

"No. Your feet stink and I don't want the room stinking for my next patient." Said Bridget sitting in a chair adjacent to him holding a blotter and her favorite glitter pen. Bridget looked absolutely stunning. Her lavender slip-on shoes seemed to match her silk button-down blouse and her white pallid Mudd jeans seemed to hug her lush thighs just right. The spectacles that made her look 10 times smarter pinched her cute little cherry nose and fulfilled a strange fetish of Vinny's. It was like they were playing doctor minus the stethoscope. Bridget had no idea but the fetish had derived from interviews with Miss Peabody from Vinny's time in prison. Miss Peabody often wore the same exact spectacles.

Bridget played with Vinny's long hair for a few seconds before starting her usual query. "So umm...are you having any hallucinations or hearing any voices?" She asked trying to be serious.

"Uh...yes as a matter of fact I hear a voice right now."

Bridget looked a little surprised. "Really? What is it saying?"

There was a pause and then Vinny grinned at her. "Really? What is it saying?" He replied then snickered.

When Bridget got the joke she gave him a playful pat in the abdomen and regained her composure. She tried to get serious. "Do you really wanna do this or do you want to uh...you know." Bridget winked at him and almost made it appear that she was undressing him with her eyes.

"No, no. I'm serious. I really want some therapy." Pleaded Vinny turning down a good time.

Bridget glanced at her girly watch the Gadget Man had gotten her for Christmas.

"Okay, we still have 35 minutes. I have a few more things to cover." She leaned over and pushed aside a few strands of hair tickling Vinny's face.

"What about suicidal thoughts. You never talk about suicidal thoughts."

Vinny mulled the question over in his mind wondering if this might turn into an inadvertent hypnotism and he might accidentally tell her everything.

"Well, I guess I get them sometimes but usually in a dream format."

Bridget pushed up on her glasses and showed a sudden interest. "Huh?" She said blatantly.

The Gadget Man continued on as Bridget became enthralled.

"Oh yeah, since I was a kid I've had this repetitive nightmare that used to scare me half to death and have me wake up

screaming." Said Vinny being serious this time.

Bridget was gradually becoming elated at this newfound information. She clicked her glitter pen and made an imprint in her notebook. "Go on." She pressed, "Please tell me about the nightmare. I've studied a lot of Franz Kafka and learned a lot about kafkaesque."

Vinny closed his eye and tried to think back. "Well, all I remember is I'm sitting in the back seat of my parents car and my father is driving." He said trying to remember every detail.

Bridget scrawled in the notebook. "Go on." She said softly.

"So anyway, it's really late at night closer to the wee hours and all of us are very tired. Maybe we're coming back from a vacation I dunno. But anywho, we're driving through some woods and the trees look very scary and lifelike. Maybe monsters disguised as trees, I dunno. There's just three of us, my dad, my mom, and me. My mother is in the passenger's seat while my father is driving. Nobody is talking and we're all very tired."

Vinny paused for a moment debating whether or not to continue.

"Um-hm, go on babe." Urged Bridget.

"So like I was saying, I'm sitting in the back seat and about to fall asleep when I suddenly notice we're drifting off the road towards the trees. I shake my father vigorously trying to wake him up but neither of my folks wake up. It's like they're already dead." He said placing his hand over his heart checking for a beat.

Bridget jiggled in her chair causing a surge of Love Spell to waft in his direction.

"This is interesting, please go on." She persisted, "What happens then?"

The Gadget Man let out a funky grunt. "Well...just as we're about to have a head on collision with a tree I wake up screaming."

"Jeez, that sounds like a dire nightmare. And you get this all the time?"

Vinny nodded his monster head. "Yes, I get that same nightmare to this very day but it's no longer a nightmare. It's a dream that I long for."

Bridget accidentally dropped her pen and then picked it up with a perplexed look on her face. "Um... I'm afraid I don't get it. You mean this scary nightmare you have you now look forward to and now your nightmares have become your dreams?"

The Gadget Man snapped his fingers. "Exactly. Every time I wake up from that dream I encounter a 6 man pup tent if you know what I mean."

A smile jumped on her face like Mario jumping around in a video game. She poked him in the tummy playfully then fixed his hair once more. "Stop it silly, we're running out of time for that." She said rolling her eyes, "I don't know why you would look forward to a dream where you and your folks smash into a tree. That is kind of strange."

Vinny quickly sat up in the lounge chair and pushed his hair back. "Does that mean I'm suicidal?" He asked with sincerity.

"I don't know what it means but you definitely exhibit symptoms similar of a catatonic."

"What on earth is that?" Asked Vinny.

Bridget chuckled and pushed on his shoulder. "It's you Hun! All those laughing spells you get and it might even explain the palsy."

The Gadget Man felt like he had scored some points. Bridget was assuming the nervous shake he always got from his criminal ways was a part of his mental condition. This was good, good, good! He stood up completely ending the therapy and moseyed around the room aimlessly. He spotted a collection of books on her desk and flipped through some of them. When he picked up a book on the very bottom of the pile he felt wrath plunging into his heart from every direction. When he read the name of the author it felt like his eyes would pop out of his head and explode like fireworks.

The author was Bridget Macavar.

CHAPTER 90

"What kind of garbage is this?" Shouted Vinny raising his voice.

Bridget appeared to be shocked at his sudden change of mood.

"Hun, what's wrong?" She said softly like a woman talking to

her abusive alcoholic husband.

"You can't write crap like this!" Hissed Vinny showing her the cover. The book was titled *Contradictions of the Bible*.

Bridget played dumb. "I don't understand what's wrong with it?"

The Gadget Man griped as he leafed through the pages. "You'll go straight to hell for this. Do you want to go to hell?"

Bridget crossed her arms and rolled her eyes at her enraged soon to be husband. "You can't honestly tell me you believe in all that Biblical nonsense?"

The Gadget Man ignored her and riffled through the pages and then stopped on page 101. He used his index finger as a guide as he read from the book. "It says here that you have a real problem with Revelations 7:1 which mentions 4 angels standing on the 4 corners of the earth and how can the earth have corners if we already know it's round?"

Vinny paused for a second and then burst out laughing. Bridget remained arms crossed and tapped her right foot which she usually did when she was upset.

"What's so funny?" She finally asked.

Vinny wiped away some snot from his beastly nose. "Well, if you really read the Bible you would know about Job 26:7 and Isaiah 40:20." Vinny said adamantly.

Bridget refused to drop her defensive shield. "Oh yeah... And what do those verses say?"

"Job 26:7 mentions that the earth hangs on nothing and Isaiah 40:22 mentions God sitting upon the circle of the earth not the square of the earth." Replied Vinny trying to sound intellectual and smiling in his glory.

Bridget pursed her bubbly lips acknowledging her possible defeat. The Gadget Man still wasn't done critiquing her handiwork. He flipped through another 20 or 30 pages and then read some more out loud.

"It says here there is a contradiction between Isaiah 43:25 and Mark 3:29. Isaiah 43:25 Say I, even I, am he that blottereth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins. Yet Mark 3:29 says But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation."

Before Vinny could read on Bridget cut him off. "Yeah, how do you explain that one Mr. Smarty pants? If Isaiah 43:25 clearly states that God will forget and blottereth out our sins how do you explain Mark 3:29?"

Her pretty hazel eyes fluttered like a humming bird's wings. She was on top now and she knew it.

Vinny took a few steps back and stammered. "I...uh...I...I guess he means he'll forgive all our sins except blaspheme." He quickly tried to change the subject. "So if you don't believe in God what do you believe in?"

"I believe in Karma." She said with a torrent of confidence.

Vinny buried his face into his hands and massaged his temple while trying to keep it together. Who meddled with this poor girl's mind?

"Is Karma that nonsense about proverbs like what goes around comes around and if you do good it will come back to you?"

Bridget nodded with a perplexed look like she didn't understand why that belief sounded so bogus. It sure made more sense than some dude walking on water and feeding 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fishes.

The Gadget Man plopped the book on her desk and placed both of his hands on her shoulders. "We got to get you some help girl." He said softly looking into her eyes.

Bridget took a step back. "Me some help? How do you explain all your antics?"

Vinny smiled like a car salesman. "Oh, that's different. I was led by the spirit therefore under no law. Galatians 5:18 says But if ye be led of the spirit, ye are not under the law."

Bridget chortled while cupping her hand over her mouth like she was talking to a madman. "So you think you can just jolly well do whatever you want cuz you're led by the spirit?"

Vinny stood tall showing his shark teeth which meant *Sure why not?*

Now Bridget was the one laughing. "You're silly! You must not have ever read Romans 13:1 which clearly tells us to submit to governing authorities."

Vinny turned his head to the side averting his eyes and staring at the paintings on the wall. He had forgotten about that verse and was shocked that Bridget knew so much

about the Bible.

"It's okay babe. The Bible always gets misconstrued. But I have one last closing argument." She was feeling good now. Feeling like a real know it all. The Gadget Man desperately tried to get himself back together to defend his way of thinking.

"We came from Adam and Eve correct?"

The Gadget Man nodded his head up and down almost not wanting to hear what came next.

"What color were Adam and Eve?"

Vinny clucked his tongue and tried to think back. "Um...the Bible doesn't say but why would it matter?"

Bridget pressed on. "Well, let's suppose they were white. If they were, where did black people come from? Even if one was white and one was black then where did Chinese people come from? How about Spanish people? A Spanish couple can't make black or white babies. It's never happened in the history of mankind! Obviously there's a lot that the Bible is not telling us and did God write the Bible? Of course not. The Bible was written by man. Are you going to put all your fidelity into something written by man that likes to tell stories about talking clouds?"

Bridget Jones had just administered the coup de grace and it hit Vinny like a freight train. It hit him so hard he had to grab his chest and hold his heart in place to keep it from falling out. He didn't answer her question but he did something he knew how to do.

He grabbed her and kissed her.

CHAPTER 91

The harmonic sounds emanating from "The People's Church" could be heard from the other end of the block on Kipper street. "The People's Church" had just been built a year ago and the freshly polished brass bells on top of the church gave it a nice touch.

For being the third Sunday morning in January, the African American church rejoiced like it was Easter Sunday. Even if Tony decided to come to church today (which he never did) he may have a tough time finding a place to sit because all of the pews were full.

The folksy audience in the crowd swayed back and forth holding their hands up to the heavens as sounds from the choir grew louder. Tony wouldn't dare come to the church anyways because he couldn't stand to be around his ex-girlfriend Keisha. It bothered him that she got full custody of their 6 month old son Clarence and the child support he was paying bore a hole deep within his long gangster pockets. He was already two weeks behind in his child support payments. Tony had thought about merking the broad that hardly ever let him see his son but he couldn't. Deep down he knew he'd make a lousy father and Keisha was proving to be a good mother.

The crowd grew quiet as Keisha stepped down from amidst the choir and stepped up to the mike. She looked absolutely beautiful even though her long navy blue gown matched the others in the choir. Her athletic figure made her prominent amongst the others.

The piano softly warmed up as she got ready to sing her

favorite song "His eye is on the Sparrow". Keisha scrutinized the crowd until she finally spotted her grandmother winking at her and nodding her head.

The piano got a little louder and faster and it was soon her time to start the song. All eyes were on her but she was not in the least bit nervous and knew she would not flub because she knew the song since she was 15.

Keisha had a few more seconds before it was time to open her mouth and she quickly thought about Tony. *What was that loser doing right about now?* Probably still sleeping and all hung over at his apartment.

Keisha quickly relinquished the thought and opened her mouth starting off the song right on key. The crowd became enthralled and hung onto her every word. She was the best singer of the group and it felt good to be the star. She made a point of shifting her gaze like a lighthouse giving every member of the audience a chance to make eye contact and see her pretty face. Some of the members were teary eyed but she was already used to this. Keisha gave a grandiose performance as usual then quickly took her seat back within the choir. People were still staring at her after she sat down.

A well dressed man in a jet black suit approached the podium holding a thick leather Bible. He was the pastor of the church and excited to get started. Pastor Brimba laid his Bible on the podium and leaned towards the mike to greet the church. A few deacons sitting on a pew behind him pulled on their pant legs showing off their checkered socks and freshly polished wing tipped shoes.

While the pastor spoke Keisha shifted her gaze beyond the nave of the church and towards the vestibule. Her moment

of fame was over and she always had a bad habit of daydreaming throughout the service. She squinted her eyes trying to see beyond the glass panel of the entrance doors and saw what looked like a badged emblem on somebody's arm wearing a dark blue shirt. Then it dawned on her. The police! The nosy pigs were here so something must be happening. Before she could even fully assimilate the situation she felt a tap on the shoulder from behind. It startled her and almost made her jump in her seat.

A female red headed officer in uniform wearing too much perfume whispered something into her ear that would change her life forever. The flat chested officer lent out a hand and the two of them slinked out towards the back exit. The words "There's been an emergency. You need to come now." buzzed around in Keisha's mind like a swarm of bees as she followed the officer out into the corridor.

When they reached the hallway there was a handful of uniforms talking to a teenage girl weeping tears all over her new flowery Sunday dress. The weeping girl's name was Tabitha and she was only 16 years old standing 5ft. 4" and sporting a French braid that almost touched the tip of her butt.

Officers clustered around her with pens and note pads hanging onto her every word. Keisha felt her heart tremor like a 9.0 earthquake as she wended towards the devastated girl. Tabitha was in charge of the church nursery and this could not be good news.

"What's going on? What happened to Clarence?" Demanded Keisha hoisting her lanky arms onto her hips. Tabitha tried to pull herself together and accepted a handkerchief from one of the friendly officers.

"A man came in wearing a ski mask. I tried to stop him but he flashed a piece. He just took Clarence and ran!" She pouted burying her innocent face into her hands and weeping like a baby.

Keisha saw her world crash down like a wrecking ball being smashed into the side of an old abandoned building. This couldn't be happening, no, not her. She had dedicated her life to Jesus and did good in the community. Her 6 month old baby Clarence was the light of her world. Nobody could take him away from her. Not even God.

Keisha was too distraught to cry. Her only instincts were to run away and search for her 6 month old baby herself at any cost. Keisha ran down the hall screaming at the top of her lungs and quickly tripped over her high heels. As she laid on the ground in the fetal position screaming officers rushed to her rescue. Then it finally dawned on her.

Tony.

Tony had to be behind all of this.

CHAPTER 92

It didn't take long for Baltimore city cops to find little Clarence. But what they had discovered would be an eyesore for the entire community.

Two Baltimore cops stood behind the doorway of Tony's bedroom of his apartment on the fifth floor of the building complex gaping like orphans at Disney world. This was not good at all and more than likely some law enforcement personnel would lose their job over this if they made the

wrong move. 6 month old Clarence was squirming around in a wooden crib adjacent to a window that was just partially opened maybe just a few inches.

While it was hunky-dory that the baby appeared to be alive and okay there was a catch. The whole outside of the crib was wired with enough explosives to blow up the entire room and then some. A big LED display almost the size of a score board at a basketball game was counting down each second showing them that the place was going to blow in about 70 hours and 11 minutes. Unfortunately the clincher was Tony's entire bedroom had motion sensors positioned in every corner of the room. According to the typed note they found taped to the outside trim of the doorway if anyone entered the room the motion sensors would detect it and the whole room including the baby would be blown to smithereens.

Officer Brown's hand shook as he continued reading the neatly typed note. He was a bear of a man and a fine cop. One of the most well respected African American cops on the force. He had never encountered anything as strange as this in his entire 15 years in law enforcement.

The note said,"If I can't have my child then nobody gets my child. In 72 hours Clarence will die. The entire bedroom is rigged with motion sensors so if anyone or anything enters the room the bomb will detonate early. There's enough explosives strapped to the crib to take out the bedroom and then some. Sorry it had to be like this but that's how we do in the hood."

The lights were out in Tony's bedroom and Officer Brown was afraid even to shine his mag light inside of the room for fear that it could trigger the motion sensors. Brown's subordinate, Officer Lance, stood next to him a full foot

shorter and tried to peer over Brown's shoulder at the note.

"What are we gonna do about this one?" Lance finally asked breaking the silence.

Brown lifted the note towards his nose and sniffed it hoping to find a clue.

"I don't know. I've never saw such a pusillanimous action like this in my life. I guess the bomb squad is gonna have their hands full."

"Where do you think Tony ran off to?" Asked Lance.

Brown grunted and nearly choked on his own saliva. "I don't know. His vehicle is not here so we sent out an APB as soon as we found out. I know the kid from the trouble he's been in before. This guy is dumber than a box of rocks. He couldn't have done this alone. He definitely had some help." He said passing the note.

The inside of Tony's room looked spacious compared to the rest of his apartment. The bedroom door was open halfway just enough to see little Clarence safe and sound in the crib. Well, obviously not safe at any rate. A poster of Michael Jordan in mid air ready to slam dunk from the foul line was tacked to the door. Tony's bed wasn't made and there were a lot of clothes lying on the carpeted floor. The entire place looked very poorly kept.

Officer Lance was feeling a little uneasy just being within the proximity of the bomb but he didn't want to show weakness. He had to keep talking to get through it.

"So what do we do now?" He said staring up at the big man.

Officer Brown scratched his Brillo pad goatee and mulled for a while before he spoke.

"We're gonna play this one by the book. We have to. There's going to be a lot of media exposure on this." He said while opening up a clear plastic ziplock bag and depositing the typed written note. "We don't know for sure what we're up against so what we're going to do right now is seal off this entire building." Said Brown tugging on his partner's shoulder. "Let's get out of here. This whole building has to be evacuated."

CHAPTER 93

The People magazine resting on the armrest of the sofa looked extremely enticing, at least to Bridget anyway. Brad Pitt's pretty boy face along with his fringy haircut radiated from the cover of the magazine like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. The popular actor had women swooning across the nation. Maybe even across the world.

It was 4pm Sunday afternoon and Bridget sat on the sofa in Vinny's barn bored out of her mind. The Gadget Man was hunched over the work bench fixing a stereo about the size of a microwave and whistling a merry tune. He assured his fiance that he was just fixing a stereo for an old friend and it would only take an hour. Later he would take her out to dinner.

After twiddling her thumbs for a few minutes, Bridget couldn't resist and picked up the People magazine. She looked good in her faded blue jeans and silky green button-down shirt. Sometimes she wished Vinny would pay attention to how much time she spent preening her hair into cinnamon swirl

like buns perched behind her head like Mickey Mouse ears just the way he liked it.

Bridget leafed through the pages while Vinny tried to engage in a conversation.

"I think I finally figured it out." He said melting solder into a circuit board with his favorite soldering gun.

Bridget looked up from the magazine. "What's that Hun?" She asked not really paying attention.

Vinny was all dressed in black like he usually wore. Black jeans, boots, and a long sleeved black cotton shirt.

"Well, the beginning and everything. With Adam and Eve I mean."

Bridget pretended to listen but began reading an article about spanking children.

The Gadget Man droned on. "Yeah, I got to thinking. Evidently the human race had to multiply by Adam and Eve's children marrying their brothers and sisters and making more children."

Bridget poked her head out of the magazine for a quick second. "Huh?" She seemed dumbfounded.

"Well, I lived with a lot of Amish people growing up and heard stories about some of their babies having 6 toes as a result of them marrying their cousins. Maybe that's what happened in the Biblical days. As a result of Adam and Eve's children being coerced to sleep with each in order for the human race to multiply, strange blemishes derived such as

change in the pigment of their skin and hair texture thus creating Chinese, Spanish, African Americans, etc." He said twisting two wires together.

Bridget felt the bile rise in her throat. This grossed her out immensely. "So now you're talking about incest! I don't think God would want brothers and sisters sleeping with each other!" She said flipping past 10 pages in frustration.

Vinny tried his best to defend his creator. "Well, maybe it was okay since nobody else was around."

Vinny's reply went through one ear and out the other in a nanosecond. It was obvious that Vinny was making stupid talk so Bridget indulged herself in an article about cheating lovers.

"Look babe, let's not argue about something that neither of us or our grandparents were around to witness. My insight is not going to change about Christianity." She replied and quickly started reading the article.

Vinny dropped the subject and guzzled down the few swigs of Budweiser. He had already assured her that his drinking was okay because Jesus turned the water into wine at the end of the wedding when all the other wine was consumed so therefore getting drunk had to be okay.

Bridget, the voracious reader, read the magazine article intently until something weird caught her eye. One of the key words in the third sentence had a bunch of holes poked into it making the word unreadable. It was very irksome and had Bridget curious. She then looked up at the top right corner of the page and noticed that the corner had been folded. Already enthralled by the article, Bridget chose to read on.

As she continued to read she noticed that the article had been very subtly stippled. She held the magazine closer to her face and observed tiny pinholes intentionally punched above certain letters in the article. Bridget quickly focused her gaze on the word that had been mutilated and then read very slowly.

Meanwhile.... Vinny was still hunched over the workbench playing with the stereo and whistling the "American Pie" song. Bridget read very slowly until she noticed the first pinhole punched in over top of the letter "H". She read even slower until she noticed another pinhole above the letter "E". Pretty soon the same thing happened with the letter "L" and then soon "P".

After she fell upon this new discovery Bridget became concerned and reached for her golden glitter pen that she always kept in her shirt pocket. As she carefully deciphered this secret hidden code, before long she had already written out "Help me I am kidnapped."

At first Bridget didn't know what to think as she wrote the discovered letters on the side of the article. But when she wrote out "Tina Anderson" she felt her heart sink like the Titanic. Who could possibly forget the horrible Anderson case that annotated CNN headlines for months?

Bridget's heart raced as she went over the article one more time to make sure she deciphered the hidden code correctly. Unfortunately she got the same exact results. Why was it every time she fell in love something bad always happened?

Bridget's palms became sweaty and she felt her muscles cramp up as a million and one thoughts entered her mind

and she reminisced about the past.

Vinny was still oblivious as to her new discovery and cranked the stereo up feeling elated that he had finally fixed it. As Bridget scratched out what she had spelled out in the magazine she began to remember things about Vinny. Their first date at the Sushi restaurant and how it seemed so strange that he had so many hundred dollar bills. It explained his palsied hands when a police officer followed them home. Then she remembered the firework show from his back porch and how he could detonate fireworks via pushing buttons on his cellphone.

Little tears welled up in Bridget's eyes as she felt paralyzed resting on the sofa. The pieces of the mysterious puzzle finally fit together. Since they had announced their engagement Vinny's parole officer had left him alone and given him plenty of room to breathe. It suddenly dawned on her that Vinny probably didn't even love her at all and was just using her as a tool to keep the authorities from prying.

Bridget took a few deep breaths, she furtively wiped the tears from her eyes, and assimilated the cold hard facts. Vinny was a ruthless serial killer who wasn't capable of loving another human being, because Vincent Young, the man standing just 20ft away with his back towards her, is in fact, the Gadget Man.

CHAPTER 94

"No, I don't believe it. My brother wouldn't do something like that. My folks didn't raise him that way." Said Alvin shaking his head in contempt.

Bridget sat on a white leather sofa with her legs crossed and

fondled her orange plastic purse like she was petting a kitten. She longed for a cigarette but knew better to ask just judging on the condition of the brand new almost half a million dollar house. It was her second trip to her future brother in law's house. The vanilla carpet was soft and squishy without any beer or coffee stains unlike the carpet in Vinny's trailer. To her left was a beautiful fireplace that ran on gas and could be started by remote control. Out in the kitchen she could see lofty swivel bar stools encompassing a glossy onyx counter top and a refrigerator so big it looked like it belonged to a celebrity. Bridget had always dreamed about living in homes like this but knew she would never find a mature enough guy to help her establish her dream home.

Alvin sat in a hand carved rocking chair across from Bridget still dressed in his uniform minus his shoes with his feet perched on a rocking hassock that matched the rhythm of the rocking chair. Alvin had a doctor's look of concern on his face and kept his gaze on his smelly socks that were dilating as he spread out his worn out toes. The starlike epaulet on the side of his shoulder was marred suggesting at one point he had been involved in some sort of scuffle.

Bridget nervously crossed and uncrossed her thunder thigh legs.

"I don't want to believe it either! I love Vincent, really, I do. But there is definitely something going on with him." She said squeezing her unique purse out of frustration.

It was still Sunday and getting close to 10pm. Alvin was having trouble relinquishing the thought of his favorite television show "The Man Show" which was supposed to be the last episode coming on in about 20 minutes when Marie would be leaving for work. Marie was Alvin's newly wed wife

and two months pregnant but it had not yet started to show.

Marie scurried around the house in her green hospital scrubs trying to get ready to work the night shift at the local hospital. Weighing only 105 pounds Marie had the body of a gymnast and the smile of a Hollywood star. Bridget could tell by observing Marie's gesticulations that she was a high maintenance woman.

Marie pranced around the house humming an unknown tune while spraying hairspray into her jet black hair. In just a blink of an eye Marie popped out of the kitchen holding two mugs of steaming hot coffee and handed one to Alvin and then one to Bridget which she graciously accepted.

"Careful it's hot." Forewarned Marie extending her arm and showing off her new diamond bracelet she had just got for Christmas. Bridget took small sips pursing her lips and savoring the English flavor. Alvin looked too distressed to even sip his coffee and remained gawking at the Bridget Jones look-A-like with a deadpan look on his face.

"So, please tell me more about this so called hidden code you found in one of Vinny's People magazines." He said scratching a dried up particle of food from the tip of the mug that the dishwasher didn't pick up.

Bridget quickly used her free hand to dig into her orange purse and fished around for the stippled article she had ripped from the People magazine. Before she could rise from the sofa to hand Alvin the article, his fatigue eluded him and he sprung from the rocking chair and snatched it out of her hand. She wondered if he was going to chew it up and swallow it decomposing the evidence that might incriminate his only brother.

Alvin's eagle eye vision was quick to pick up the subtle pinholes intentionally punched above certain letters in an effort to cry out for help.

Meanwhile...

Marie donned a furry coat and gyrated towards the front door as she put it on. She waved a cutesy bye-bye to both of them and slipped out the front door.

After decoding the hidden message, Alvin folded up the magazine article and stuffed it into his front shirt pocket. "You said there's more to the story. What other things have you discovered?" He said with both hands now resting on his hips.

"Well, I called up the Church Of The Brethren and spoke with the secretary. She said that she is positive that Vinny wasn't at church this morning. Vincent rarely ever misses a service."

"You don't go to church with him?"

Bridget shook her head. "That's where him and I fall out. I've believed in Karma since I was 16."

"Okay, I'm a little confused. What does Vinny's not being in church have to do with anything?"

Bridget cupped her hand over her mouth. "You don't know what happened in Baltimore this morning? It was all over the news. A 6 month old infant was kidnapped from a church and placed in a crib with bombs strapped around it!" She said standing up to get her point across, "I'm not positive, but

I think the father of that kid was one of Vinny's students from 7th grade that got him in trouble. The police are linking the father to the crime because he is missing but I think Vinny may have set him up." She said wiping a tear from her eye.

Alvin tried to keep himself together but the news he was hearing was disturbing. It suddenly dawned on him what Bridget was talking about.

"I spent all day in the squad car patrolling so I didn't get a chance to watch television. Come to think about it, I do recall the Amber alert on the radio this morning and hearing something about it." He said digging his toes into the carpet. Alvin still had a hard time believing his older brother could possibly be the Gadget Man. He finally took his first sip of coffee and tried desperately to put his mind at ease.

Bridget had tiny tears trickling down her rosy cheeks. It seemed like every time she fell in love there was always a catch. A drug addiction, psychosis, or in Shaggy's case, important body parts on the fritz.

"Where's my brother at right now?" Asked Alvin pulling a cellphone out of his pocket.

Bridget plucked a Kleenex from her unique purse and pampered her impeccable face.

"I don't know where he's at. We got into an argument at dinner over religion again. We were supposed to catch a movie after dinner but he seemed really upset and said I was acting up. Then he accused me of sleeping with my ex-boyfriend who I haven't even seen in three years. He paid the tab at the restaurant, gave me 20 bucks and told me I had to find my own ride home and then took off!" She said

with resentment coming into her voice. She watched Alvin punch some numbers into his cellphone.

"Who you calling?"

"I've got a friend in the FBI that might be able to help us out. He has a lot of clout with the bureau." He said holding the phone to his ear. Bridget began to feel like a snitch but she knew she was doing the right thing. She secretly wished she could put all of this behind her and lock Marie out of the house then live the rest of her days with Alvin. Marie had the tight body of an Olympic skater but Bridget had a prominent buxom that looked like something you might see at a renaissance fair which kept guys gawking from hundreds of feet away. Sometimes she wondered if that was her only asset.

Bridget took her seat on the sofa again and nursed her coffee while preparing herself to eavesdrop on Alvin's phone conversation. Everything was completely quiet except for her beating heart while she waited for Alvin's friend to take his phone call.

After a few rings Alvin's thick uni-brow jounced like Tiger hopping around from Winnie-The-Pooh. Bridget leaned forward and tried to listen intently.

"Erik? Hey what's up this is Alvin..." He said rolling his eyes. Erik had curtailed him and had already begun gabbling like usual. "Oh yeah, she's doing fine. She's two months pregnant now. Hey look I really need to ask you something. How much do you know about this so called Gadget Man?" Said Alvin quickly pulling a pocket sized note pad from his shirt pocket and clicking his pen.

Alvin's face looked like it grew 3 inches longer as he scribbled on the pad. "Okay you said they believe he was prior service, tall, and well educated in the field of electronics and was believed to be seen driving a red Jeep Wrangler?" Said Alvin incredulously shaking his head at Bridget. Although he rarely stayed in touch with his brother, he had never saw Vincent in a red Jeep.

Bridget raised her hands palms up signaling that she didn't know either. With her keen sense of hearing, she thought she could make out Erik's voice on the other end of the line.

"Is this all speculation or do you have any real evidence for me?" Asked Alvin crossing his fingers behind his back. If Vincent really was the Gadget Man, Alvin's good reputation might be quashed forever just for being his brother.

"None? You sure about that?" He said with a sigh of relief. "Oh... I don't have any leads I was just curious that's all...yeah I know...that reward money is kinda high...hey look I gotta go thanks for your insight." He said winking at Bridget as if to say *everything is going to be okay*.

Just before he was about to flip his cellphone shut his eyes got all big. "Oh, there's more?" He said clicking his pen and getting ready to jot.

What he wrote on the pocket sized notepad made an indentation into the next 5 pages. At the bottom right hand corner of his notation Alvin had written out and carefully circled the most puzzling piece of the puzzle that would eventually tie everything together.

5 twists.

CHAPTER 95

Alvin never did get a chance to take his uniform off Sunday night. Instead he found himself in his toasty warm cruiser racing towards Vinny's place at the speed of light. The curvy roads forced him to slow down and he found himself fidgeting with the knob on the radio just to keep his sanity. If Vinny really was behind all of this it would look better if Alvin brought him in himself. He almost got lost finding the place because he had only been to Vinny's trailer once when Vinny first moved in.

As Alvin pulled into the long stony driveway he noticed Vinny's truck was missing and all the lights were off. It was 12:15am and all Alvin could infer was Vinny was probably at a local watering hole drinking off some steam.

There was an eerie light glowing from the barn and it had him very curious. Bridget had mentioned that Vinny usually spent a lot of time in the barn and that's where she found the People magazine.

A few jagged stones spat out from the tires as the squad car squelched to a stop. Alvin quietly exited the car and dug his thumbs inside his belt and pulled his pants up a few inches like cops often do. The 13 pounds of gear that they wear on their belt causes their pants to droop so cops are often seen yanking up their pants.

As Alvin moseyed towards the barn he unbuttoned the top of his gun holster then quickly snapped it back shut. Vinny wouldn't attack his own blood would he?

Alvin left his Glock40 alone and slinked towards the barn. He spotted a small window but it was 8ft from the ground. He

snooped around a little and soon found a rusty barrel to prop underneath the window so he could peer inside the barn.

Not making any more noise than a mouse stealing a piece of cheese, Alvin stepped on top of the barrel and peeked through the window. The lights were on but nobody was inside.

Alvin hopped off the barrel and made his way towards a door on the side of the barn. To his dismay, the door had a combination lock hanging from it. Fortunately for him, Mark had showed him years ago how easy it was to pick those combination locks without the use of lock picking tools.

Alvin got on his knees and placed the back of the combination lock against his ear. He turned the dial clockwise very slowly until he heard the faint ting sound. Then he turned it very slowly counter clockwise until he could hear the tiny pins once again. After hearing the familiar sound he turned the dial clockwise once again and had no problem opening the lock.

Alvin left the combination lock hanging on the hinge and pushed the door open. Entering the barn felt like an equivalence of the ambiance you would feel entering a cemetery late at night. Death. The smell of death seemed to be lurking about.

The first thing Alvin noticed when he stepped inside the barn was the boat was missing. He had never saw it before, but hadn't Theresa once mentioned that Vinny had a boat?

Alvin quickly began snooping around being careful not to meddle anything that the Gadget Man might later discover. If anyone took a guess as to what the infamous Gadget Man's

lair might look like, they might picture a hodge podge similar to the mess Alvin was standing in right now. Off to the side of the cluttered work bench were numerous appliances all torn apart. Microwaves, televisions, air conditioners, even a Norelco electric razor had been taken apart.

A gut feeling hunch lured Alvin to the big blue plastic trash barrel which appeared to be overflowing. Alvin was in no mood to pick through trash but noticed an empty chocolate milk carton perched prominently at the top of the pile that seemed to be screaming at him.

Without touching the 16 ounce milk carton Alvin was able to lean over the barrel and read the expiration date printed on the side. He seemed surprised to learn that the milk had expired 8 months ago especially since Vinny was so picky when it came to expired dairy food. Even if Vinny disposed of the milk carton 8 months ago what was it doing on the very top of the trash?

Alvin found a broom, flipped it upside down, and shoved the handle into the trash barrel. After pushing it less than a foot into the barrel the broomstick struck something solid. The experienced law enforcer put the pieces together in his head and realized there had to be a hidden compartment inside the barrel. He placed the broom on the floor and bear hugged the plastic barrel and pushed up on it until it popped in half. It was contraband galore. Sticks of dynamite, model rocket accessories, pager guts, and even pyro sensors.

He felt his heart beat faster as he put the trash barrel back together and continued his investigation. This was not looking good at all. Alvin walked over to the pile of appliances on the floor and spotted a chain saw that didn't appear it was ever taken apart unlike the rest of the stuff.

Something told him to examine the blades on the chain and the dark red spots looked all too familiar and definitely weren't paint. There was no doubt in Alvin's mind that the red stains on the chain weren't blood. He decided he better put gloves on before he finished his snooping around.

A big black and gray Sony boom box setting on the middle of the workbench and surrounded by screwdrivers caught his attention next. The black plastic casing in the back of the stereo had been removed and rested at the corner of the workbench. It was quite evident that Vinny had been recently working on the stereo.

Alvin recalled the information that Erik had conveyed to him and closed his eyes and said a quick prayer before he spun the boom box around to examine the tinkering Vinny had done to it. When he opened his eyes he found himself retching from the shock of what he was looking at.

Clear as day were red and blue wires that had been soldered to the circuit board. Every one of them had exactly 5 twists.

CHAPTER 96

A pair of cross eyed headlights raced up the stony driveway and pointed to the facade of the barn making a big round fiery circle which gradually diminished as Vinny pulled the big Tacoma into the driveway. It was 3am and the Gadget Man was stacked and pissed off like a professional gambler coming home from a rough night. He had smashed into an 8 point buck on his way home from the bar and messed the front end of his truck up pretty bad. Especially the right headlight which shone more to the left than the left headlight did.

Vinny evidently was not having a good night and the knuckles on his right hand were bleeding from punching the inside roof of the cab out of frustration. *What was Bridget's problem anyway? Why had she been acting weird all day?*

Vinny opened the driver's side door and spewed Sunday night's dinner all over the driveway. He didn't even bother to check out the damage to the front end of his truck, but rather ambled towards the trailer with a nice warm bed on his mind.

A stray black cat raced past him nearly tripping him and ran towards the barn. *Wasn't coming across a black cat supposed to be bad luck?*

Vinny followed the cat with his drunken eyes and watched the black cat leap onto a rusty metal barrel that had been flipped upside down then quickly jumped off and ran to the other side of the barn. At first Vinny thought nothing of it and proceeded towards the trailer when he stopped abruptly in his tracks.

The rusty metal barrel.

Had he accidentally left it there? Didn't he usually keep it outside on the other side of the barn? Vinny felt himself sobering up faster than a crew pit working on a race car. He sprinted towards the barrel to investigate. After noticing it was neatly propped under the window it was obvious that someone had been snooping around. Bridget maybe?

Vinny opened the combination lock and stepped inside the barn. Everything seemed to be in order and nothing had been tampered with. The Gadget Man quickly scoured the inside of the barn counting tools and making sure nothing

disappeared. When he was satisfied he zipped up his black leather jacket, relocked the barn door, and went inside the trailer to sleep away the rest of the morning.

Once inside the trailer, his gastric stomach churned hastily telling him if he didn't go to bed soon and lie still, he would be spewing all over the floor once again. Vinny held a hand over his stomach, took short breaths, and realized there was one more thing he had to do before the night was over. He sauntered over to the bedroom dresser and flicked on the LCD screen to his laptop. The laptop had a wireless receiver plugged into it and had a yellow video cable wire running into the VCR. The wireless receiver received signals from a micro-cam with the lens about the size of a pinhole hidden inside the barn. That's why the Gadget Man always left the lights on inside the barn because the VCR inside his bedroom accurately recorded any activity taking place inside the workshop when he wasn't around.

Vinny anxiously rewound the tape and then pushed play. A vivid picture of inside the barn came on the screen and everything looked legit. The Gadget Man pushed the fast forward button then sat at the edge of the bed and yawned. Moments later he thought he was hallucinating when he saw a uniformed figure dancing around on the screen.

Vinny pushed the pause button and gaped in disbelief. Like an objecting lawyer jumping out of his chair, the Gadget Man sprung from the bed and glued his face to the screen. *No, no, no! It couldn't be could it?* Sure enough there was his brother Alvin snooping around and tampering with things.

Vinny slung the remote across the room and it splattered against the wall causing the casing to pop off and triple "A" batteries flew out. The adrenaline running through his body

sobered him up so quickly he found himself digging through the closet searching for the left over ransom money from the Anderson kidnapping.

Vinny hoisted a black Jenson book bag over his shoulders and then rummaged through his sock drawer for some fake IDs. He was no longer safe living it up out here in the bucolic environs. It was time for the Gadget Man to go on the lam.

CHAPTER 97

The next day the FBI building became more busy than the New York stock exchange. Word spread like wildfire that Vincent Young was the Gadget Man and considered to be extremely dangerous. Phones rang all day long with possible leads as to where he might be or where he might go. Everyone was trying to collect on the big reward money for his capture.

Officials believed that Tony was dead and his corpse probably dropped off in a river. 6 month old Clarence was still alive and well in the crib but police really didn't know what to do. The entire bedroom that the crib was in was equipped with motion sensors that prevented them from getting up close to the bomb to figure out a way to disarm it. Time was running out anyway before the bomb would go off on its own killing the baby and possibly destroying most of the building.

The entire apartment complex had to be evacuated and tenants were threatening with lawsuits because they had to temporarily leave their home. It was imperative that they capture the Gadget Man alive because only he would know how to defuse the bomb.

While the nation wide manhunt for Vincent Young AKA Gadget Man was on Vinny was laying on his belly behind some bushes flanking the side of Alvin's ritzy home. He had had a very rough day. The poor Gadget Man had to cut his long greasy hair and remove his eye patch so people couldn't recognize him.

In lieu of his eye patch he wore a pair of snazzy sunglasses that gave him a little trouble seeing in the dark. It wasn't very hard checking into a seedy hotel with a fake ID. Hotel attendants rarely checked the faces on driver's licenses and were usually just happy to see some form of ID.

Vinny pushed the indiglo button on his wristwatch and saw that it was almost 10pm. Any minute Marie would be leaving for work to go work the night shift at the hospital. He yearned for a cigarette but didn't want to risk giving himself away over a dirty habit. He was certain nobody knew he was hiding behind the bushes. The siding of Alvin's house was perfectly clean and looked like it had just been power washed. No blotches of dirt or green stains from loose grass clippings spewing out of the lawn mower.

Vinny snapped out of his daydream when he heard the electric garage door opening. This was the big moment, it was finally show time.

The Gadget Man sprung to his feet and realized his right leg had fallen asleep. He quickly pummeled his leg with his right hand until the blood flow replenished. He sidled along the side of the house like James Bond in the video game.

Marie backed the gray Acura Integra out of the garage slowly with her head turned and faced toward the street. The red luminous brake lights flickered as she carefully backed

the car down the driveway and toward the street. This was Vinny's big moment.

While Marie's full attention was geared towards what was going on behind her, Vinny slinked into the garage undetected just before the garage door closed. It was easier than breaking into Helen Keller's home.

Since everyone now knew the Gadget Man's identity, Vinny screwed the silencer onto his 9mm before he opened the door which led to the kitchen. He kicked off his loafers and tip-tied through the kitchen towards the living room holding the piece at chest height and flicking off the safety button.

Alvin was wearing black Nike sweatpants that were too baggy on him and a red Phillies T-shirt that he had since high school. Vinny peered around the corner and saw his brother slightly rocking in a rocking chair surfing through the 101 cable channels on the 46 inch screen Sony television. His long legs were perched on a padded green checkered hassock which prominently displayed his dirty white smelly socks.

The Gadget Man crept up slowly behind him curling his toes as they touched down on the carpet being careful not to make a sound.

As soon as Alvin stumbled upon a cable channel that piqued his interest he laid the television remote in his lap and leaned back into the rocking chair. As he leaned back he felt something cold pushing into the nape of his neck.

"Don't move!" Mandated a voice behind him. The rocking chair stopped rocking and Alvin didn't move a single muscle, he didn't even raise his hands.

Vinny pushed the silencer firmly into the back of his neck forcing Alvin's head to loll forward.

"Put your hands up nice and slow where I can see them." Instructed Vinny.

Alvin did as he was told and extended his hands skyward very slowly. For some reason he was acting very nonchalant, almost as if he was expecting to see him.

"Stand up slowly and don't turn around or you'll be a dead piggy."

Alvin stood up slowly from the rocking chair and the television remote fell from his lap and banged against the wooden rocker startling them both.

"Why are you doing this?" Pleaded Alvin.

The Gadget Man leaned forward and spat into his younger brother's ear. "What were you doing snooping around my barn?" He said pushing the 9mm so far into the back of his neck it was turning red.

Alvin had not yet seen his brother's face but it was pretty obvious who it was. In one swift motion, Vinny withdrew the 9mm from Alvin's neck and gyrated to the front of him and pointed the pistol at his little brother's chest. Alvin didn't move and kept his hands high in the air. He could now see his perpetrator face to face. Vinny didn't look the least bit scared. It was clear he had the upper hand.

"You didn't answer my question." Hissed Vinny, "Why were you snooping around my barn?"

Alvin's eyes grew big as he stared at the silencer pointed at his chest. He played dumb like most of the criminals he arrested always did.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't screw with me. I saw you on tape." Replied Vinny off-putting. The gun remained pointed at Alvin's chest.

Alvin the socialite, mulled over at what angle he wanted to hit this. "You killed a lot of people." He said debilitating. He thought Vinny appeared to be high on drugs.

The Gadget Man snarled exposing his shark teeth. "So what! They were all bad people and deserved to die!"

Alvin tried to remain calm and keep eye contact refraining from staring at Vinny's piece. "You had something to do with that fire that broke out in Baltimore and killed that innocent girl didn't you? I know you're capable of it. And Bridget, she was just a patsy right?"

The Gadget Man couldn't help but smile. The downside to committing crime and getting away with it was you could never take credit for it. Vinny was feeling good and in the mood for guessing games. He continued smiling like the joker on Batman when he suddenly remembered something. While Alvin deduced his smile as a sign of guilt, Vinny pulled a syringe out of his pocket and eyeballed it closely. Officer Young looked frightened. He had a fear of needles.

"What's that for?" He asked nervously.

While holding the 9mm steady in one hand, and the syringe

in the other, Vinny tossed the syringe to his brother. Alvin caught it in mid-air and looked at it stupidly.

"I don't understand. It's empty. Were you planning on injecting me with truth serum? What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I want your blood idiot! And you're gonna give it to me!"

"Huh?"

"You're gonna give me a sample of blood so I can test the DNA."

"DNA? For what?" Alvin was completely clueless.

"To find out if you're my real brother that's what. The blond hair, the blue eyes, the cocky attitude, none of those traits resembles a true Young."

Alvin smiled as if he knew something or maybe he was just amused at Vinny's stupidity. Vinny couldn't be sure. Out of nowhere Theresa popped into the living room pointing a Glock40 right at Vinny.

"I think I can answer that question." Said Theresa becoming a totally different person.

"Mom! What are you doing here?" Said Vinny fully surprised.

"A true mother always knows what her sons are up to. The big question is what are you doing here?"

Vinny was shocked by his mother's bravado. She even kept the pistol pointed right at his chest without shaking the piece.

Before the Gadget Man could answer Theresa continued on. "We prayed to God that you would never figure it out. With Mark not being Alvin's real father and all..."

Vinny cut her off. "We? Alvin knew this too?"

Alvin nodded his head in consent. Vinny became enraged. It was his turn to play guessing games.

"So let me guess. Barry the car mechanic? Was that why you refused to let dad buy you a new car because you liked that little Dodge rust bucket that kept breaking down? You wanted an excuse to see your secret lover?" He asked almost wanting to cry.

Theresa nodded her head while looking into the eyes of her oldest son.

"But mom how could you? You're supposed to be Christian and this secret affair must've went on for years! That car broke down at least 3 times a month!"

"I'm sorry Hun. Your father just couldn't give me the love that Barry could." She said quickly averting her eyes to check Alvin's response.

Alvin still looked worried because there were two different guns pointed at two different directions and one was pointed directly at him!

Vinny shook his gun at his little brother. "What about you little punk? This explains why momma spoiled you growing up because you knew her little secret. Figures why you grew up to be a pig. All cops are dirty, all of them."

Alvin just shrugged his shoulders and gave no response. Theresa tried to wrap up the scenario before everyone's blood ended up all over the brand new carpet.

"Put the gun down Vinny, it's over, we're gonna get you some help." She pleaded.

"It's never over!" Hissed Vinny. Without notice he fired twice directly into Alvin's chest. While Alvin staggered backwards preparing for a pratfall, Vinny quickly pointed the gun towards his mother but it was too late. A shot rang out and Vinny felt a sharp piercing pain in his right shoulder causing him to drop his weapon.

Alvin pounced him to the floor and Theresa tossed him a pair of handcuffs she had hidden behind her back. Officer Young put his police training to good use and cuffed Vinny's hands behind his back faster than a NASCAR crew changing a tire.

The ignominious Gadget Man bellowed like a demon gorged deep in someone's throat. "I'm going to kill both of you and I'm telling dad everything!" He shouted while squirming around writhing in pain.

As it turns out, Alvin was in fact wearing a bulletproof vest. They knew Vincent was coming and the entire thing was a setup.

"I'm still your half brother." Said Alvin picking up Vinny before any more of his shoulder wound could spill on the carpet.

Theresa quickly came over and tended to Vinny's wound with a sock she pulled off her foot. Vinny was going to be alright. They had successfully captured the Gadget Man and

pretty soon they would have their money.

CHAPTER 98

The inside of Alvin's cruiser smelled like walking inside of Victoria Secret. Alvin must've had at least 6 different air fresheners hanging from the rear view mirror. The Gadget Man sat in the back seat with achy shoulders because his hands were cuffed behind his back. He was surprised at how immaculate the inside of the car was knowing that he had often heard stories of drunks puking in the backs of police cars.

Vincent was feeling vindictive, who did his little brother think he was handing him over to the authorities? There would be repercussions. Nobody sandbagged the Gadget Man and got away with it.

Alvin sat in the comfy driver's seat and yawned while mulling over the situation. He decided to break the eerie silence between them.

"You didn't plant a bomb in my cruiser did you?" He said caustically. Cops always had a way of getting fresh when their quarry was finally subdued and they had the upper hand.

"I wouldn't tell you if I did!" Vinny shot back.

Alvin no longer thought of what ill-treatment would come his big brother's way, but started spending the reward money in his greedy mind.

A good 5 minutes passed of complete silence before the Gadget Man engaged in a conversation. His shoulders were

really starting to hurt. Especially the right one which had been shot. Getting cuffed behind the back while sitting in the back of a police car caused excruciating pain.

"So who tipped you off? Or should I say who was the rat?"

"I can't tell you that, that's confidential information."

"I'll bet it was Bridget wasn't it?"

Alvin didn't respond and kept focused on his driving.

Vinny droned on. "All you pigs are alike. You don't have the guts to do the things that we do because you're too soft. You're enthralled by our criminal behavior and write books about it and even movies. I've even heard stories about cops getting autographs from the 90 second bank robbers. Remember them? All you authority figures are just a bunch of pantywaists!"

Alvin slammed on the brakes as if a child had just run out in front of him. His blood was boiling and he was pissed. The Gadget Man quickly shut up. Alvin pulled off to the side of the road and pulled up on the transmission stick putting the cruiser in park. He grabbed something off of the passenger seat and quickly exited the car. When the Gadget Man looked to his left he saw Alvin holding a weapon of some kind and before he knew it his door swung wide open.

Vinny cowered to defend himself but it was too late. Alvin tasered him with the taser gun sending enormous volts jolting through his body causing him to curl up into a ball like a crushed spider. Vinny couldn't even muster the strength to scream.

Officer Young wasted no time. While the Gadget Man was down, Alvin ransacked the back of the patrol car until he found what he was looking for. Sure enough, wedged in between the seat, Alvin found a tiny handcuff key. Vinny had already picked one of his cuffs. The Gadget Man had been properly frisked before he ever entered the car but Alvin had overlooked one subtle thing.

Alvin quickly unfastened Vinny's black leather belt and removed it from his waist. His sleuthing skills paid off and he found the piece of tape on the inside of the belt where Vinny concealed the handcuff key.

Alvin pocketed the handcuff key then tossed the belt to the front of the cab. Before Vinny regained consciousness, Alvin handcuffed him once again hands behind his back. Then he went back to the front of the car and rummaged through the glove box until he found a small metal black box. Criminals hated these little black boxes because they were uncomfortable to wear and prevented them from tampering with their handcuffs.

When the Gadget Man finally woke up he immediately felt the extra weight of the black box clasped to the handcuffs choking his wrists. Alvin was driving the car like nothing happened.

"How did you know what I was up to?" Vinny finally asked.

"I know how much you like silence and you were talking too much about nonsense. I had a hunch you were trying to distract me from something...and...what can I say? I was right." He said in a cocky voice. He loved his job, he really did.

As Vinny tried his best to convalesce, he comforted himself by thinking of all the evil things he would do to his younger brother as soon as he got the chance.

As the police car made its way to the police station or wherever it was they were going, Vincent lived up to his reputation and enjoyed his silence.

CHAPTER 99

It felt good to be back in the loop. The man sitting at the table across from him looked nothing like the sketchy portrait that had derived from the city councilman and Tina's boyfriend's best friend.

Special agent Carter stared deep into the Gadget Man's good eye with a menacing look that spoke volumes. Almost as if to say *Go ahead, do something stupid so I have an excuse to kill you*. Carter had received the call when he was sound asleep in bed dreaming about mermaids. When he got the news of Vinny's capture he raced over to the police station where Vinny was secretly being detained. The Gadget Man was being held at the Brickerville police station where Alvin worked for umpteen reasons. Primarily because the authorities were not yet prepared to deal with the media circus should they discover the Gadget Man's whereabouts.

Carter looked like a total wreck from being awoken from a deep slumber. There was lint in his curly blond hair, bags under his eyes, and wrinkles in his white collared shirt he had picked up off his bedroom floor. The adrenaline pumping through his body kept him going and increased his awareness.

Vincent slouched a little in his chair with a stoic look on his

face. His hands were cuffed in the front since his shoulder hurt oh so much and he had refused to talk should his hands remain cuffed in the back.

Plenty of Brickerville police officers flanked the walls of the room armed with truncheons and mace should the Gadget Man decide to get out of line. Vincent didn't feel intimidated in the least bit. He knew they still needed him to disarm the bomb encircling little 6 month old Clarence's crib. And if they messed this up, then the infant's blood would be on their hands.

Carter could taste blood inside of his mouth from biting too hard on the inside of his cheek. There was a long eerie silence between them as they stared at each other waiting to see who would blink first.

Carter finally spoke first. "You killed my partner and my best friend John Travis." He said looking for signs of remorse.

There were none, just smiles.

"Your friend chose a wrong profession to get into, just like my brother has." Vinny shot back.

Alvin had left the police station immediately after he had dropped Vinny off. He felt sick in the stomach and didn't want to stick around for whatever dire things they might do to his brother to pump info out of him. Vincent had dug his own hole and he was on his own.

"I'm not sure that your profession is all that great either. Do you like needles? That's the last thing you're gonna see because you're getting the death penalty. Mark my words" Said Carter brazenly.

The Gadget Man just chuckled and remained calm and collected. "Oh am I? Whose the one who has to deal with a 6 month old infant laying in a crib surrounded with explosives. You know how those black folk are out there in Baltimore always so quick to pull the race card. If they find out you white Alphabet boys knew of a way to save that baby it'll look like the million man march all over again."

Carter grimaced but quickly became elated realizing that there was a possible way to save Clarence. They only had 32 hours left before the bomb would detonate on its own. Probably even less time if the baby could even live that long without nourishment.

"How do we defuse the bomb?" He asked clicking a pen getting ready to jot.

Vinny slithered his snaky tongue from side to side. "What do I get in return?" He said smiling bigger now.

Carter looked at him as though he just asked a stupid question. "Well, we just might let you live. But you're still doing life."

Vinny shook his head no. "Not good enough. I want a full pardon."

Carter motioned for the lawmen to come closer and surround Vinny. He stood up from his chair. "Are you completely out of your mind?"

If Vinny felt threatened by the guards he didn't show it. "Sounds like you got yourself stuck in a catch-22." He said still sporting an impish smile.

Carter took a step towards the door. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

The Gadget Man's smile disappeared like a balloon that had just popped. "Where are you going?" He asked nervously as the Brickerville lawmen balled their fists. Vinny was finally looking scared.

Carter made his way toward the door and winked at a sentry. "I guess I've got to work on your immunity." He said, then slipped out the door.

CHAPTER 100

Max Trowell paced around the parking lot of the Brickerville police station in his long black trench coat smoking a cigarette. He never smoked. Only when he was really stressed out like he was now. Carter tried to keep up with his boss' pace while bringing him up to speed. They didn't have much time to play head games with the Gadget Man. It was dark and cold outside but neither one of them could feel it because of the blood boiling through their veins.

"I think I know how we can circumvent." Said Max taking a long pull on his Winston 100.

Carter kept pace with him like a dog on a leash. "How's that?"

Max blew a huge cloud of smoke into the nocturnal air that lingered after he exhaled. "We don't have time to find a judge, do all the paperwork, to grant him immunity. So we fake it."

A little light bulb flashed in Carter's head. He became excited as though they were at the 5 yard line all huddled up and someone had a play idea for a winning touchdown. Excitement grew in his voice.

"Oh, I get it! We make up some fake paperwork on the computer granting him immunity then he cooperates."

Max snapped his fingers. "Exactly." He said taking another drag.

"But can we really do that?"

"We can do whatever we want. We're the Feds remember?"

Carter smiled at the thought of this. "I'll go back in and tell him we're willing to negotiate." Said Carter turning around about to walk back inside.

Max yanked on Carter's black leather bomber jacket before he could elude him. "Wait. While you're in there I want you to pump out as much information as you can about that U-Haul truck packed full of explosives crashing into our building. I've got a gut feeling he couldn't have acted alone on that one." He said flicking his cigarette butt into the grass and checking his watch.

"Gotcha." Replied Carter making a beeline towards the police station.

"Hurry. We don't have much time." Shouted Max from a distance.

When Carter walked back into the room he noticed the Gadget Man's good eye was completely swollen and he was

no longer smiling. Perhaps he had gotten out of hand during Carter's jaunt. The only smiles in the room were on the Brickerville cops.

Carter sat back down in his seat a little more relaxed this time. Vinny was gnashing his razor sharp teeth.

Carter cleared his throat breaking the silence. "We're prepared to negotiate and we're in the process of granting you immunity."

All the pigs in the room frowned and murmurs could easily be heard. When the Gadget Man looked down at the table completely astonished Carter winked at one of the lawmen who subtly winked at the others to put their minds at ease.

"But first, I need to know your plan for defusing the bomb so I know everything is legit. You have my word we won't double cross you." Carter was good at lying.

The Gadget Man weighed his options in his mind while the throng of officers feigned being pissed at his future immunity.

"Fine very well. Unfortunately the plan of dismantlement is going to have to involve me."

Carter looked surprised. "How so?"

"I have a remote control buried in the ground at a secret location that I'll have to personally show you. Once that button is pushed, the bomb becomes inactive." Said Vinny watching Carter taking notes.

He paused for a second and looked up at Vinny. "So let me get this straight. You push a button on a remote control and

the bomb becomes disengaged. How will we know for sure that it's no longer live?"

"The digital timer will completely black out and then it will be safe to enter the bedroom."

Carter mulled this strategy over in his mind but didn't like the idea of the Gadget Man taking them to his secret hiding spot where the remote was buried. For all he knew it could be a trap. There could be another bomb buried in the ground that could blow them all up. But what other choice did he have? If a 6 month old baby got blown to smithereens because of their screw up, it would be Rodney King all over again. Suddenly Carter remembered what his boss had told him outside. He reluctantly changed the subject.

"What can you tell me about the U-Haul truck armed with explosives that crashed into our building and killed 25 people?"

Vinny looked shocked that an FBI agent would take the time to deviate while an infant remained in grave danger. It figures these haughty well-heeled white people only cared about themselves.

Vinny rubbed his swollen eye into his shoulder and then looked up. "I'm going to need a cigarette before I can answer that question."

"There's no smoking in here."

"You're gonna have to make an exception."

Carter looked stupidly at the guards until one of them withdrew a pack of Marlboro Reds from his pocket.

Vinny shook his head. "Nuh-uh, I only smoke menthol. Let me get a Newport from my own pack. It's mixed in with my personal property."

Carter nodded to one of the pigs standing closest to the door and the cop quickly left the room to find Vinny's cigarettes Alvin had confiscated. While they waited for the Gadget Man's cancer sticks, Vinny leered at Carter through his swollen eye and adjusted his eye patch. He could barely see a thing.

"People don't just suddenly become monsters. The government creates them!" He said breaking the silence.

"You seem to have a lot of animosity towards the government." Replied Carter.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? I did 10 years for a crime that I never committed."

Carter rolled his eyes at this response. *Oh no, another one of those guys* he thought to himself.

Vinny droned on. "Do you know what it's like to be labeled a pedophile in jail? Inmates constantly pick on and attack sex offenders putting their lives in grave danger. Just look at my eye and the scars on my face."

What the Gadget Man was saying went in one ear and flew out the other. Carter heard all of this nonsense before and learned how to daydream right through it.

Vinny's Newports arrived and his handcuffs jingled as his palsied hands removed a Newport 100 from the pack. He

popped the cigarette in his mouth and a pig walked over and lit it for him. Carter was becoming impatient and time was running out. He needed answers before it was too late.

"So back to the U-Haul truck incident. Did somebody help you with that?"

Vinny felt more vainglorious than a crooked real estate agent. He couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, you guys." He said matter-of-factly.

Carter looked astonished. He looked around the room at the other officers like he didn't get the punch line to a joke. A few of them shrugged their shoulders. With a crocodile smile, Vinny dug deep into his pack of smokes and pulled out a lemon scented towelette then threw it on the table.

CHAPTER 101

"Where did you get that?" Said Carter more confound than a fly stuck in a spider web. He immediately recognized the company logo printed neatly on the corner of the lemon scented towelette. Two yellow lemons tied together like a pair of Christmas bells.

Vinny decided to drag this issue out. "You know, Jake the Snake was a back stabber and a dangerous man. It's probably good that he's dead. But you know, he taught me some things when we did time together. Let me give you an example. Where is your pen Agent Carter?"

"It's right here in my shirt pock-" Carter reached in his shirt pocket and noticed his pen was gone. When he looked back up Vinny threw his pen on the table. A few of the cops in the room chuckled and Carter's face turned crimson red. He

tried to play it cool.

"Okay I get it. Jake the Snake taught you to pickpocket and now you expect me to believe that you pick pocketed that from my partner Paul Newman." He said pointing to the moist towelette on the table.

The Gadget Man turned cynical. "Hey, you're pretty smart genius." Said Vinny noticing that his cigarette had been smoked down to the filter. A lanky younger officer of the bunch brought him a styrofoam cup halfway full of water to substitute for an ashtray.

Carter tried desperately to put the pieces together in his mind but still seemed confused.

The Gadget Man continued with his little spiel. "Was your buddy at work the day your little Alphabet building went kaput?" He asked with an unhinged smile.

Carter did his best to reminisce back to that terrible day and did vaguely recall Paul had not shown up to work that day because it was his birthday. *That stupid homo. What is he up to now?* He thought to himself.

"I don't understand. He's with us. What would be his motive?" Asked Carter.

Vinny dropped his cigarette butt into the water and watched with great delight as it sizzled. "You! You guys are his motive. He secretly hates all of you and he's fed up with your gay jokes you guys make behind his back. There wasn't supposed to be any people in that building. That was his idea!"

Carter rolled his eyes and looked at his audience. They gave no response. "I find that hard to believe." He said with dubiety leaking from his voice. He was starting to tie up the loose ends in his alphabet boy mind.

Vinny gave it to him from the beginning. "I sent an E-mail to him long before it happened warning him what I was about to do. I was completely shocked at his response. He said it was a great idea and prompted me to do it but advised me I should have no mercy for the people inside that were all jerks. Then he complimented me on my work and begged for a chance to meet the one and only Gadget Man like I was his favorite villain hero. We met under a bridge and it went from there."

Carter was wishing he had a television remote that could mute Vinny from disgracing his partner. "What? What went from there?"

Vinny's smile grew bigger, almost reaching his earlobes. "He asked how he could help. I needed to plant some boosters inside the FBI building and he gladly volunteered."

There was some murmurs amongst the pigs in the room. This looked bad for law enforcement. Really bad.

The Gadget Man continued in his reverie of wooing his captivated audience. "How do you think I slipped Jake the Snake the note with instructions of how to break out of jail. Paul was in on that one too." He said lighting another smoke.

"How did he get the gun in?"

"Oh, that was my part. Pure genius. I got the idea from watching a show on the discovery channel where people

were launching pumpkins thousands of feet with homemade air cannons. It's kind of like a giant BB gun. With the right calculations of applied air pressure and knowing the exact weight of the projectile, I can launch a gun thousands of feet at my target within a 10ft radius." Said Vinny pampering himself. He was very proud of his work.

Before Carter could start his next query, a lively officer bolted past the other cops and entered the room like he was Paul Revere. Vinny was surprised to see it was his brother Alvin ready and alert. Alvin seemed to be oblivious to Vinny's swollen eye.

"We need to end this interrogation now!" Said Alvin dropping the news.

Carter looked dumbfounded. "Why? What's going on?" Demanded Carter.

"The newsy Calvary is on its way! Somebody must've tipped them off. We've got to move this interview elsewhere." Stated Alvin.

"What about my immunity papers? I demand to see my immunity forms before I assist you ignoramuses any further. How long is it going to take?" Asked the Gadget Man.

Carter casted a malicious glance towards him for his selfishness. Not even realizing how he himself had deviated from the subject at hand, little 6 month old Clarence.

Max pranced in with the phony papers and plopped them in front of Vinny. The green vein throbbed in his forehead at the thought of complying with a cold blooded killer. Max unexpectedly double crossed his subordinate and pinned the

dilly dally on Carter.

"Come on!" He barked, "We don't have time to question him to death! We have a 6 month old baby to rescue. Let's get going." Demanded Max.

The officers stirred around like cattle eluding the crack of the whip. Amidst the shouting Vinny had already begun scrutinizing the phony documents. To his dismay, Alvin swiped the papers from under him.

"Hey!" Shouted Vinny clearly irked. He shifted his gaze to the boss man, Max Trowell. Max wrapped his trench coat around himself like it was Saran wrap.

He pointed to Alvin. "Your little brother can read you the papers on the way. It is imperative we get out of here ASAP. Let's go!" He said walking towards the door.

Vinny reluctantly followed the phalanx out to the parking lot. Eight police cars revved up their big V-8 engines and unfortunately the notorious Gadget Man was in one of them. Tires squealed as they eluded the media circus just in time.

CHAPTER 102

The three way setting plastic dome light inside of the Chevy Tahoe shone brilliantly onto the faux documents in the Gadget Man's hand. If truth be told, Vinny really didn't know what immunity papers were supposed to look like and so far they had him fooled. To make matters worse, Alvin and Carter sat in the front of the SUV playing a little game called "Who's better at deceiving the Gadget Man."

Alvin sat in the passenger seat while Carter planted his lead

foot on the gas pedal heading for Vinny's residence where the remote was purportedly buried in the ground.

A motorcade of black and whites followed them as if they were escorting the president. Whatever tricks Vinny might have up his sleeve would not be able to outwit them all. They were highly skilled lawmen that all made it through the police academy. Feeling elated that the nightmare was finally coming to an end, Carter became quite the chatterbox.

"I still can't believe my boss gave in and granted those immunity papers! What on earth are we going to tell the public? They'll be outraged!" Said Carter in a serious tone of voice.

"I dunno. We'll just tell them we did what we had to do and it really wasn't our decision." Replied Alvin faking it just as well.

Meanwhile.... Vinny eavesdropped while holding the papers firmly in his manacled hands. Standard procedure was to be cuffed in the back but they had made an exception since his shoulder hurt oh so much. As Alvin and Carter continued their feigned political debate, a rock song by Papa Roach "Getting Away With Murder" ran through the Gadget Man's mind. They could never take him to jail, at least not alive anyway.

The ride got bumpier as Carter's Tahoe made its way through windy roads to the Gadget Man's lair. An FBI chopper was already shining a spot light on them and following their every move. It was going on 2am and anything could go wrong in the dark. They all became blithely when they saw two cute little bunnies race out in front of their headlights in a zig zag pattern as they pulled

into Vinny's driveway.

"So this is where our cold blooded killer lives." Commented Carter as the SUV came to a halt. "I think I understand all the trees now."

Vinny and Alvin gave no response as Carter put more of the pieces of the puzzle together in his clouded mind. He recalled Tina in the hospital making statements about lots of trees.

Before they could even step out of the SUV the uniformed motorcade following them surrounded them making sure nothing crazy would happen. The chopper circled around the tree farm encircling Vinny's trailer to scope the place out. Big burly uniforms chaperoned Vinny as he led them towards the tree farm that looked like it went for miles. So many miniature trees all looking exactly alike.

Meanwhile...

Alvin raced towards the barn to go fetch a shovel. The tilled ground was soft and loose making a perfect spot to bury something. Lots of mag lights shone in every direction like an episode from "Prison Break". Since all the thousands of trees looked all alike, Vinny had a glittery ribbon wrapped on the branch of one identifying his secret hiding spot.

It didn't take them long to spot the tree flourishing the ribbon. Alvin finally caught up with the group holding a pointy shovel.

"It's buried under this tree?" Questioned Carter to Vinny.

Vinny snorted then stifled a laugh. "Of course not! Do you think I'm that stupid?"

There was no response. Vinny counted 6 trees to the right of the ribboned tree and instructed his little brother to dig under that particular tree. Alvin pushed his size 12 Timberland boots onto the head of the shovel and dug up the earth. While he was shoveling Carter's radio crackled and he heard the pilot in the chopper.

"Everything looks secure out here but we got a dead Rottweiler decaying about 100 yards from where you're at." Advised the pilot.

For a split second Vinny felt a pang of guilt pierce through his body. Poor Sparky. He did really used to love that dog. Alvin's shovel made a clanking sound so he dug a little faster. Within minutes he was holding an antiquated metal lunch box. The kind the Amish often used. He quickly opened it and found the remote inside.

Since Vinny's ankles were shackled to prevent him from running away, Carter decided they couldn't spare the time having the Gadget Man lagging behind. It was time for Carter to play super hero once again.

Without asking, Carter slung the killer's 185 pound frame over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and raced back to the rendezvous point.

CHAPTER 103

As it turns out, there were several buttons on the remote control and Vinny insisted that he had to be the one to push that special button that would deactivate the bomb surrounding little Clarence's crib. They had made the trip to Baltimore in two and a half hours.

It was now 4:30am and still very dark outside. There was no way the Feds could delay the media circus any longer and rubbernecks and spectators were filling up the parking lot to Tony's apartment complex by the minute. You could see several white vans with satellite dishes perched on top. It was ironic how a lazy part of the city could look so upbeat at 4:30 in the morning. Usually drug dealers and ticket runners had just fallen asleep at this hour.

Tony's five story apartment complex had been completely evacuated of the 65 residents that were threatening lawsuits towards the city. The bricky building was cordoned off with the usual yellow tape and nobody was allowed to come within 100 yards of the building unless you were authorized personnel. The police didn't want flashlights pointed towards Tony's apartment's outside window because they were afraid it might trigger a motion sensor and cause a big kaboom.

The infamous Gadget Man was being ushered by Carter, his brother, and three burly Marshals well over 200 pounds past the yellow tape and towards the apartment complex. They had to get in range for the remote control to function.

Vinny pulled on the antenna with his teeth making it two feet long. The remote control looked similar to ones used on radio controlled cars that sold in toy stores. The remote in Vinny's hand had 4 different buttons and the Feds prayed that those other nonessential 3 other buttons didn't blow something else up or they would really look stupid.

Vinny's holding of the remote in his hands quickly got misconstrued for something else by the nosy crowd.

"Look! Those alphabet boys are going to let a madman blow

the place up!" Shouted a disheveled bystander.

Vinny silently chuckled at the thought of this. He looked up towards the top of the building trying to remember which window was Tony's. Everything was completely dark and the place looked like a haunted house. When they got within 30ft of the building Vinny stopped dead in his tracks and flicked on the power switch to the remote. A little red light turned on the switchboard giving a red soft glow in his hands.

"This is far enough. The frequency should work from here."

The group halted and all eyes were focused on the remote control. Carter took in a deep breath then let out a sigh. This was it. The big moment.

"Go on. Push the button or I'll push it." Instructed Carter trying to sound tough.

They all watched as Vinny pushed the button on the top right corner. Everyone held in their breath expecting something terrible to happen, but nothing happened. Even the misinformed crowd 100 yards away grew quiet.

"That's it? It's all done?" Questioned Carter.

"Yup. She's all yours. You can take these handcuffs off now. I think I'm going to go grab a bite to eat." Said Vinny.

Carter placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Whoa, whoa, hold on there buster. My men haven't confirmed it yet. I forget, how do we know it's been disarmed?"

"Oh that's easy. The big bright LED timer display should be completely turned off. You want me to go in and check?" He

said crooking his neck way back and looking towards the top of the edifice.

"No that's quite alright. I'm going to send a member of the bomb squad in to check to make sure it's clear." He plucked the walkie talkie from his belt and barked a command. Within 30 seconds a bomb squad member dressed like Darth Vader from Star Wars made his way cautiously inside the building. Vinny surmised it was probably hard for him to see with the protective shield over his face and it being extremely dark.

"Grab me a beer from my fridge while you're in there!" Shouted an angry tenant. The crowd shut up as everyone waited patiently for the bomb squad dude to come back out and bear the news. As it turns out, 2 minutes later they had their answer.

Bomb squad dude came sprinting out of the building empty handed with no baby and people were getting worried. He raced right up to Carter who was now joined by a pissed off Max Trowell.

"There's been a mistake! We've got a big problem on our hands. He must've pushed the wrong button because the timer is counting down like the minutes are milliseconds! We might only have 5 minutes before she blows!"

All heads turned to Vinny for an answer. For once the Gadget Man felt himself shrink in fear. It was like facing a mean bull about to charge you. These people were clearly irate. Carter grabbed a fistful of Vinny's shirt getting ready to throw a punch.

"You son of a-"

Alvin quickly stepped in between them. "Hold on! Maybe he accidentally made a mistake and it can be fixed." He said trying to alleviate the situation.

Carter loosened his grip and stepped back and tried to regain his composure. The Gadget Man was in a trance and lost somewhere in outer space. Alvin lightly tapped his brother's cheeks bringing him back to earth.

"Hey, big guy, we need to know what's going on. Can this be fixed?"

Vinny sadly shook his head no. "I screwed up. There's nothing we can do. She's gonna blow." He said feeling true guilt for the first time. He was finally learning that he did indeed have a conscience.

Carter pushed Alvin out of the way and pushed his finger into Vinny's chest. "I'm going to see to it personally that you get the needle you sick bastard!"

The Gadget Man retaliated. "Ask me if I care you soft curly haired freak!"

Alvin stepped between them once again. "Just chill out a second. There's gotta be something we can do."

"How?" Questioned Vinny, "I've got at least 30 activated motion sensors in that room. If anything bigger than a fly enters that room you can kiss that baby goodbye."

Suddenly a thought entered the Gadget Man's mind that could save them all. Maybe all except for him. Vinny whispered into Alvin's ear and by the time he was done whispering a tear had welled up in Alvin's eye.

"You sure you want to do this?" Questioned Alvin.

Vinny slowly nodded his head yes.

"What? What's going on?" Carter wanted in on the secret.

"He's going to sacrifice himself for the sake of the baby."
Alvin quickly spat out. He didn't think it was such a bad idea. He'd rather see his big brother go out with a little style than watch an unjustified crowd set their minds at ease watching him get the needle.

Carter wasn't buying it. He didn't trust the Gadget Man as far as the eye could see. "This is ludicrous! If you think we're letting Vincent go in that building alone you're highly mistaking Officer Young."

Alvin shot back. "You got a better idea?"

Before Carter could answer Max stepped in between them. "Gentlemen! Quit wasting time! We've got a 6 month old baby in there that we don't even know is still alive and an angry crowd that's gonna see to it we all lose our jobs." He looked at Alvin, "What's this great plan of yours?"

Alvin proceeded to tell Max Vinny's genius idea. According to the Gadget Man once the motion sensors were triggered there was between a 4 to 5 second delay as the fuse ignited. Vinny was prepared to rescue the baby but would probably die in the process.

Alvin pointed up to Tony's window which was slightly ajar as he spoke. Max looked up at the window but could see nothing because it was so dark. He took his word that the

window was slightly open.

Meanwhile...

Carter was pacing back and forth nervously like he was trying to come up with the right words to tell an ex-girlfriend.

Max clapped his hands together sealing the deal. "Good. Let's make it happen. We're running out of time. I'm going to have my men watch all sides of the building in case he tries to escape." He looked directly at Vinny, "Do you understand that? My men won't hesitate to shoot you."

Vinny solemnly nodded his head. Max barked into his radio and the plan went into action.

Police officers ran across the parking lot and took up their positions. Max allowed Alvin to remove the handcuffs from his brother and have some final words. Alvin tried to be gentle as he carefully removed the cuffs.

"You know mom would be proud of you. You're doing the right thing. When everyone finds out you saved that baby you'll be considered a hero."

Hero? Vinny mused at the thought of this. For a brief moment he thought of Bridget. Yes he had used her for a patsy but he did have a soft spot for her. *Would she be proud of him too? Would this be how the story of the legendary Gadget Man ends?*

Vinny could feel his body going back to it's roots from years ago and contemplating on doing the right thing. It was time to be a man and do what was right. Another tear dripped from Alvin's left eye when he loosened the last cuff. He

could tell by the look on Vinny's face that the ploy was over and he was prepared to fix the mess he'd made. He hugged his big brother and whispered into his ear. "I love you bro."

The Gadget Man just nodded and remained stoic. Together the duo wended towards the building only Alvin stopped and stood directly under Tony's bedroom window and gazed up at the 5 floors. The Gadget Man proceeded to walk into the building alone as the lawmen took up their positions watching every corner of the building.

It was finally show time and the raging crowd grew quiet. Vinny moved swiftly up to the 5th floor trying to be loud to break the eerie silence of what felt like a haunted house. While reminding himself that the armed crib was adjacent to Tony's bedroom window which was partially opened, he rehearsed his game plan in his head. *Okay, I've got to run in the bedroom as fast as I can and do my thing in 4 seconds.* He thought to himself. His rescue plan was still a crapshoot, but it just might work. After all, it was the only way.

Meanwhile...

The onlookers, rubbernecks, and angry tenants watched from 100 yards away Officer Young standing nervously outside of the building under Tony's bedroom window. A few minutes had passed but nobody could see what was going on inside Tony's bedroom because everything was dark as the Ace of spades.

Just when they least expected it, it looked like that horrific Michael Jackson scene all over again. 6 month old Clarence was dangling from the window then quickly released into mid air.

The crowd gaped in disbelief as they watched the infant fall 5 stories plummeting towards the ground. Halfway during the fall, a loud whooshing sound mixed with a thunderous echo rang out followed by a great big gaseous ball of fire nearly blinding the public. Shards of glass from Tony's window shot in every direction as the aftermath of the explosion started the building on fire.

Alvin caught little Clarence in the nick of time and quickly ran out of harms way and towards the crowd. Little Clarence was completely unscathed and crying for his momma. Alvin ran with Clarence in his arms and made his way towards the crowd and found Keisha crying tears of joy.

The crowd applauded as Alvin tenderly handed off little Clarence to his mother who thanked him repeatedly. Alvin completely forgot about Vinny's sacrifice and sopped up all the attention for himself.

There were more cameras flashing at him than the leading kickoff to the Super Bowl. Carter had to push people out of the way just to shake hands with Alvin and congratulate him on a job well done.

Fire trucks immediately went to work on the conflagration to try and salvage some of the building.

The nightmare was finally over. Or was it?

CHAPTER 104

While most bereaved mothers would grieve at the loss of their oldest son, that wasn't the case for Theresa Young. She was a Bible thumping Christian and believed in God and his heavenly kingdom. She truly believed that Vinny was up

in heaven looking down on her while confessing his sins to the almighty God. Theresa was so proud her son had did the right thing and rescued little Clarence. As she sat at home in her favorite rocking chair sipping Earl Gray tea she smiled big like she did at every funeral she ever attended. It was good when people died because that meant they went to heaven.

Theresa rocked back and forth in the rocker subtly as she watched the news on television show replays of the baby being thrown out the window and then the explosion. The replays were sketchy but that was only because everything was so dark.

Her husband of 30 years sat on the blue leather sofa which was a little closer to the television. Mark was too distraught to go to work this Tuesday morning and didn't seem nearly as cheery as Theresa. He also believed in God but basically only because she did. Deep down inside he considered the possibility that there is no afterlife at all. Once you die that's it. Your afterlife consists of being buried 6 feet under the ground and that's only if you could afford it.

While Theresa watched Mark still in his blue and white striped pajamas, she thought to herself *Jeez, I sure am lucky Vinny never got a chance to tell him about Barry the car mechanic.* She had managed to keep her privy affair a secret for all these years and she knew Alvin would never rat on her because it would devastate Mark. While she chewed on this thought she heard a strange rustling sound coming from the attic.

"Honey, did you hear that?" She said looking towards the ceiling.

"Ah...it's probably those stupid squirrels. I can't do nothing about that." He assured.

Because they lived adjacent to the woods, they've had problems before with squirrels jumping off tree branches, onto the roof, and getting into the attic.

There was a lull and the shuffling ceased. Mark and Theresa both shifted their gaze back to the tube. Alvin was making an appearance on television and trying his best to explain his brother's deviant ways. Then the shuffling sound continued and it sounded a little too loud to be squirrels.

"Honey, did you hear that?" Asked Theresa.

Mark did not want to take his eyes off the television. "Yeah, I dunno. Maybe there's a bunch of em." He said not paying much attention.

Theresa couldn't take it anymore. Her curiosity was killing her. "I'm going to go check it out." She said setting her cup of tea down and getting out of the comfy rocker. She was dressed in a 70's look with a long tan corduroy dress and a flannel shirt.

Theresa made her way to the closet just 15 feet away from the living room which connected to the attic. When she opened the closet door she got a lovely surprise. There stood Vinny holding a sharp pointy knife with a 10 inch blade.

When Theresa saw her son she almost had a heart attack but she managed to keep it together. She held both hands across her chest trying to catch her breath. Vinny looked possessed and she thought she could see legions of nano

demons swimming around in the vitreous humor of that wicked eye.

The Gadget Man inched his way out of the closet brandishing the knife and twisting it side to side like it was an ice cream cone.

Theresa took baby steps backwards holding her hands in the air while making her way towards the living room. "Vinny you're alive! Did Jesus bring you back to life?" She said demurely. She still hasn't put the pieces together.

The Gadget Man chuckled but kept the knife pointed to her. "Oh, he brought me back to life alright. Just like he used to do for Houdini."

Mark recognized his son's voice and walked over to see what all the commotion was about. He was shocked as well.

Theresa still seemed perplexed. "But... We saw you on television. How did you survive the blast?"

Vinny laughed at all of this. It was time to confess his master plan. "Did you really think I would go rescue that little tar baby? I never threw that kid out the window. Tony did."

Vinny proceeded to tell his parents his great scheme. "The motion sensors set up in Tony's bedroom were never activated but the ones taped to the crib were live. It was safe to go into Tony's bedroom at any time as long as you stayed 3 feet away from the crib. After I kidnapped little Clarence I went to Tony's apartment and held him at gunpoint. I hog-tied him and gagged him in such a way that he couldn't make any noise if he wanted to and stuffed him in his own bedroom closet. The police could never find him because

they were afraid to enter the bedroom in fear the bomb would go off." He said boasting.

Theresa shook her head and a tear ran down her face. Mark wrapped an arm around his wife and pretended not to be threatened by the knife.

"So how did you escape?" Asked Mark.

"Oh, that was easy. After I freed Tony I explained to him what the deal was and how to rescue Clarence. I pointed a gun at him I found under his bed and informed him that he and his son didn't both have to die. He was more than happy to save his only son's life. Meanwhile I changed into a fire suit I had stashed in the closet. I had no trouble leaving the building undetected." He said ever so proud of himself.

Both of his parents had deadpan looks on their faces. They hadn't raised a monster like this. Vinny pointed the long knife at his mother and twirled it around like it was a pointer being used in a lecture. Theresa was really looking nervous. Mark tried his best to calm things down.

"Come on son. Put down the knife. You're scaring your mother." He said precariously.

Vinny ignored his father. "I believe your wifey has a little secret to tell you." He said smiling like a jack-o-lantern.

Theresa subtly shook her head no. *No Vinny don't do this. Not after all these years.* She thought to herself.

The Gadget Man waved the knife around carelessly. "Go on mom! Tell your hubby your little secret about Barry."

Vinny was loving every minute of this.

"I don't know what you're talking about. You need to be medicated. You're out of your mind." She said defiantly.

"Out of my mind? Was Barry the car mechanic out of his mind after he was blowing your back out for nearly 8 years? Why don't you tell dad where Alvin came from?"

Theresa just stood there and cried. This was not good. Not good at all. She buried her face into Mark's shoulder and cried a river.

"I'm sorry Mark. I always wanted to tell you but I didn't want to hurt you."

Unfortunately Mark wasn't buying her story. He was flat out pissed. He threw Theresa off his shoulder and took his seat back out in the living-room to stare at his son on television who wasn't even his. Alvin was still talking to a reporter on the news. It was just Vinny and Theresa now. She turned into the wicked witch of the west.

"You're a jerk! I wish I never had you! You weren't even ever meant to be. You're an accident!"

Now Vinny's blood was boiling and he was losing control.

"Was this an accident too?" He said pointing to his wounded shoulder from when she shot him.

Before she could answer, Vinny plunged the knife into her right shoulder at the exact location she had shot him the day before. She tried to scream but it just wouldn't come out. Vinny twisted the knife causing her to writhe in pain. When

he pulled the knife out blood squirted everywhere. Theresa tried to use her left hand to cover her wound but the Gadget Man thrust the ten inch blade into her heart before she could do so. Vinny twisted the knife again like he was winding a clock.

Meanwhile...

Mark sat on the sofa out in the living-room like as if nothing was going on. Vinny was having fun watching his mother's blood bleed onto the carpet. It was like a game to him. Just for giggles he stabbed her 40 times repeatedly like he was tearing open a pinata.

Once it finally felt like he was stabbing a crash test dummy Vinny finally stopped to catch his breath. The voices in his head were complimenting his aggressive behavior and he decided to leave the knife lodged into her chest all the way down to the handle. Theresa was deader than a door nail. Vinny used her brown corduroy dress to wipe the blood off of his hands. When he was finished he skittered out to the living room to talk to his father.

Mark was on the sofa with his face buried into his hands. He really didn't want to look at the world. Vincent sat down next to his father on the sofa and placed a loving hand on his shoulder.

"Dad, it's finally over. You didn't need her. It's just you and me now." He said soothingly.

Mark's body was convulsing and breaking out in a cold sweat. He was a softy and not used to a lot of excitement. Vincent tried to get through to him but he was stuck in a trance. He shook his father's shoulder a little more vigorously

to get his attention.

"Dad, dad...it's me your only son Vinny, can you hear me?"

Mark placed a hand on Vinny's knee signaling that he could hear him talking but had no control over his emotional breakdown. The Gadget Man had killed so much that his heart rate was normal and he lost the palsy in his hands. He appeared more calm than a pastor at a Sunday dinner.

"There's some things I have to do yet later tonight. I can't stay in the United States anymore but I have some money. There's nothing here for us anymore dad. Mom is gone and Alvin isn't even yours. Please, please help me get out of the country. I know where we can go. It'll be just me and you like old times. Lots of fishing trips I promise."

Vinny knew that Mark liked to fish. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flyer advertising Costa Rica and tossed it onto his father's lap. Mark still seemed to be bugging out but he did place two fingers on the flyer. The Gadget Man continued to wheedle him.

"I have to get going now." He said slowly standing up.
"Business as usual. If you decide to come with me, meet me at your church parking lot tomorrow at midnight. Make sure you come alone. There's nothing left here for us anymore. I promise you a better life." He said reassuringly.

He watched his father pick up the flyer and look at it but Mark didn't say a word. He was traumatized. Vinny walked over to the living room window and looked outside making sure the coast was clear for his departure. It was. He adjusted his black leather eye patch and moseyed his way towards the front door.

The Gadget Man had only one thing on his mind.

Felix Roberts, AKA Wiggles.

CHAPTER 105

There was no need to play silly dice games for the Gadget Man to figure out his next move. Even though it was January, the outskirts of Baltimore felt like a beautiful Spring day. About 67 degrees to be exact. People were finally starting to believe Al Gore's little spiel about Global warming.

Vincent pumped his legs up and down as his calf muscles throbbed like a beating heart. The Gadget Man pedaled the pricey Mongoose 21 speed bicycle down Pine street like he belonged there. He was traveling incognito once again. The neon green bicycle helmet covered most of his head and the shaded visor concealed the brunt of his face. On his shoulders was his favorite black Jenson book bag packed with just about everything you could imagine.

Pine street was located in Avery county which was just a 10 minute drive from the big city of Baltimore. It was basically a neighborhood for people who couldn't stand living within the heartland of the city but couldn't afford to move out into the nice suburbs. Crazy things happened along Pine street because eccentric drug dealers always found great spots to hide when they eluded the brass chasing them out of the city. The big yellow salt boxes flanking the infamous street often got used for drug transactions. Residents in the neighborhood had empty plastic kitty pools for drug dealers on the run to flip over and hide under.

Vinny liked traveling via a bicycle because they were very

hard to identify unlike automobiles which might have bumper stickers or easy to remember license plates.

As he pedaled the bicycle easily down the street he kept his gaze towards the left side of the street and tried to read every house number. Wedged between his left hand and the handle bar was a small piece of paper which read 149 Pine street. There was no need for him to look towards the right because all the odd numbered cottages were to his left.

Vinny just happened to look up towards the sky and noticed a pair of old Nikes hanging from the telephone lines. Drug dealers usually did this for their customers to easily find their homes so they could do business.

When Vinny looked directly across from the dangling sneakers, sure enough he found the dilapidated home he was looking for. 149 Pine street. Evidently since the Gadget Man knew Felix Roberts notorious nickname (Wiggles), his whereabouts were extremely easy to come by. A little asking around of the roaming thugs milling the grungy streets of Baltimore and wallah! Almost everyone knew Wiggles and where he could be found.

Vinny pedaled the Mongoose into the weedy yard and parked it behind a bush by the house. This was purportedly Patricia Fernwell's residence who was supposedly Wiggle's girlfriend. A rusty gutter was hanging halfway off the roof and the whole cottage looked to be made of paper mache.

Vinny kept the bicycle helmet on his head and quickly made his way to the front door. He did the same rhythmic tap-tap knock that teenagers often did thinking it was some secret code.

The door quickly cracked open and Vinny immediately recognized Wiggles bloodshot hairy eyeballs bulging from his head like they were about to pop out maybe.

"Are you here to buy or sell?" Asked Wiggles in a croaky voice. He was used to strangers coming here all the time to buy or sell drugs.

Vincent smiled like a salesman selling faulty vacuum cleaners, he mulled over his sales pitch. It felt so good to see the boy once again after nearly 11 years. The Gadget Man almost wanted to reach out and give Wiggles a hug. Deep down inside Vinny was impressed how the hellion had conjured up a clever way to put him away for 10 years. If Wiggles recognized his 7th grade math teacher in any way, he sure didn't show it.

"I'm here to sell of course. I've got some pretty good stuff here that would keep your customers coming back for sure." Said Vinny stifling a laugh.

Wiggles crooked his head a little and noticed the black back pack on his shoulders. The front door closed temporarily and he could hear a chain being unlatched. This time the door swung open wide and Wiggles motioned for him to come in.

The Gadget Man was truly amazed at how tall Wiggles had gotten over the years but the hoodlum was still skinny as a rail. Wiggles sported a red "Wutang" t-shirt which hung to his knees and a pair of South Pole jeans with most of its material hugging his ankles. He also wore a long golden chain necklace with a medallion the size of a beer coaster with the letters "O-G". Vinny surmised it might stand for "Original Gangster". He met some of those in prison and Wiggles surely wasn't one of them.

Vinny followed Wiggles into the cottage while keeping his right hand behind his back as they sauntered towards a coffee table covered with oodles of drug paraphernalia.

Wiggles took a razor blade belonging to a box cutter and cut out two equal lines of coke on the table and rerolled a hundred dollar bill. It was standard procedure with bonafide drug dealers to break bread first via drugs to weed out potential police officers. Honest cops were not apt to use drugs thus alarming drug dealers.

When Wiggles took the rolled up hundred dollar bill and shoved it up his bulbous nose, he was greeted by a shocking surprise. The Gadget Man held out a 9mm and pointed it directly at his former student. Wiggles immediately stood up and placed both of his hands in the air with the hundred dollar bill still jutting from his gargantuan nose.

While keeping steady aim, Vinny removed his bicycle helmet with his left hand and tossed it onto the floor. Wiggles had to bite his tongue to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He wasn't.

"I don't believe this! This isn't possible! I watched the news this morning, you like...died man!" He said biting his tongue once again to be sure.

"Felix, Felix, Felix, why do they call you Wiggles?"

"Come on man, you know the answer to that, cuz I can't sit still for just one minute. Don't you remember?"

A half dressed 19 year old girl with a caramel complexion appeared from the hallway and approached them.

"What in the h- oh my stars! He's got a gun!" She cried cupping her hands over her mouth. She wore a pair of tight fitting bell bottom jeans that weren't fully buttoned and a pink sports bra. Her hair looked like it had been pulled on. She said a silent prayer then placed her hands in the air. Vincent was so freakish looking and the last thing she wanted to do was piss him off.

"We don't want no problems sir. We're just two youngings trying to get our fair share of paper. We'll give you whatever you want." Said Patricia.

Vinny appeared very amused. "Oh... That's so cute, trying to get that paper. I take it you're Wiggles' girlfriend?"

She nodded her head up and down. Vinny continued playing the wise guy role.

"Well you sure know how to pick em. I'm sure he's quite the gentleman." Joked Vinny.

Patricia was finally sensing that this was about something more than a robbery. Vinny shifted his gaze towards a very petrified Wiggles and gave him a lovely smile.

"I don't think boo here knows me. Perhaps we forgot to tell sweetie about our skeletons in the closet?" He said not hiding his shark teeth.

Wiggles decided to play dumb and buy himself some time so he could plan his move. "Hey man I don't know you! You look like you escaped from a mental ward." He protested. A bead of sweat trickled down his wrinkly forehead.

"Oh sure..." Mocked Vinny, "And I guess I never shoved a

broomstick up your rectum."

Patricia giggled at the thought of this. There was no way Wiggles would ever let someone do that to him. She finally interrupted them.

"Am I missing out on something here? A broomstick? What's this all about?"

Vinny tried to bring her up to speed as fast as he could, but he really didn't feel like re-telling the whole story. He gave her the gist of his side of the story and she looked completely enthralled. Evidently Wiggles had never mentioned all the antics he practiced as a kid.

The Gadget Man noticed a wooden chair along side the wall with old phone books stacked on top of it. He swatted the phone books onto the floor and placed the empty chair in the middle of the living room.

"Since you twos act like children and refuse to get real jobs like grown ups I thought we'd play my favorite childish game of musical chairs." He said with great delight.

Wiggles and Patricia were both frowning. They weren't in the mood for games.

"Come on! It'll be fun" insisted Vinny, "The one who sits in the chair first before the music stops gets to live." He said. He could tell by the looks on their faces that they already knew how the game was to be played. They both reluctantly stood on each side of the chair.

"What about the music?" Questioned Wiggles, "What are you going to use for music?"

Vinny was acting like the Joker from Batman. "How about my own voice? And why don't you shut up?" He chided.

Wiggles crossed his arms and looked at him leerily. Vincent ignored him and began singing the song that the voices inside his head prompted him to sing.

Surprisingly the Gadget Man began singing "Jesus Loves Me."

CHAPTER 106

Patricia and Wiggles marched in circles around the wooden chair while the Gadget Man sang the words he knew by heart. "Yes Jesus loves me, Yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me-" he stopped mid-sentence.

Patricia was closest to the chair and flopped onto it before Wiggles even got a chance. Unfortunately Wiggles had no problem overpowering her and threw her off the chair then took the seat himself. Vinny loved every minute of this. It felt so good to be reunited with his nemesis.

Patricia threw a fit. "You cheated! Give me the gun and I'll kill him for you!"

Vinny smiled at the thought of this. His plan was definitely working. He needed Patricia to be mad at Wiggles for his plan to work. He shouted above the pandemonium.

"Kitties please, please, I was just kidding I'm not going to kill any of you. In fact the one in the chair gets to get tied up first." He explained and pulled a rope from his back pack. Patricia pointed a finger at Wiggles and laughed. "Ha! Ha

you worthless cad!"

Vinny was shocked that she knew such a big three letter word but he bet that Wiggles didn't. He wrapped the rope taut around Wiggles and the wooden chair implementing special knots he had learned in the Marines. Vinny couldn't use handcuffs because that could possibly leave cuff marks on Wiggles' wrist and his plan would be ruined.

Patricia was still trying to get over the thought of her lover pushing her out of the chair and almost getting her killed.

When Vinny put the final touches on the tie-up he leered at Patricia with a perverted smile. "You got any beer in the fridge?" He asked.

She placed her hands on her hips and tried to guess where he was going with this. "Yeah, we got a whole case in the fridge, why?"

Vinny grabbed her by the arm but not too roughly and led her to the kitchen. He still needed her yet and didn't want her to not cooperate. She reluctantly followed but had no clue what was going on. Vinny still had on his black leather cycling gloves but she seemed not to notice. They each grabbed four twelve ounce cans of Natural Ice from the bottom shelf in the fridge. *5.9% alcohol for each can, this will work great* Vinny thought to himself.

When Wiggles saw them stealing his beer he immediately became irate. "Hey man! You can't take a man's beer like that!"

Vinny let out his Santa Clause laugh. "You shouldn't have cheated with the musical chairs game. Now your girly and I

are going to stand here and drink all your beer and you have to watch." He said popping open an icy cold can of Natural Ice. "Psst!" He took a few swigs and then nudged Patricia to do the same. Needless to say, she was getting into this. She hated the cheap beer but she drank it anyway just out of spite.

Wiggles bit his tongue until it started to bleed. He could not believe this. There's two things you never do to a man. You don't steal his girl and you sure don't even think about stealing a man's beer.

Vinny drank the entire 12 ounce can in less than a minute then smashed the empty can on his forehead like stone cold Steve Austin. He tossed the crushed can into his back pack then instructed Patricia to open a beer and pour it into Wiggles' mouth. She did so and Wiggles drank like a fish almost faster than she could pour it into his mouth. Little did the pissy love birds know, all the beer was meant for Wiggles.

After Patricia had helped Wiggles down 9 or 10 beers she was starting to become a little suspicious. *What was this crazy cyclist planning? Was he seriously going to hurt them or was he just playing around?*

Vincent was ready for the Grand Finale. He pointed to all of the drug paraphernalia spread out on the coffee table. "The hard stuff" he said, "It's time for the hard stuff. Bring all those drugs over here. We're gonna dope this boy up." He proudly announced.

Patricia used her brain and slid the entire coffee table towards the wooden chair right in front of Wiggles. Vincent was impressed with her ingenuity. When she looked up she

noticed Wiggles looked scared out of his mind. He was already close to passing out.

Wiggles curtly nodded to her as if he was signaling something. The Gadget Man caught on to the surreptitious gesture and prepared himself for whatever tricks they might have up their sleeves. Vinny waved the 9mm towards the improvised crack head pharmacy in front of them.

"Go on" he said to Patricia, "Dope your man up. It's show time."

Patricia went for the cocaine but Vinny shook his head no.

"I think our boy wants some heroine. Let's shoot him up."

Patricia grabbed a syringe that was ready to go. She carefully injected it into Wiggles' veiny arm that was securely fastened and pumped him full of the good stuff. He twitched his eyes like he was trying to tell her something. Vinny caught onto this also. Part "A" of Vinny's plan had finally worked. In less than 30 minutes Wiggles was completely passed out.

Patricia pretended like she was organizing the drug paraphernalia on the coffee table when she decided to try a hoodlum power move. She quickly slid her free hand under the coffee table and opened a secret drawer. After she groped around a little she felt cold hard steel in her hand. In one swift motion she pulled out a snub nose 38 and whipped it towards Vinny's direction.

Her wile didn't work and Vinny knocked the gun out of her hand before she could even take aim. He placed his own gun in his waist band and picked up the 38 special.

"Pe-e-r-r-fect" muttered Vinny.

Patricia raised her hands in surrender. He quickly glanced at the coffee table and noticed a cordless phone.

"Pick up the phone now!" He demanded.

She slowly lowered her right arm and picked up the house phone. The Gadget Man pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked as nervous as a melting snowman and looked at Wiggles. He was still passed out. Nothing he could do.

"Call 9-1-1. When they pick up, read everything on this paper and sound convincing. Do you understand me?"

She subtly nodded her head up and down. While she made the call Vinny immediately went to work unfastening Wiggles' restraints.

Meanwhile, Patricia cried into the phone. "I need help please! My boyfriend is drunk and stoned out of his mind. He was chasing me around with a frying pan earlier and now he's got a gun!" She said doing a good job making it sound real. She still wasn't very sure what Vinny was trying to do.

When she looked over at him for approval, that's when her entire world went black. Using Wiggles' gun, Vinny fired two directly into her chest killing her instantly. She went down hard smacking her head into the coffee table.

The Gadget Man wasted no time celebrating her death. He quickly put his rope back into his back pack and checked out Wiggles for rope burn marks. There were none. He pushed

Wiggles' listless body onto the floor and placed the chair back neatly along the wall.

Last but not least, he placed the snub nose 38 into Wiggles' right hand. He really didn't know, but he prayed to God that Wiggles was right handed. As he placed the bicycle helmet back on his head getting ready for his rapid departure, a Bible verse entered his mind. *Vengeance is mine, saith The Lord...* Well, he wasn't God. But he was something God had created.

He was, and he liked being, the one and only, Gadget Man.

CHAPTER 107

Meatballs Tavern wasn't just your ordinary bar. If you came to Meatballs Tavern to pick up women you were at the wrong place. In fact, if you were a straight guy and inadvertently strolled into the place you might throw up.

Special Agent Carter and his team of men geared up and completely surrounded the building. Loud music blasted from the tavern that sounded nothing like what you would hear at your local watering hole. The Gadget Man had gotten away but they hadn't forgotten him mentioning that he didn't act alone on everything he did.

Agent Carter barked commands into his radio telling his men where to take up their positions. Carter felt like he had the situation under control, at least for now. He insisted that he be the first one into the building. He barged through the front door and was immediately accosted by a burly security guy dressed all in black.

Carter brushed past him quickly almost knocking him over.

The security guy grabbed onto Carter's arm and yelled at him. "Hey man! Like there's a ten dollar cover charge, ante up punk."

Carter got right in his face and flashed his credentials. "How's this for a cover charge tough guy?"

Security dude quickly let go of his arm. "Oh, sorry dude. I didn't know."

Carter ignored him and jostled his way through the horny crowd of men gone south. He tried to think like a smart guy would and looked for a booth closest to an exit.

A few chiseled Latino men in their mid-twenties with their bodies completely waxed, danced around on a pole in black speedos with dollar bills sticking out. Everything looked very gay indeed. A crowd of all ages clapped and cheered egging on the dancers to start getting jiggy with it. Carter ignored all the nonsense and scrutinized every face in search of his target. A Giddy fellow gave him a playful pat on the rear end as he made his way to the corner of the room. This was so gay.

When Carter finally found the man he was looking for, he gaped like a pastor watching his number one deacon stealing money from the offering plate. Just say it wasn't so. But it was so! At the very corner of the room he saw a lanky GQ looking guy wearing a mauve silk button-down shirt leaning back into the leather booth seats with his hands wrapped behind his head and a broad smile on his face.

Carter was very surprised to see Alvin sitting like this. What made the scene even more gay was there was a dorky looking man sporting a floral dress shirt half-way unbuttoned

sitting on Alvin's lap and dropping luscious strawberries with whipped cream into his mouth.

Alvin had his eyes closed and seemed to be loving every minute of the pampering. He was completely unaware that Agent Carter was just an earshot away. Actually both of the lovebirds were unaware because the dorky looking man had his back towards Carter and concentrated on pleasing his lover. Although the rest of the police force might find this scenario amusing, Carter was in no mood for laughs. Instead he let out a loud grunt.

"Ahem!"

Carter was not surprised that the dorky looking guy was none other but Paul Newman. Paul's face turned flush red and he thought about jetting but Carter's men closed in on the scene.

Alvin opened his eyes and immediately pictured his beautiful wife signing divorce papers. He wasn't 100% gay like Paul but he was definitely what one might call "curious". But after all this got out, he might stay with the boys.

Carter's crew surrounded the table and most of them were chuckling.

Paul stammered. "I...I...I don't understand? How did you know I was here?" He looked at Alvin to see if he had something to do with it but Alvin remained expressionless. Alvin apparently knew nothing about the bust.

Paul shifted his gaze back to Carter and still seemed confused. All of a sudden the song "It's Raining Men" by the Weather Girls blared from the loud speakers and the crowd

got rowdy. This was every homo's favorite song.

Carter pointed up at one of the speakers. "Do you hear that song? Regular bars and clubs don't play that favorite gay song of yours. Do you remember when we were hanging out in the surveillance van in Chicago during the Anderson kidnapping? Well guess what? When your boyfriend called you on your cellphone while we were in the quiet van I could eavesdrop and recognized that song. I made inquiries and found out this is the only place that plays that song. We figured you'd be hanging out here." Carter said with certainty having to shout over the loud music.

Paul's jaw dropped and Alvin pushed him into his own air space. "I never called you from here! This is only my first time here! Do you have some little secret to tell me?" Said Alvin full of ire.

Paul felt like he was on Jerry Springer. "Hey man, I do what I do. You were spending too much time with Marie and I thought you had forgotten about me. You can't just keep seeing me when you feel like it. I need loving too ya know." Declared Paul.

Alvin had enough. He stood up from the table and buttoned the top few buttons on his purple dress shirt. Carter's team giggled at the theatrics but kept their backs towards a half-dressed dancer bringing out a small bucket full of cement with a rope tied to it. They sure didn't want to see that.

Alvin was still irate that he had been cheated on. He picked up a frosty mug halfway full of Lager and splashed it in Paul's face.

Paul just sat there dumbfounded. "You see? This is why I

assisted the Gadget Man with taking down the FBI building. You guys think you can just push me around and use me for a tool. I wish everybody would've died that day." He said fuming.

Alvin donned a black leather jacket and forgot about being gay. "Take him away boys." Said Alvin like in the movies.

And that's exactly what they did.

CHAPTER 108

Later that night the Gadget Man realized he had one more thing to do before he hopefully met up with his father at midnight in the church parking lot. *How could he possibly leave the country without saying goodbye to his fiance?*

It was just a little after 10pm and he knew his little farewell had to be quick if he wanted to meet his father on time. Mark knew that Vinny was always punctual, always. He had only been to Bridget's trailer park a few times and couldn't understand how those trailer trash people could live so close together. If he had to live in a trailer park and had to listen to his neighbors making noise and blaring music, no questions asked, he'd light their trailer on fire.

Fortunately for him, Bridget's double wide trailer was all the way in the back and sequestered from the others. This was terrific because he didn't need any nosy neighbors calling the police. Those stupid pigs. Who did they think they were? God? Vincent had been to Bridget's bedroom enough times to know what bedroom window was hers.

Dressed in black like a ninja, Vinny slinked through the edge of a cornfield that connected to Bridget's backyard so he

could take a peek through her window. "Scouting" he liked to call it.

Bridget lay sound asleep on her queen sized bed letting off a slight snore. She had five patients to see tomorrow which was way more than usual. Among one of the patients was a creepy 60 year old war vet who used to run her around in circles with war stories he probably made up. She needed a lot of rest to be able to put up with that old goat that constantly hit on her when he wasn't talking about war.

It was 10:10pm and Bridget's tender lips vibrated like a hummingbird's wings as she took little breaths making a soft snore. Nobody knows what she was dreaming about, not even the author of this book.

Suddenly there was a ruckus from Bun-Bun's cage. Just enough to wake her up from her slumber. She rubbed her eyes and looked over at Bun-Bun's cage.

"Bun-Bun, what is it boy?" She said in a croaky voice. Bun-Bun ran around in little circles of the cage purposely banging along the sides of it. Something had definitely startled Bun-Bun. Bridget turned her head and looked out the window. She could've sworn she saw a shadowy figure duck below the window. *A figment of her imagination?* It was too dark to know for sure. That's when it finally dawned on her. *Vinny! Had he figured out that she snitched on him? Wasn't he supposed to be dead?* All the ideas she picked up from reading Sue Grafton books came back to her. She knew just what to do. She gathered up loose blankets and heaped them up under her comforter making it look like she was sleeping under the blankets.

Bridget stood next to her bed for a brief second and admired

her handiwork. Wait just a minute. She was a big girl. Vinny would never buy it. She had to think of something else. She quickly rushed over to her bedroom closet and found a beach ball still blown up. Perfect. Shapely just like her. She stuffed the beach ball under the comforter with the blankets. Her cellphone was left in her car so she picked up the cordless home phone to dial 9-1-1. The phone was completely dead. Nothing. *What was this? A freaky Halloween movie?*

Her heart did a buck ninety as she frantically raced around the trailer in search of a weapon to defend herself. All she could find was a long, sharp, pointy pair of scissors. Better than nothing right?

She could hear someone snooping around in the kitchen so she hid behind her bedroom door and waited. An intruder was definitely inside the trailer. Probably the infamous Gadget Man.

Bridget squeezed the handle of the shears tightly in her hand and stood perfectly still behind her bedroom door while trying to listen to the oncoming footsteps above the noise of her beating heart.

The footsteps down the hallway got closer and closer and she thought that she could already smell Vinny's body odor. This was a ridiculous plan. *How well could she possibly defend herself with a pair of scissors? How did Vinny find out she squealed on him?*

By the footsteps and the pungent odor, Bridget knew Vinny was just a hairs breadth away. Vinny walked into her bedroom as if he belonged there and she immediately recognized his voice.

"Goodbye Bridget Jones." He whispered softly and fired 3 shots from a 9mm equipped with a silencer into the heaping pile of blankets.

Bridget lunged at him from behind while she had the chance. She tried to stab him in the back but got his right shoulder instead. The gun dropped to the floor and he brayed like a hyena.

He squirmed around on the floor and Bridget quickly picked up the piece and pointed it at him as if she's handled a gun once before. She had stabbed his already wounded shoulder and didn't even realize it.

Vinny taunted her. "Go ahead and do it! They're going to kill me anyway. Do it you wuss! Put me out of my misery."

Bridget started crying. She didn't know what to do. What if those punk kids had never ruined his life? What kind of man would he have turned out to be?

She could almost see the innocence in his defeated blood shot eye. *Is this how the story ends? Bridget takes out the Gadget Man and collects the reward money?*

Adages ran through her mind in addition to the thing she learned about Karma. Vinny was a killer but how could she blame him? Ten years in jail is a pretty nice size bid. Not to mention all the defamation of character he had to endure when the media labeled him as a pedophile.

The gun in her hand jiggled like a flag in the wind as these thoughts ran through her mind.

The Gadget Man caught onto this. "What are you thinking about? Just do it for bloody sake! I don't want to live anymore. I love you Bridget." Cried Vinny.

Vinny's words ate away at her heart and she lowered the gun but held onto it. Tears raced down her bulbous cheeks like they were having a soap box derby contest.

Bridget began to shout. "I can't take this anymore! Guys think that I'm a fricken nurses station! They get what they want and then take off!"

She said waving her arms frantically as she spoke to put more emotion into it. "Just get out of here! Leave now! I don't ever want to see you again!" She said and threw the 9mm at the window as hard as she could. The gun shattered the window and went right through the glass.

And that's just what Vinny did. Like the coward he had evolved into, Vinny ran out of the trailer and into the night.

CHAPTER 109

The well lit sign advertising for Mt. Zion Baptist church appeared to look desolate in the late hours of the night. Some punk teenager had removed the letter "T" from the sign so it now read "In God we rust". Stupid, stupid kids.

Mark felt pretty scared sitting in his silver colored PT Cruiser parked in the middle of the vacant parking lot and letting the heater run. *How much trouble could he be in if he was caught aiding and abetting a high profile serial killer?* He couldn't back out now because Vincent was his one and only son. And he sure loved him dearly. They were wrong for unlawfully incarcerating Vinny for 10 years and jeopardizing his life. Vincent should've stayed teaching at St. Mary's

Catholic school where the students adored him. But as the old saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished". Vinny's only crime was trying to educate some rejected hoodlums that society just didn't care about.

These thoughts ran through Mark's cloudy mind as he looked at the digital clock on the car stereo. 11:58pm. Mark knew that Vinny was always punctual. The parking lot was very dark and kind of spooky looking. Mt. Zion church was poorly lit and the stained glass windows casted an eerie glow. It was strange how such a large building would only be occupied for a few hours one day out of the week.

Mark heard his wristwatch beep. He knew it was midnight but where was Vinny? He didn't see anyone enter the parking lot. He had parked right in the middle just as Vinny had asked. Then in the blink of an eye the passenger's side door opened and Vinny got in the car and tossed a black back pack into the back seat along with Mark's luggage.

Mark tried to catch his breath. He was sure he had surveilled every inch of the parking lot and all he could deduce was Vinny must've been hiding underneath his tires for quite sometime. He didn't. He was the Gadget Man, he could do anything.

Vinny buckled his seatbelt and pretended as if everything was hunky-dory. He even sounded in a good mood.

"How ya doing pops?" He said finally looking around to make sure they weren't being watched.

Mark tried to answer but choked on his words until they finally came out. "It's, it's...uh...it's good to see you son." He said inspecting his boy, "You didn't kill anyone else did you?"

Vinny chuckled and looked out his side window. He thought about the mail bomb he just dropped of in the blue drop box that was getting mailed to his prosecutor Lisa Jenks. "Of course not. Just business to attend to. Come on dad let's get going." He said reassuringly.

Mark carefully flicked the gear shifter into drive and eased out of the church parking lot taking a deep breath as he thought what his new life would be like in Costa Rica. They reached a stop sign at the end of the parking lot. Mark stopped and put on his right turn signal.

While he waited for traffic to clear so he could pull out his father's words came into his mind from when he himself was a kid. As Mark made the right hand turn to start their long journey he let out a deep breath. He felt obligated to say something to break the eerie silence and show that he could handle this.

He pushed on the gas pedal and finally broke a smile.

"Just like your Pop Pop used to say Vinny, we're off like a herd of turtles."

THE END

Epilogue

Wiggles looked like he could swim in his bright orange jumpsuit that was two sizes too big for him. He hadn't yet lost any weight but insisted on wearing extra loose attire. Gangstas always wore big clothing.

He laid on his graffiti embossed 3 inch rubber mattress fuming like a losing presidential candidate. He felt pretty stupid for cheating in Vinny's game of musical chairs. Now he had a life without parole to think of that. He wasn't even entirely sure what all had happened. It was like he passed out at his girlfriend's house and woke up in jail. The jury didn't buy his crazy story that his 7th grade math teacher broke in, killed his girlfriend, and set him up for her murder. Stupid system. Always looking to throw a black man in jail.

Wiggles sat on the bottom bunk and bounced a blue rubber ball against the wall. He promised himself if he ever managed to dig himself out of the hole he was in, he would find this so called Gadget Man and kill him himself. How dare that cracka come into his girl's crib and boss them around like that and then have the audacity to take out Patricia.

As he thought about the good times he had with Patricia a loud knock rang out from his cell door. A burly impatient Latino guard beat on his door with his fist.

"Come over here and cuff up newbie. You have a legal visit."

A legal visit? Wiggles thought to himself. His pettifogging court appointed lawyer hadn't promised to see him until next month. He walked over to the steel door anyways and turned around then bent his knees so he could slide his hands through the slot to cuff up. The prison probably made a mistake but he needed the breath of fresh air anyways.

When he was securely shackled he took a step forward away from the door with his back facing the guard and waited for the door to open. The door unlocked and swung open and Wiggles exited his cell room walking backwards just like they were taught.

A second guard joined them and escorted Wiggles off the block and onto an elevator. From there he was taken to another room and properly vetted for contraband. They gave him his usual 30 seconds to get redressed then finally took him to his legal visit.

When Wiggles entered the room for his legal visit he was completely flabbergasted. A hot chicky momma hotter than Bill Cosby's wife sat at the table flirting the gilded hoop like earring in her left ear. The shapely woman was a true knock out and was dressed very sophisticated with black stylish pleated dress slacks and a matching silky button down shirt. Wiggles only guess was that this fine looking woman must be a psychiatrist looking to do a psychiatric evaluation. Wiggles took in her sweet perfume as he carefully took his seat.

"You look just as skinny as you always did." Joked the foxy woman.

Wiggles looked puzzled. "Do I know you?" He finally asked trying to play off gangster.

The lady smiled and showed her pearly white teeth. "You don't remember the pudgy teacher's pet that you and your homies used to make fun of?" She said with a flirtatious look.

Wiggles gaped as only one student came into mind. But no, it couldn't be, could it?

"Na...Na..."

"Natasha" She cut in helping him out.

He still had a look of disbelief. "I don't understand...You liked that crazy teacher, what are you doing here?"

She just smiled at him pleasantly. "Yes, I know you guys picked on me and drove that poor teacher nuts but you were just stupid kids. Lots of innocent people go to jail and live productive lives when they finally get out. I guess it's just the luck of the draw. Mr.Young killed a lot of innocent people that didn't deserve to die."

Wiggles cut her off. "Yeah, like my girlfriend." He said convincingly.

Natasha looked at her silver shiny Tiffany wristwatch to check the time. "Hey look, I don't have much time and I have another appointment with another client. You had ineffective council and I can prove it. I can almost promise I'll have you back on the streets by the end of this month." She said reassuringly.

Wiggles smiled at the thought of this. Maybe his life wasn't

over after all. Natasha crammed a bunch of loose papers into a portfolio then quickly stood up and signaled the guard. Wiggles was still confounded as to the nature of her intent.

"Wait!" He said pleadingly.

Natasha turned around with a look on her face like she knew what he was about to say.

"Why are you doing this?" He finally asked.

She already had her answer. She looked him over one more time. "Because I saw what the crooked judicial system did to my father so I went to law school so I could get the opportunity to defend screw ups like you silly." She replied and winked at him.

Wiggles didn't argue the insult. As the guards escorted him back to his cell he thought to himself *I'm going to get my crew and we're gonna find this so called Gadget Man and get our payback. Wiggles is coming back to town and he's not clowning around.*

Meanwhile...

Things in Costa Rica panned out pretty good for the Gadget Man. Him and his father managed to get into the country safely without any problems. They purchased an upscale bungalow in a quiet rinky-dink town scattered with creative looking shanties made of every kind of material.

Vincent managed to learn Spanish and within 6 months he spoke it fluently. Mark usually kept to himself and did a lot of fishing. The Gadget Man took all of the necessary precautions to protect his real identity so it would be almost

impossible for U.S. Federal agents to find him. He kept his hair cut short and did away with the eye patch. Vinny now sported a beautiful glass eye and he even got a lot of plastic surgery done to his face. He was really enjoying the beautiful country and his new life.

After a year Vinny felt compelled to go back to what he does best. He found a job teaching math to some kids at a middle school that were as grateful as the students he had at St.Mary's many years ago. The students adored him and laughed at all his stupid American jokes.

As for Vinny's father Mark, not too many people ever got to know him. The last anyone had ever seen Mark was when he and his son went on a hunting trip together. Unfortunately there was a terrible hunting accident and Vinny's father never made it back.

To be continued....