

# THE FICTION OF BRIAN KNIGHT



A SAMPLER

---

# THE FICTION OF BRIAN KNIGHT

---

Stories and Excerpts - A Sampler

**BRIAN KNIGHT**



# CONTENTS

[Brian Knight's Knightmares](#)

[Feral - Excerpt](#)

[Broken Angel - Excerpt](#)

[Hacks - Excerpt](#)

[Sex, Death, & Honey - Excerpt](#)

[Big Trouble in Little Boots](#)

[Midnight Blues](#)

[Don't Toy With Me](#)

[Night of the Dog](#)

[About Brian Knight](#)

Published by Tupla Books. Copyright © 2018 by Brian Knight. All rights reserved.

These stories are works of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. No part of this publication may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, distributed, or used commercially for any reason without the permission of the author.

Cover art by MSR Photography

[www.tulpabooks.com](http://www.tulpabooks.com)

---

## ALSO BY BRIAN KNIGHT

---

### Horror - Novels

- Feral
- Broken Angel
- Hacks
- Reservoir Gods (coming soon)

### Horror - Omnibus

- They Call Us Monsters (coming soon)
- Reservoir Gods/They Call Us Monsters - Monster Double Feature (coming soon)

### Horror - Chapbooks

- Children of Filth
- Heart of the Monster
- Apocalypse Green
- Johnny Junk
- Death is Blind
- Midnight Blues
- The Beast Inside - The Berserkers, Part 1
- Blood Rage - The Berserkers, Part 2

### Horror - Collections

- Dragonfly
- Dangerous Toys (coming soon)

### The Phoenix Girls - Fantasy

- The Conjuring Glass (Book 1)
- The Crimson Brand (Book 2)
- The Heart of the Phoenix (Book 3)

### The Misadventures of Butch Quick - Crime

- A Face Full of Ugly - A Chapbook

- Big Trouble in Little Boots - A Chapbook
- Sex, Death, and Honey (Book 1)
- Cut to the Quick (Book 2, coming soon)

---

## **PRAISE FOR BRIAN KNIGHT**

---

"Brian Knight's writing shines with a dark brilliance." Douglas Clegg, author of *The Children's Hour*

"Knight is a writer to watch." Ellen Datlow, *Years Best Fantasy & Horror*

"Say hello to horror's next big thing." Brian Keene, author of *The Rising*

"One of today's most exciting writers." Ed Gorman, author of *The Dark Fantastic*

---

## BRIAN KNIGHT'S KNIGHTMARES

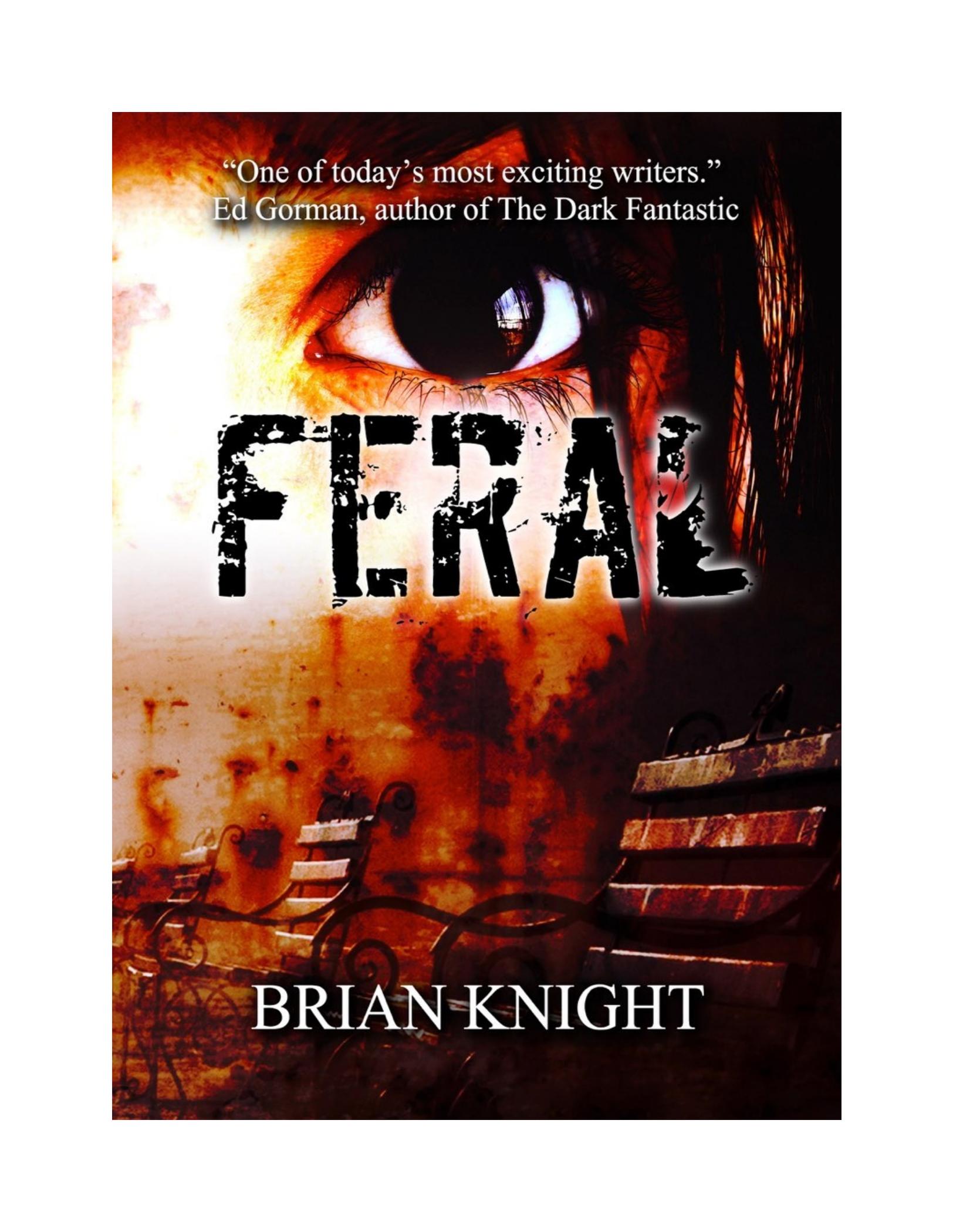
---

Subscribe to Brian Knight's [Knightmares](#) for news, updates, and free fiction.

---

## **FERAL - EXCERPT**

---



“One of today’s most exciting writers.”  
Ed Gorman, author of *The Dark Fantastic*

# FERAL

BRIAN KNIGHT

*For Ed Gorman, the first to say yes to this story.*

---

**SWEET, PRECIOUS THING**

---

---

## PROLOGUE

---

They called it The Playground of Dreams, and that's what it was at first.

---

Built in the early 1970s, it was a project one part government grant, two parts community spirit. The planning had taken years, but once they broke ground it finished up in a three-week whirlwind of donated time and money. The massive playground sat just outside of town at the eastern end of Blackstone Park where the neatly manicured green gave way to wild grass, groves of old willows, then stony, weed-choked shoreline. The northern border of Blackstone Park was the Snake River, flowing docilely toward the Pacific Ocean like a dark, liquid giant, and a paved walkway that joined Blackstone Park to the city. Its southern border was a line of tall willows, a sound barrier separating the park from highway.

Blackstone Park was developed in the 1960s as the cornerstone of Riverside's largely successful beautification project, and The Playground of Dreams was Blackstone's pinnacle.

It was a place where Riverside's kids could go and indulge their every fantasy while parents waited and watched from park benches just

outside the midget kingdom's iron-barred wall. Pirates roamed the deck of a tiny grounded ship, climbing up and down ladders and knotted ropes in search of treasure or imaginary enemies to run through. Brave and able knights guarded high wooden castle turrets and patrolled winding walkways like the tops of castle walls.

Sometimes the pirates and knights battled each other; sometimes they fought together, recruiting from each other's ranks to mix up the endless battle even more. Sometimes Black Beard watched over Camelot while King Arthur pillaged. It didn't matter, it was all one kingdom. The only enemies in The Playground of Dreams were boredom and reality, and inside that magical iron border they stood no chance.

Mostly there was no organized play. Mostly it was just perfect, joyous chaos.

Then the dream died.

---

In the late 1970s a girl was found beaten almost unrecognizable, naked and violated, half buried in the playground's sandbox. Her name was Jenny Heyworth, and she was only nine years old, a runaway.

One day The Playground of Dreams was full of screaming, rioting children, the next it was empty.

Blackstone Park, dubbed Feral Park after years of disuse, became a different kind of playground, a playground of drinking, drugs, and teenage sex. City workers blocked the access road from the highway with a barricade and a sign reading *Blackstone Park is closed to the public—Enter at your own risk*. Someone had since crossed Blackstone out and written Feral above it in dripping, purple letters. Soon Feral Park gained a reputation as something else entirely, and even the partiers left it alone.

Sometimes the kids still found it. Street kids, runaways, children of

the night, and many who went there were never seen again.

---

## CHAPTER 1

---

Amber heard someone call her name in the night and rose to answer it. She was still somewhere between dream and reality, and in her mind it was her daughter's voice.

When she saw the man's familiar face standing before her in the near perfect darkness, a grinning caricature, all teeth and glaring eyes, every suppressed terror and forgotten childhood nightmare she had ever known came back to her. She had forgotten this face, the face of the Bogeyman, but here it was again, and now she remembered.

"My sweet little Amber," he said. "My precious, precious thing. How you've grown."

She tried to run, but the power of his gaze kept her where she stood. She wanted to scream, but he cupped his hand over her mouth, cutting off her breath. As hard as she tried, she could not make a sound.

Then she saw his other hand and the wicked thing he held. A pair of stainless steel scissors, polished to a spotless mirror shine. They opened with a metallic hiss, making an X shape. He gripped them at the crux with his bare hand, fingers wrapped around handle and blade. They should have cut him, but did not. Weak light from outside lit the razor edges like lines of fire.

He punched through her with one extended blade and yanked

upward, opening her up from navel to sternum.

She felt the freezing sweat on her brow, cheeks, and chest, the odd sensation of parting skin and flesh as it hung in flaps from her midriff. Cold fire filled her to the core, its intensity growing with each application of his weapon. There were hot, meaty splashes against her legs and feet as he gutted her.

Then, finally, her struggle for breath ended. The grinning face faded to black and she felt nothing.

---

He knew she was gone. He could see the horrible understanding in her eyes die, leaving the dumb, empty gaze of a stuffed animal. He released her and she folded inward like a noiseless accordion, coming to rest at his feet.

He was drenched with her blood, painted with it, but that was fine. Just fine. He put the scissors away and rubbed his palms together in a slow, circular motion, relishing the tacky wetness between them. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, savoring her smell.

“Mommy.” It was a small, fear-choked cry from down the hallway. The voice of the child he had come for. “Mommy, I’m scared!”

He opened his eyes, his smile widening, and laced the fingers of his bloodied hands together in a prayerful gesture.

“Ah,” he intoned in a slow out-rush of breath. His lips parted in an impossible grin.

Huge teeth, sharks teeth, shining in a shadow face.

He went to her, sat on the edge of her bed.

“Why are you crying, Charity?”

She ignored him, continued to watch the door, waiting for her mother. She gave him an occasional nervous, twitching glance. He was a

stranger to her, though she knew his face from dreams.

She was not a stranger to him. He knew her, had come for her as he had so many others.

He asked her again, "Why are you crying, my precious little angel? It breaks my heart to see you crying."

Again, she ignored him. The third time he took her gently by the face, the V between his thumb and forefinger gripping her chin while his fingers caressed her cheeks. The blood on his fingers painted them, red streaks like the war paint on one of Peter Pan's little Indians. He eased her into a sitting position and leaned closer.

Her eyes darted, left and right, up and down. They rolled in their sockets in an effort to avoid his gaze. She was the strongest child he had ever encountered, but the force of his will was too powerful to resist.

"I had a bad dream," she said at last.

"My dear, Charity," his voice was soothing, offering cold comfort. "A bad dream, was it?"

"Uh huh," she said, then closed her eyes, forcing back the panic and tears. She opened them again and glanced back toward the door. She knew her mother wasn't coming. She did not cry then though, she stayed in control.

"I dreamed about the Bogeyman," she said when she had managed to kill the sobs.

He patted her head, smoothed the dark tangle of hair from her high forehead.

"There, there," he said. "Don't cry now. Close your eyes and sleep."

She nodded and slouched back against her pillow, all fear put away by the force of his suggestion. Thoughts of her mother, at least for then, were swept aside.

He smiled and held her as her eyes slipped shut. "You weren't dreaming."

He picked her up. She lay limp as a rag doll in his arms, and he had held her like that for a long time before leaving. Instead of devouring her, as he had come to do, he took her with him.

Looking into her eyes that night, he found something unexpected. Something he had never seen, or thought he would ever see, in any of these sheep-like creatures. He saw something in her that would always separate her from the rest of the flock. Something strong. Something wild.

Something that would set him free.

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

“Get ready,” said a voice from the shadows of the park.

“She’s coming.”

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

Charity chanted as she ran, an endless mantra that governed the beat of her sneakers against the blacktop, concrete, and bare earth. The words kept her running through the night, although she was too tired to run, kept her focused ahead when every shadow, tree limb, or mirage that she viewed sidelong transformed itself into him. When she was too scared to do anything but curl up in a ball somewhere and wait for him to find her, wait for her punishment, the mantra kept her moving.

Run, run as fast as you can,  
Running away from the Bogeyman.  
Through the light and through the dark,  
Running home to Feral Park.

Charity was nine years old now, and this was the third time she had run. He was neither patient nor forgiving. If he caught her again, he would punish her. She knew he wouldn't kill her no matter how mad he got, but he could be very mean.

She ran, keeping to the unlit streets and alleys as much as possible so no one would see her. This time she knew where she was going, and she thought if she made it, she would finally be safe.

She'd dreamed about it, the playground by the river. Except it wasn't really a playground anymore. It had gone wild, the grass in the park around it, uncut for many years, supported large clusters of wild sage and thistles. The iron bars and rails that surrounded it were a blood-red color from years of rust. The swing's chains, slides, and other metal surfaces were the same. Wooden ladders, towers, and walkways, though still sturdy in most places, were gray with age, showing signs of warping from seasons of cold, rain, and the cooking summer sun. Thick, knotted ropes used for climbing and swinging hung frayed. Some were tied into hangman's nooses.

There was a large wooden sign at the entrance that read Blackstone Park, only Blackstone was painted over in purple with the word Feral.

Feral: free, wild, returned to a natural state.

Charity understood what feral meant the way she sometimes understood things without knowing why, upon waking from the first dream of Feral Park. The meaning touched a part of her that she thought was dead, the part that dared to hope. The part that laughed, cried, felt anything beyond the dumb, numb fear. The word, and the idea that she could be feral too, drove the numbness away. For the first time she actually dared to hate him.

Her fear of him was still there, but for the first time she realized she needed to escape him. The other times she had run away had been impulse, the way a dog will run from a cruel master. It doesn't think of escape, because the cowed dog does not believe in freedom. It can only hide, knowing its punishment will be great when the master finds it.

Charity was finished being his pet. This time she wasn't just hiding. This time it was for keeps.

---

## CHAPTER 4

---

Shannon Pitcher started taking her late-night walks after settling into her brother's house on Walnut Street. They started late one evening as a walk to the convenience store for snacks, and maybe a good book to pass the next few nights with. She hadn't slept well the past few months, hadn't slept at all the past few weeks, except in short violent bursts just before dawn. She was tired of watching the midnight movie marathons, mostly B-movie rejects culled straight from the bargain basement of the trashy eighties, and the infomercials were pure insomniac hell.

That night, an hour after starting toward the Sunset Mart she had awoken to her surroundings and realized two things, she had no idea where she was, and she was exhausted. She could have curled up in the dew-damp grass of someone's front yard and fallen asleep right then. Instead she did a drunken about-face and walked back the way she had come.

She stopped only to read the first street sign she saw. It was the corner of Fair and 17<sup>th</sup> Street. She had walked over a dozen blocks. She wasn't used to this much street running unbroken and straight. Riverside was only a small city, but much larger than her hometown, Normal Hills.

She forgot the snacks and walked home, then crashed until late the next afternoon without the help of her hated pills.

While that long, uninterrupted sleep had been the greatest thing to happen to her in this new life, her post-Thomas-and-Alicia life, it had completely reversed her sleep cycle. Shannon found it was a change she could live with. Sleep during the day, take care of life's mundane necessities in the evening, and spend her nights in a nocturnal parody of life.

She had money, and the ability to make more when she needed it, so she was set. All she needed was a place to crash and a good movie or book to keep her company. That, and her night walks. The exhaustion and the dreamless sleep she needed to do it all over again.

---

Shannon heard the music before she saw the playground. It was a muffled, almost ethereal mixture of heavy metal and children's laughter. Her brother, Jared, had listened to heavy metal as a teenager.

Her taste for what their father called *the wild stuff* had never been as wide or varied as Jared's, but she recognized this tune. It was Queen's Stone Cold Crazy, but not Queen that was playing it. Behind the heavy metal noise, and running through the fast beat and sandpaper rhythm like a scarlet thread, was the laughter of lunatic children.

Shannon knew she should turn around, caution being the greater part of valor and all that shit, and just go back the way she had come. Kids will be kids, she knew, and the safest thing to do when they got up to harmless mischief was to leave them alone. Just stay the hell out of their way and let them wind down.

Like I'm doing now, she thought. Let them exorcise, or maybe just exercise, their demons and hope their better natures kick in before any real trouble starts.

There was something fundamentally wrong about this though. It was

not the boisterous carousing of teenagers. The voices behind the laughter were too young, the maniacal tittering of grade-school lunatics on a field trip to some carnival freak show.

*Can't be, she thought. You're hearing things. Just turn around and walk your ass back home. It's getting early, and you're so fucking dead on your feet you're hallucinating.*

Instead, she continued along the river, ear cocked toward the odd sound of toddler metal madness. She wasn't hallucinating. There was a playground over there by the edge of the wild where all traces of the city ended. A goddamn big one, and so old and neglected she couldn't believe any parent would let their child play in it.

The music and the laughter ebbed and swelled, ebbed and swelled.

The playground was empty.

A single voice, the voice of a haughty schoolyard queen, rose above the others. She sounded eight, maybe nine years old, Alicia's age.

*Stop it, a voice in her head screamed. We are not going there tonight. Not tonight, not ever!*

She tried to kill the thought as she approached the playground. It quieted, falling back into the denied darkness of her subconscious, but it would not die. It hung on, whimpering in the darkness where she could still hear it.

That crazy music, ebbing and swelling, and the sound of muffled laughter, distorted into something horrible.

It was Her voice, beautiful and frighteningly familiar, singing some nonsense hopscotch song, one of many in her repertoire. Then she spoke to Shannon.

"Why did you let him do it, mommy? Where were you when he took me away? Why didn't you stop him?"

The voice, Alicia's voice, came from inside the playground, and from somewhere within her own head.

It can't be her, she thought coldly. There's no way it's her, she's dead.

You don't know that, they never found her body. You don't know she's dead.

Shannon ran toward the playground, stumbling through ankle-high grass and clumps of stinging thistles. The music, the laughter, the screams of terror that she recognized only vaguely as her own, expanded. The jumble of noise pulsed between her temples.

*"Alicia!"*

She passed a large wooden sign, Feral Park, and as she ran beneath the sign at the entrance that proclaimed The Playground of Dreams, the noise popped like a bubble and was gone. Her momentum and the adrenaline pumping through her body carried her on. She ran through to the heart of the playground, dodging obstacles, ducking one low-hanging rope bridge strung between a pair of wooden towers. Her feet tangled in the cover of old graying wood chips and she landed, sprawled out in the sandbox a few feet away.

She lay there for a minute, not hurt, but physically and emotionally drained.

*What the hell just happened to me?*

She didn't understand the specifics, but the basics were clear enough. She was having a walking nightmare. She was losing her mind.

When she felt she could trust her legs, she rose and brushed the dust from her jeans. She remained as still as possible, silent, listening for the music, the laughter, or the voice, but the silence endured. She looked around, eyes and senses wide open, but in the toy-crowded playground it was impossible to know if she was truly alone. There were too many shadows, too many cubbyholes, too many hiding places.

Behind her a rusty swing squeaked, nudged by the wind, or perhaps an unseen hand. To her left, old wood groaned as if being relieved of some unseen burden. Something moved in front of her. A shadow that

hadn't been there a few seconds earlier snaked across the wood chip covered ground toward her. She stumbled away from it in horror, and something grabbed her from behind.

"Hey lady." A soft young voice, faint but clear, as if someone had come unnoticed behind her and whispered in her ear.

Shannon spun around, a startled shriek escaping her lips. She tasted fear, thick and salty, in the back of her throat. She could feel, worse, could hear, the increasing tempo of her heart. It pulsed irregularly, echoed by a pounding behind her eyes.

No one was there.

Something touched her ankle.

She jerked away, striking something hidden in the darkness with her temple. The low ringing sound suggested it was metal, but the ringing may have only been in her head. For a second the playground was gone, and she was alone with the pain and a frightening sense of surrealism.

Then the laughter started, like a white noise broadcast in the tender gray tissue between her ears. It grew, its volume increasing like a radio that has been turned from one to ten, bringing her back to herself. She opened her eyes and looked up into the dirty face of a young boy. He was laughing too, but no sound came from his wide-stretched mouth. It was in Shannon's head with the rest of the sounds.

A second later the face was gone.

Shannon rolled onto her knees and rose. Around her the shadows jumped, shifted, melted together like living pools of ink. Some vanished just as she caught sight of them, only to reappear in the periphery of her vision. Every swing, teeter-totter, and hanging length of rope was in motion. The rope bridges above and around her bounced and swung violently.

The noise of laughter grew and grew, again mixed with that distant music.

Shannon stood, her fists pressed to her ears, an attempt to block out the noise. It didn't help. She searched for the opening in the playground wall, the arched entrance she had come in through, found it, and bolted. She glanced back as she ran and saw something following, a long serpentine shadow. It picked up speed and size as it absorbed the smaller shadows in its path.

Now Shannon could hear screams as well as the laughter, and realized they were her own.

"Come back lady! We wanna play!"

Something flew past her, sailing only inches from her right ear. It might have been a brick, but she couldn't be sure in the dark.

"Nany-nany poo-poo, stick your face in doo-doo!"

Something grabbed her upper arm as she ran. It felt like tiny fingers, incredibly strong and with long fingernails that dug into her flesh like the teeth of an iron trap. She went into a rough sideways spin, stumbling over her feet and landing hard on her ass. The invisible thing lost its grip on her as she fell. She tried to rise again. The exit was only feet away. The great shadow serpent, more like a shadow river now, was rushing ever faster.

She scrambled and was grabbed again, this time the tiny iron trap hand closing around her ankle.

"Damnit, let go!" she screamed and kicked at the invisible hand until it released her.

"Ow! Fuckin' spoilsport!"

She blundered to her feet, and fell down again as something large and solid struck her between the shoulder blades. She made a choked *oof* sound and landed face first.

"Get her!"

She turned over onto her back in time to see the monstrous shadow stretch out wide and rear up like a cobra. It came down on her legs and

they disappeared from the thighs down. All sensation below her waist ceased.

She dug fruitlessly into the wood chips and dirt with the heels of her hands as it started to suck her in.

“Catch the Bogey!”

“Kill the Bogey!”

“Cram a stick up its ass!”

Then there was a scream, a sound of such honest terror that Shannon thought her heart might stop.

Then it was over. All was silent. All was still.

The shadow thing retreated and she had her legs back.

She turned to the exit and saw a girl, a girl who reminded her so much of Alicia it hurt, staring past her slack faced. The girl didn't look anything like her missing daughter. It was the clothes. Faded Arizona blue jeans, pink canvas high-top shoes, pink t-shirt, and the small heart-shaped gold locket that hung around her neck. The locket had a picture of Thomas, Alicia, and herself inside it. The last time she had seen Alicia, she had been wearing those clothes. Then the girl began to sag, her eyes rolling up to the whites, and she collapsed before the arched entrance.

---

## **BROKEN ANGEL - EXCERPT**

---



"Say hello to horror's next big thing."  
Brian Keene, author of *The Rising*

# BROKEN ANGEL

BRIAN KNIGHT

*For Judi, who always loved this story the best.*

"Mysteries are not necessarily miracles."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"The final mystery is oneself."

Oscar Wilde

"Now comes the mystery."

Henry Ward Beecher (dying words)

---

**CLEARWATER**

---

---

## CHAPTER 1

---

She was a mystery from the start.

But was she a miracle?

---

The yellow Oldsmobile idled in the gravel and dirt parking lot, in front of a *No Place* Idaho greasy spoon called Canyon Jack's.

*I'm a coward, he thought. I should just cut her throat and drop her in the river.*

He couldn't make himself do it though. He was afraid.

He was already cursed.

He didn't want to be damned.

"What are we going to do with her?"

---

His girlfriend sat beside him, hands clenched in her lap. Waiting for him to do something.

Anything.

The girl sat in back, slumped against the passenger side door. Eyes open, but not awake. Breathing, blinking only when the autopilot in her

brain told her to do so.

Just a piece of living meat. The ghost inside the machine was subdued.

For now.

“What are we going to do with her?” his girlfriend asked.

“We’re going to leave her here,” he said at last.

She glanced back at the girl behind them, gave her a look both frightened and sympathetic. “We can’t leave her. She’s your sister.”

“No,” he said. “She’s not my sister.”

“Then what is she?”

---

He focused on the rearview mirror, watching the monster in the back seat. She’d moved, or at least he’d imagined she had. Then her unfocused eyes turned toward the mirror, found his, made the short hairs on his neck prickle.

“What is she?” Raw desperation cracked her voice.

“I don’t know.”

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

The fight hadn't even started and Eugene Grim was already half exhausted. The long way to the salvage yard was a half-hour walk from town, down the highway and over a neglected logging road through the woods. He'd have taken the Yamaha, but it was broken down in his front yard, awaiting repair. He didn't trust himself to fix it alone, and Danny was just too busy at work lately to help him.

If his plan worked, the long walk would be worth it.

Old Ron Wallen's salvage yard was the ideal place for the year's first game, he thought, since they had lost it to Alex Cain and his friends in the last game before winter. Alex and his buddies had handed them their collective ass.

The added excitement with Wallen's place was the possibility of getting busted. It all depended on how drunk the old man was, the drunker the better, and if one or both of the sheriff's Jeep Wagoneers happened to be in the shop.

Of course, it was always easier if you held that ground. The salvage yard was easier to defend than it was to take.

After ten minutes of pounding dust, Grim turned off the dirt road, into the trees. He could smell the salvage yard's accent odor on the wind, old oil, burnt rubber, and rust. The perfume of dead machines. Beneath

that, the heady scent of pine sap.

He stopped, took a deep breath to steady himself.

*Pucker time*, he thought.

He shrugged out of his backpack and leaned it against the trunk of a tall spruce tree, unzipped it and took inventory. He'd loaded the pack with more than he could carry up a tree, and he didn't feel like climbing with the extra weight strapped to his back. He needed the binoculars and his paint gun. The spud launcher, on the other hand, might be tricky to fire from up there.

*What the hell*, he thought, and pulled a potato from the bottom of the pack. He shoved it into the spud launcher's tube, packed it down with a stick, and hung the launcher from his shoulder by the twine strap. He shoved a can of aerosol hair spray into the front of his pants, checked the load of paint balls in his gun, and holstered it. The holster was homemade; leather and twine, road-kill ugly, but it would keep his hands free for climbing. He hung the binoculars from his neck and zipped the pack up again.

He jumped and caught a low limb, was about to hoist himself up when he changed his mind.

Clay wanted him to stay far enough away that Alex and his friends wouldn't be able to hear him, or see him if they happened to glance up the right tree.

*If you get a shot, take it*, Clay had said. *But stay back. If they catch you alone and take you out before we get there, we're screwed.*

Clay, his best friend in Clearwater, Keith, and Kelly were counting on him for recon, first and foremost.

Grim wanted to get in closer though. He'd be a lot more useful closer to the fight.

Besides, the thought of sitting high up and plugging away at Alex Cain and his friends Raif, Bo, and Kelly's older brother and arch enemy,

Clint, filled Grim with a giddy anticipation. He wanted to show those fuckers up in the worst way.

He dropped back to the needle covered ground, picked his pack up by the straps, and crept onward.

He went closer to the salvage yard, almost daring himself forward, and didn't stop until he heard their voices, amplified, but tinny in the steel jungle that was the salvage yard. They were probably hiding in the old boilers, or lying low in the stack of rusted culverts.

Waiting. Smug bastards.

*Got a surprise for you guys.*

Grim set his backpack down, found a sturdy looking tree, and climbed.

He scanned with the binoculars but didn't see them. They didn't see him either. He waited and listened, then heard their voices again a few minutes later, coming from inside the old cement mixer. The cement mixer was a long-time fixture of the salvage yard. It had settled into the ground over the years and was pocked with large rust-holes. A great place for an ambush. Grim knew. He had used it.

He unclipped the walkie-talkie from his belt. This was the part he didn't like. Alex and his friends carried talkies too; there was always a chance they'd get lucky and guess which channel he was using. Cell phones would have been safer, but Clearwater was a giant dead zone, no signal for miles. Few people in Clearwater bothered with them unless they worked upriver in Orofino or downriver in Lewiston.

He turned the talkie on, pressed the send button, and said, "Hey, you guys awake down there?"

---

"This is bullshit," Keith said. He lit a cigarette, shook his match out and

tossed it into the grass at the edge of the road. "This is the last time we trust *Eugene* to plan a raid."

Clay shook his head, bent and plucked the burnt match from the grass, tossed it onto the pavement. "Better not let Grim hear you calling him that," he said. Grim didn't like his first name, had talked about changing it for as long as Clay had known him, but his foster mother, the only one in Clearwater who got away with using it in front of him, wouldn't let him. So, to anyone who didn't want to start a fight, he was just Grim.

Keith made a disgusted noise and dismissed Clay with a wave. Keith had caught Grim screwing his older sister the year before and had never quite forgiven him. As much as he liked to badmouth Grim behind his back though, he didn't have the stones to take Grim on.

"What's up your ass?" Clay asked.

"Just remembering last time," Keith said.

"You can't blame Grim for that."

"Nope, but I'm gonna tear him a new one if he makes us late."

It was nearing sundown, the magic hour, when Wallen would be at his drunkest and the sheriff's office would be more interested in coffee at Canyon Jack's and completing the day's paperwork than patrolling. If they waited too long the dark would catch them, and they might as well go home. No way in hell they'd take the salvage yard in the dark.

"Hold on to your dick," Clay said. "We'll make it."

"Call him," Keith suggested, and slapped the walkie-talkie clipped to Clay's hip. "Ask him what the fuck he's up to."

Clay laughed. "You're feeling brave tonight. How about you ask him?"

Kelly swiped the smoke from Keith's hand and took a drag. "Shut it. We're almost there."

They were coming up on the packed dirt road to Wallen's place. The

salvage yard was not visible yet. The road twisted an S through the trees to Wallen's shack, then past it to the yard.

They turned down the dirt road, and when Wallen's shack came into view, they broke into the woods. They passed it, keeping quiet, putting enough of the forest between them and the road to mask their passage.

When the salvage yard came into view they crouched down in the trees, unloaded their backpacks, and prepared for war.

Minutes passed, and they didn't hear from Grim. The sun dipped to the edge of the western evergreens. Silence from the salvage yard.

"Quit jerking off, Grim," Keith whispered, and drew snickers from the others.

Then it came, a low crackle of static on the talkie, and Grim's voice. Clay cranked the volume down and pressed the speaker to his ear.

"Where are you?"

"Looking down at them," was Grim's reply.

---

Grim prepared himself for a little dose of the old Clay attitude and said, "Looking down at them."

"Shit, how close are you?" Clay asked.

"Close enough to be useful."

A moment of radio silence, probably Clay cussing him out on the other end, then, "Where are they?"

"In the cement mixer." He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the salvage yard again. "Don't know if they're all there. They could be spread out." He paused, looked back toward the declining sun. Not much of it left. "I'd like to wait for a while and make sure but I don't know if we have the time."

"We're cutting it pretty close," Clay said.

"It's your call."

A few seconds pause, then Clay said, "Let's do it now. Keith's gonna piss himself if he has to wait any longer."

"Gotcha," Grim said. "Hit it with the spud guns, aim for the holes if you can. If we can scare them out we'll have a better chance."

"Gotcha. See you on the other side," Clay said, then was gone.

Grim clipped the talkie to his belt and unstrapped his spud launcher. He straddled the branch he sat on, back pressed against the rough skin of the spruce, pulled the hair spray can from the front of his pants, and fumbled in his pockets for a lighter. He almost panicked when he didn't find it.

"Shit," he said under his breath. *Lost it!*

Then he found it and relaxed. Almost relaxed.

He sat with the spud launcher drawn across his lap, the hair spray can in one hand, and the lighter in the other, and waited for it to begin.

It started with the bang of rusted metal as the first potato struck the concrete mixer. The metal rang like a gong, startling birds from the trees around him. A second bang followed the first, and he steadied himself on his limb before uncapping the can and spraying the flammable aerosol into the small hole on the back end of the tube.

He heard shouting, cursing from below – if the noise was this loud from as far back as he was, it must have been ear rupturing inside. Alex and Raif scrambled toward the mouth of the mixer.

Grim couldn't help himself; he had to take the shot. He gave the tube another shot from the spray can, aimed a few feet over the top of the mixer to adjust for drop, and used the lighter.

The spud left the tube with a hollow sound and pounded through a rust pock in the hull of their hideout.

Grim didn't have time to appreciate the excellent shot. The recoil had thrown his balance off. He slid sideways, the spud launcher falling as he

grabbed for a handhold. He caught the branch with a hand as he went over.

“Oh shit!” He swung one-handed from the branch, straining for a hold with his other arm, but not finding it.

He heard the ping-ping-ping of paint pellets on metal, and spun to see the action. Raif was on the ground beneath the lip of the mixer, crouched and firing. Alex leaned from the mouth of the mixer, gun pointed down the salvage yard’s main path. He fired.

“Fuck! I’m out,” Kelly said, and came into view, arms in the air and a splatter of red paint on his chest. Then he dropped to his knees and Clay rose up behind him.

Pop-pop-pop.

Alex ducked back inside and the pellets splattered the wall behind where he had been.

Clay took cover behind a row of rusted culverts stacked like logs along the path.

Raif rose and chased after him.

Where was Keith?

Still swinging from his limb, Grim wrestled his paint-gun from the holster and squeezed off a half dozen shots. One of them was lucky, taking Raif in the small of the back.

He stopped and kicked at the dust. “I’m out!”

Grim took no time to gloat. His arm ached, and his shoulder felt stretched out. He fumbled the gun back into its rough holster and strained for the limb. The hand keeping him from falling some fifty feet to the ground was slipping. The fingers of his free hand found wood, and lost it.

Then the first paint-ball exploded against the trunk, just above him, splattering him with red paint. Another followed, just missing him as he twisted around for another grab at the limb.

"Hey," he shouted, then realized how stupid it was to expect Alex to cut him any slack. He wouldn't have given Alex any if their positions were switched.

Grim made another grab, and breathed easier when his hand caught wood and held. He shimmied toward the trunk, another paint-ball flying over his head, then he hugged the trunk and lowered himself down to the next limb a few feet below.

It bent beneath him, then let go with a dry snap.

The fall was over before he had a chance to scream. He hit the ground with his feet, his knees buckled and he landed hard on his ass. There was a moment of darkness, the muted sound of footfalls coming toward him. Someone said *Oh shit*, but he couldn't tell who it was.

Then the darkness morphed into pain, a pounding inside his skull, a line of pain up his spine. He was able to sit up without stirring more pain. He flexed his legs. They worked.

"You okay, man?" Clay ran toward him, gun hanging forgotten in his hand.

Alex followed close behind. He actually looked worried.

Grim took a moment to appreciate Alex's concern, then unholstered his gun, and aimed.

Clay's eyes went wide and he jumped aside. "What the fuck, Grim?"

Alex stopped, turned to run, but too late. Grim fired and the paint-ball exploded against Alex's shoulder. He looked down at his red-splattered shirt, then back to Grim. "Dirty fucker," he yelled, then raised his hands to the graying twilight sky. "I'm fuckin' out!"

Grim smiled, and rose to his feet. It was a cheap shot, he knew it and felt a little guilty, but the satisfaction outweighed the guilt.

A second later Clay was at his side. "That was dirty, man," he said, then laughed.

"Thank you," Grim said. "How we doing?"

“Good so far,” he said. “Bo and Clint were hiding behind the gate. They got Keith on the way in. I nailed Clint.”

“Two to one?”

“Yep.”

“I like those odds,” Grim said.

Clay opened his mouth to reply, then stopped. He reached around with one hand and rubbed his back. His hand came back smeared with red.

“I’m out.” He raised his hands, paint-gun aimed at the clouds, and winked at Grim.

Grim nodded and pointed his gun at Clay’s chest.

Clay stepped aside.

That trick would not work again; there was no one behind him.

Grim ducked behind the trunk of his tree, and waited.

The others were on their way to the waiting point outside the gates of the salvage yard. He heard Clay say something, then laugh, and heard Alex’s surly reply.

*Cheap shot motherfucker!*

Yep, he was pissed.

It was just him and Bo now. If they lost this time it *would* be his fault.

He peeked around the trunk of the tree and saw no one. This did not comfort him. There were a lot of places to hide in the salvage yard.

He stepped into the open, bracing himself for the sting of a paint-ball, and sprinted out of the trees. Inside the yard now, he ducked behind the iron bulk of a World War II era boiler, the first in a long row of its fellows, and listened.

There was nothing at first, then the approaching thunder of footfalls coming down the main isle.

He steadied himself, paint-gun raised, and stepped out to meet Bo.

“Watch it,” Alex said, and pushed past him. The others followed,

Clay at the rear.

“Haul ass,” Clay said. “Big brother’s here.”

Shit! So damn close!

“Hey, Grim.”

Grim turned and saw Bo standing only a few feet away, gun pointed, a grin splitting his face. It wasn’t his paint-gun; it was his spud launcher.

*Pow!*

The flying potato caught Grim in the stomach, doubling him over, knocking the wind from him. He dropped his paint-ball gun and fell to his knees, trying futilely to suck air. A paint-ball exploded against his shoulder, close range, and added to the pain.

“Say it,” Bo said.

Grim struggled to catch his breath, then finally sucked in a lung full. He breathed it in great whoops. The salvage yard’s decay scented air had never tasted so sweet.

“Say it, Grim.”

Grim raised his hands resentfully and said, “I’m out.”

Bo nodded. “Bet your ass,” he said, then followed the others into the woods.

Grim knelt in the dirt, panting, listening as their passage through the woods faded. Time to go.

He picked up his paint-ball gun and started to rise when the voice came from above.

“Drop the gun, punk. You’re coming with me.”

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

Michele was fifteen years old, looking forward to the last week of school, when the workload would lessen and softball season would begin. Softball wouldn't last long; the Clearwater team never made it to the post season. There wasn't a big enough talent pool to build a *good* team. Still, it was fun, and a great excuse to hang around the diamond after their games to watch the boys from visiting teams.

She knew almost every girl her age in Clearwater, but she didn't know the girl sitting alone in the corner booth. The girl who appeared to be sleeping with her eyes open. Except for the slow, rhythmic movement of her chest, she could have been dead.

"Don't stare, Michele. It's not nice."

Michele turned to face her mom, but her eyes flicked back to the girl. "There's something wrong with her, mom. Look at her."

"Michele!" Her mom's lips pulled into humorless lines, her eyes widened and scanned the tables around them, almost hoping, Michele thought, that she wasn't the only one incensed by her daughter's rudeness. "You can be such a little monster sometimes."

Michele rolled her eyes and dipped one of Canyon Jack's limp fries in catsup. "She's been sitting there since we walked in, and I haven't seen her parents once. Don't *you* think that's weird?"

“They’re around somewhere,” her mom said, but she sounded unsure. She looked around the dining room, as Michele had earlier, but saw no strangers she could match with the girl; just Jack working the kitchen, the waitress, Darla, and a few townies. She looked out the dining room window, scanned the half dozen cars, and frowned.

The strange girl just sat there, staring into the nothing.

Then her head turned and she looked at Michele.

Michele felt a sudden, electric shock of fear. Those dark, bottomless eyes seemed ready to swallow her. Giving way to the fear was a loathing she didn’t understand for the strange girl. Her stomach gave a sudden, slippery roll. Her throat burned, and she had just enough time to duck beneath the table before her dinner came back up.

“Michele,” her mom shouted, and tried to pull her back up. “My god, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, then wiped her mouth. “Let go, I’m fine.” She opened her eyes and saw the pile she’d left between her feet. Not much there, she hadn’t eaten much, but what was there was tinged with red. Michele almost screamed, then realized it wasn’t blood, but bile-thinned catsup.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” It was Darla, standing at the table with a pot of coffee in one hand and a bar rag in the other. She frowned at Michele, then the mess under the table.

“Do you know who that girl is?” her mother interrupted.

Darla followed her mother’s pointing finger and flinched when she saw the girl. “Oh m’god! I didn’t know she was still here!”

“You know her?” Michele ventured. She chanced another look at the girl, bracing herself for another wave of sickness. There was none, just her natural curiosity and a creeping pity.

“No,” Darla said. “She was here when I came on shift. Sitting with her friends.” She looked thoughtful for a second, an almost alien

expression on her face. "They left about the same time you came in."

While Darla and her mother spoke, Michele looked around at the other patrons. Not many, especially not for a Friday night. They'd arrived about the same time as usual, just ahead of the normal Friday rush, but tonight that rush hadn't come.

There were a few kids, stopped over on their way to some Friday night party or other, a few mill workers from down-river.

Old man Wallen sat at the bar, nursing what was probably his twentieth beer of the afternoon. He'd come in earlier, already half toasted, bitching about the *Damn Punk kids foolin' around his salvage yard again*.

He was the only one, besides her, her mother, and Darla now, who seemed to notice the strange girl. He watched her, blood-shot eyes unblinking, muttering.

"Maybe you should check the restroom," her mother said to Darla. "I'll look around outside. They have to be here somewhere."

"Yeah," Darla said, then set the coffee pot on the edge of the table and wandered toward the rest rooms.

"Stay put. I'll be back in a minute."

"Yeah," Michele said. "Sure."

Her mother pulled out her pack of Saratoga's, the vice she usually kept well hidden in view of other people, and lit one on her way through the door. When the door swung shut behind her, Michele got up and walked over to the lone girl's booth.

"Hey," Michele said, and stopped in front of her.

She didn't respond, not even a blink of the eyes or a turning of the head in the direction of Michele's voice.

"Where are your friends? Did they leave you?"

Nothing from the girl.

Michele heard footsteps from behind and turned to find Old Man

Wallen approaching, his cane leading the way like an arthritic third leg.

“You best get now,” he said to Michele, but his eyes remained fixed on the unresponsive girl. “Get on back to your table and let me deal with her. You don’t want to get mixed up with her lot.”

Michele was suddenly scared of him. He’d always been just the cranky old junk man, but she felt something coming off of him, a stink that was more than beer or whiskey. There was something very wrong with him.

Michele backed a little closer to the booth, standing in front of the girl. “She didn’t do anything wrong, Mr. Wallen. She’s just lost, I think.”

Now his eyes did find hers, locked onto them, held them in an electric grip. What she saw in them was worse than his irrational drunk talk, worse than the stink that seemed to ooze out of his pores. What she saw in his eyes was a simple, brutal rage.

He dropped the cane. It hit the tile floor with a wooden clatter, then he limped forward a step. His right hand flew at her, and before she could duck it slammed into her face.

She heard the shocked gasps that came as one from the other diners, then felt the dull, metallic pain as her head hit the floor. She tasted blood, and spit it onto the tile in front of her.

She tried to scream for her mother, but her traumatized lips wouldn’t cooperate. They were fat, rubbery.

“I’m going to do this,” Wallen said. “Oh, you little bastards I’m going to do what I should have done a long time ago!”

Michele pushed herself up from the floor; there was a lot of blood on it.

*That all came from me, she thought, amazed. That ass-hole hit me!*

“Ass-hole,” she said, but it came out blubbery through her swollen lips. More blood spattered the floor.

She began to cry.

From the other side of the dining room, Darla screamed.

Wallen was laughing.

Michele turned her head, looked up.

He was choking the girl.

Michele couldn't see the girl, only Old Man Wallen, bent over her, arms thrust out, tendons standing under the skin like strands of bailing wire.

"Help her," she said, but no one did. They just stood around, watching, faces ashen, eyes big.

Michele stood, slipped in her own blood, fell to her knees. She saw Wallen's cane lying on the floor and picked it up. Before she even knew she meant to do it, she was standing behind him, cane upraised like a club.

"Michele, no," she heard her mother scream from somewhere behind her, but she was already in motion.

The cane came down on the top of the old man's head with an almost comical *bonk* sound.

Wallen grunted, lurched forward, but didn't release the girl. Her face had gone a pretty shade of lavender.

Michele raised the cane again, held it with both hands, and brought it down as hard as she could.

The *bonk* sound was less comical this time. It was accompanied by a brittle cracking sound, like an eggshell breaking on the edge of a mixing bowl. He fell to his knees without a sound, leaned forward onto the booth's seat, then slid onto the floor under the table. This time the blood staining the tile floor was his, and there was a lot more of it.

His eyes were open still, but he didn't see Michele. They were not accusing as she might have expected, like a dead person's eyes sometimes were in the books she read. They were like the eyes of a mounted deer head.

Michele dropped the cane, turned away from him. She found the strange girl lying on the seat of the booth. There was an ugly red ring around her neck; a raw red peppered with grime from Wallen's ever dirty hands.

She was breathing though, drawing air in ragged gasps. Her eyes were red, leaking silent tears.

Michele began to bawl. She dropped next to the strange girl on the seat, lifted her up and wrapped her arms around her, fists locked behind her back, and cried for both of them.

---

Deputy Danny Grey allowed Grim to sit in the front passenger seat of the old Jeep that served as deputy sheriff's patrol rig for Clearwater, instead of the back seat. Being a lawman's brother rated that much at least.

Not a real brother, Grim supposed, but close enough. They'd both been raised under the same roof, by the same woman. Clara Grey, Clearwater Post-mistress, President of the local chapter of The Sisters of Mercy, and foster mother. Clara Grey, Clearwater's resident saint.

Grim's arsenal was zipped up snug in his backpack again and stashed behind the Jeep's back seat, where it would likely remain until Danny decided he'd been punished enough. He'd replaced his paint splattered shirt with a spare he'd packed for afterward.

"It had to be the salvage yard, didn't it?" Danny said, trying to sound stern but not quite accomplishing it. The salvage yard had been a favorite playground to the kids of Clearwater since time out of mind, and he'd heard stories about Danny's exploits in his younger years. Not a serial rapist by any means, but he'd got up to his own mischief.

"You knew we were going," Grim said. "If you're so concerned about Wallen's property rights why didn't you stop us?"

“Hell, I don’t care what you do in that old crap-yard, so long as you keep it low key.” He frowned at Grim, gave his head a little shake. “It was those damn spud-guns. Sounded like you were beating war drums. Wallen was damn near frothing when he called.”

They rolled slowly along the dirt path from the salvage yard to Wallen’s shack. Grim’s heart played a little tango in his chest when it came into view.

“You’re going to make me apologize to him, aren’t you?”

“That would be a sight,” Danny said, then laughed. “No, I told him to be gone before I got there. Said I didn’t want to have to worry about restraining him and a gang of juvenile delinquents at the same time.”

They passed Wallen’s cabin and found smoother ground. Grim noted with some relief that the old man’s green International was gone.

“Didn’t know you could do that.”

“Can’t, but I did anyway. He was probably too drunk to question it.” Danny pointed at Grim as they turned the next narrow corner, almost running them into a tree. “Tell your friends the next time I get a call from Wallen I won’t give them a running start. You’re lucky as hell it was me instead of Everett.”

Everett Johnson was Clearwater’s daytime deputy, the main reason they’d planned their game for the evening, rather than the middle of the day. “He’d just love to bust you.”

“I know,” Grim said. “He’s had a hard-on for me from day one. Thinks I’m a bad apple.”

“You are a bad apple,” Danny said, but not without another hint of a smile. “Incidentally, you want to duck down when we get to Jack’s. Wallen’s waiting there for a full report.”

“What’re you going to tell him?”

Danny screwed his face up into a sour mime of Wallen’s and croaked, “I’ll tell him the shit-lickin’ bastard punks were gone when I got there.”

"Thanks," Grim said. It wasn't the first time Danny had covered for him. Most likely wouldn't be the last.

"Don't mention it. Especially not to Mom. She'd kick my ass."

They rounded the last corner through the trees and the road to town came into view. As they turned onto it Danny's radio blared static, then a voice. "Danny, have you been to Wallen's place yet?" It was Lydia, the volunteer dispatcher. When the office was empty all calls routed to her.

"Just leaving now," Danny said, then held a finger up to pursed lips, a little *be quiet or we're both in for it* gesture.

"Good, you need to get over to Jack's, ASAP."

"Copy," he said, rolling his eyes. "Tell Wallen to keep his pants on."

"Wasn't Wallen that called, it was Darla."

"Come again," Danny said.

"Darla called. I couldn't understand most of what she said, but she's pretty upset. Sounded like she said Michele Kirkwood just killed someone right there in Jack's dining room."

Grim gawked at the radio, then at Danny. He knew Michele Kirkwood, not well, but well enough to doubt what he heard.

*No fucking way*, he mouthed to Danny.

Danny didn't believe it either, and indicated his doubt with a little shake of the head.

"You have got to be mistaken," Danny said. "Michele wouldn't kick a dog if it was chewing her leg off."

"I know," the radio squawked back at them. "Dear God, I hope I am mistaken."

---

Danny had seen dead bodies before, mostly on the highway. Truckers run off the road by exhaustion, and a few town folks that had been t-

boned pulling onto the highway by Jack's without looking first. This was his first murder.

Well, not exactly a murder. Wallen had attacked Michele first, then the strange, silent girl sitting alone in the corner booth. A fifteen year old girl that he knew from town, a nice girl, a good girl, had busted Wallen's old head wide open with his own cane, and had saved the other girl's life.

So really, she was a hero, not a murderer.

She was hysterical when he arrived, crying and clutching the strange girl. Grim had to help him pry them apart.

Grim sat with Michele now, holding her, trying to comfort her while Danny took a statement from her mother, Evelyn Kirkwood.

Jack had closed the place down and left for home after giving his statement. Not much help really, since he was in the back cooking when it had happened. The other patrons were gone too, having given their individual statements and perspectives.

The consensus was that Michele had been damn brave and acted before any of the others had a chance to.

This didn't feel right though. Wallen had backhanded Michele out of the way, and a damn wonder she wasn't out cold after the hurting he'd put on her, then attacked the girl in the booth. The girl's throat was swollen, and there were ugly purple imprints where his fingers had closed around it. That had taken more than just a second to inflict.

And Michele had hit him twice before his skull caved in. Twice. There should have been plenty of time for someone else to step in and help.

What it looked like, though Danny didn't quite dare say it, was that the others had just stood around and watched.

That didn't make any goddamn sense either. He knew these people, thought he did anyway.

"Thanks, Evelyn." He closed his notepad, he wasn't going to get

anything new. "Would you like us to take her to the hospital? She took quite a shot."

There was a lump on her head where she'd hit the floor, and her split lip dribbled blood, but he thought she would be fine. No concussion, nothing broken. The emotional shock seemed to be the worst of it.

Evelyn glared at him.

"Well, no shit? Where ever did you get your spectacular grasp of the obvious?" She turned away from him, purse clutched to her chest and nose in the air. "I can take care of her."

*Let it slide*, he thought, face burning with equal parts embarrassment and anger. *She's having a shitty night too.*

Shitty night or not, that kind of antagonism was what you expected when dealing with Evelyn Kirkwood. She was a bitch on her best days.

He watched her approach Grim and Michele and willed her to keep a civil tongue with Grim at least.

"Let's go, baby," she said, holding out a hand to Michele. To Grim she said, "Thanks."

At least her mouth said thanks. Her tone said *stay away from my girl*.

"Take care, Michele," Grim said, and didn't even acknowledge Evelyn, just stood and walked past her like she wasn't there.

*Just let it slide*, as Grim liked to say.

Little brother? Kind of. Troublemaker? Definitely. But, sometimes that kid impressed the hell out of Danny.

Grim waited until the door swung shut behind Evelyn and Michele, then said, "How did such a nice girl ever come out of that bitch?"

"Shut up," Danny said, even though he'd been thinking close to the same thing.

It was just them, Darla sitting alone in the employee's break room in back and waiting for the state police and coroner to arrive, and the girl.

And Wallen of course, laying where he'd fallen, covered with one of

Jack's red and white checkered tablecloths.

Danny had an idea why no one else had helped. It was his job, and he didn't want to. The thought of touching this strange girl made him cold.

The girl had settled back into the far corner of the stall, hugging her knees to her chest, then gone away again. Not comatose, not a vegetable. It was almost like she was sleeping with her eyes open.

"Shouldn't the ambulance be here by now?" Grim asked.

"Naw," Danny said, a little disgusted. "They're all tied up right now. There was a pileup on the highway. That's why we're still waiting for a state police and the meat wagon."

"We taking her then?" The nearest hospital was fifteen miles east, in Orofino. The girl seemed to be breathing fine, so there was really no huge rush, lucky for her.

"I am," Danny said. "You can go back home if you want, but I won't stop you if you want to come along." He gave the girl a sideways glance, barely a flick of the eyes, and shivered. "Tell the truth, I could use the company."

"No sweat," Grim said.

For a moment neither moved, neither spoke.

"What the hell do you make of her?" Danny asked. He supposed it was silly, him asking a garden variety juvie what he thought of anything, but he'd spent his whole life here, and Grim had lived in Seattle most of his life, a street kid until he'd found his way to Clara. He had seen things, experienced things that Danny never had.

After a brief pause, Grim said, "E-Z-Lay."

"What?"

"Roofies," Grim said. "I've seen what they can do." He looked away from her, must have seen the disgust that Danny felt and looked at the floor. "She's probably so drugged up she can't remember her own name."

Danny was still trying to take it in. "Roofies? The date rape drug?"

"Yeah," Grim said.

She was just a kid, looked about the same age as Michele, maybe younger.

Grim sat down next to her, "Hey there, can you hear me?"

No response, no acknowledgment.

"My brother and I are going to take you to the hospital." He reached out and gave her shoulder a light shake. "Don't be scared. We're going to take care of you."

A small response that time; she raised her head from her chest, just a little, rolled her eyes toward him. Then she shifted toward him and laid her head against his shoulder before blanking out again.

Grim put an arm around her narrow shoulders and held her.

"We better let Clara know where I am. She's probably passing a stone by now."

"Yeah," Danny said.

He saw a black and white pull into the mostly empty lot as he walked around the counter to use the telephone and felt a little of his tension ease. It was the state's scene now. He'd give this bull his collected statements and let him babysit Walden until the coroner arrived.

---

The ride to Orofino was quick and quiet. Neither Grim nor Danny spoke more than a word at a time. The girl spoke not at all. She sat buckled in next to Grim, slouched against her restraints.

The only time she showed any life was when they passed the pileup on the highway. Danny turned the flashers on as they approached it, and the State cops waved them by.

Only one ambulance remained on scene, waiting for the extraction

crew to peel open the last of the vehicles involved. An old car, mustard yellow, looked like it might have been a Buick, California plates.

The girl turned her head and watched the crew working to open it up. When they were past it she twisted around in her seat, still watching. She didn't settle back into her seat until the next bend in the road put it out of sight.

---

A sound in the blustery, star dappled night. A sound that made dogs whimper and hide under porches. A sound that roused men and women stumbling zombie-like from beds to lock doors and latch windows. A sound that made children pull blankets over their heads and bunch pillows over their ears.

The gusting wind picked up the pace and dark clouds snuffed out the starlight.

Then the sound came again, louder.

Outside, somewhere in the deserted streets of Clearwater a voice called out. A loud schizoid wailing that sounded like laughter, or maybe laughter disguised as wailing. Crying.

Then a scream.

"Oh no!" A woman's voice.

Her silhouette moved against the Old West Style false front of the Post Office, dragging something behind.

She stopped, dropped what she dragged behind her. A bag.

"Oh my god, oh-my-god, ohmygod!" She held her hands up and looked at them. Then down at the bag.

Then she ran away into the darkness, leaving the bag where it lay.

The sound that followed her, like the heartbeat of the night, the squelching sound of footsteps in blood.

---

The night crawled on, the darkness endured. Total darkness. The sky was dead.

Canyon Creek grumbled past at full flow. A deep gash carved into the earth by a thread of water over the long years.

Splashing feet disturbed the water, and the ragged breath of runners cut the wind.

He caught her in the underbrush on the other side, the wild side of the Creek, and threw her down.

There was a struggle, but it was brief.

Ripping cloth, the wet smack of flesh on flesh.

Slobbering, grunting, yowling, painful pleasure. Animal. Organic but unnatural, like a monkey fucking a cat.

Only one returned.

---

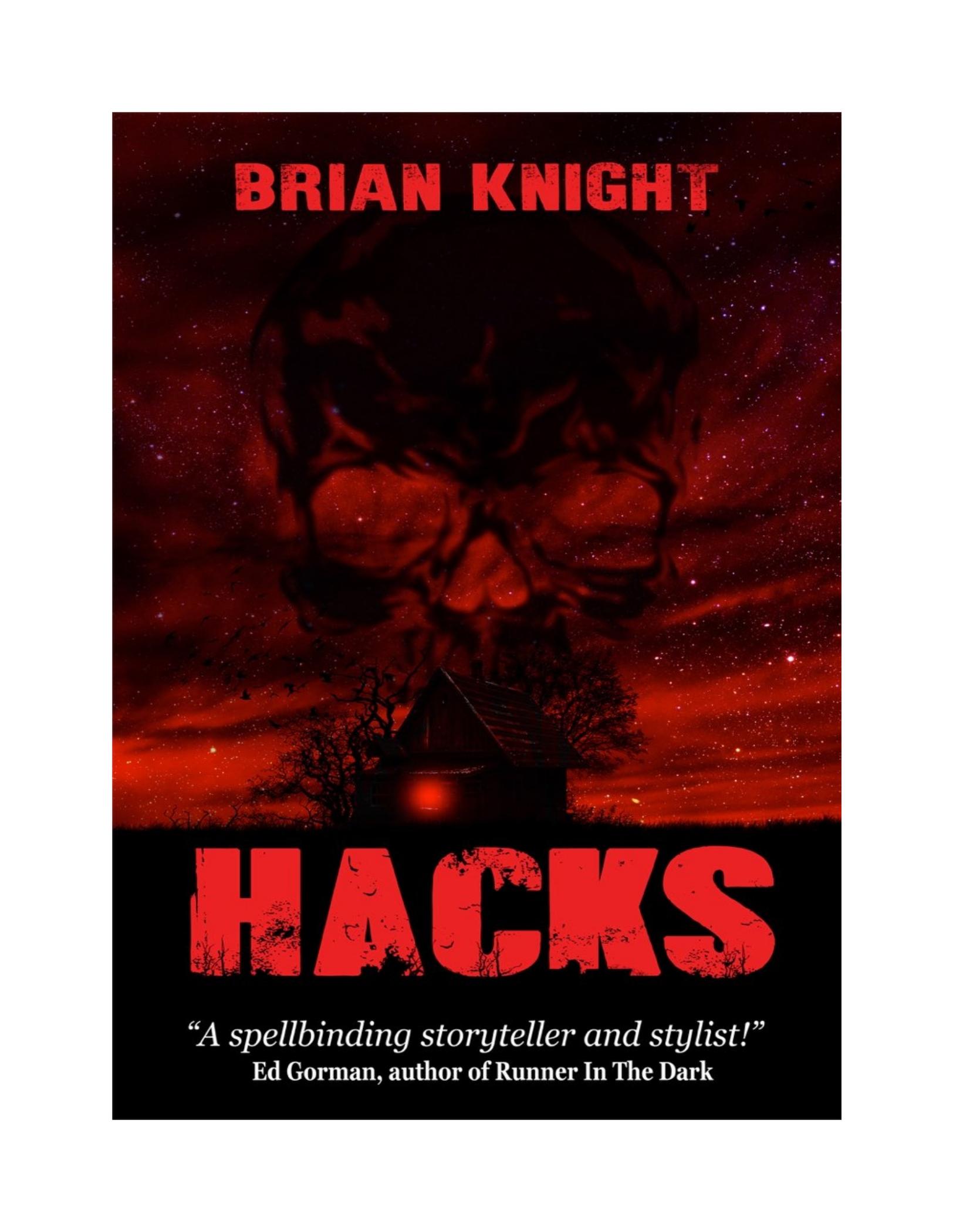
The night grew old, bleached out like something dead. The stars returned, but they were pale, weak.

The darkness was not finished yet, the darkness endured.

---

# HACKS - EXCERPT

---



**BRIAN KNIGHT**

# HACKS

*“A spellbinding storyteller and stylist!”*

**Ed Gorman, author of *Runner In The Dark***

*For H Casper, who continues to be a good sport.*

From the Garfield County Examiner:

*Blue Mountain Blaze Threatens Anatone.*

*The blaze spotted early yesterday morning by a Department of Lands employee at the Wenatchee Lookout Tower has now burned thousands of acres of wilderness and forced the evacuation of several high mountain campgrounds.*

*Fire crews now have the wildfire sixty percent contained to the west and southwest, where it threatened the evacuation of Stentz Springs and Baker's Pond area homes. High winds continue to drive the blaze eastward, where it threatens residents of Anatone.*

*It is unclear if the fire was started by lightning, or is man made.*

*The inmate fire crew from the State Prison in Orofino, Idaho is now working with Washington fire fighters to contain the blaze's eastern front.*

*A small party rescued by an Air National Guard helicopter crew surveying the area was taken to Sacred Heart Medical Center in Spokane, Washington, and are being questioned.*

---

## CHAPTER 1

---

### The Devil's Tail

Aptly named, The Devil's Tail twisted through some of the roughest country the Blue Mountains had to offer, a narrow, stony whip crack of a road, thrown into constant darkness by old, leaning fir and pine trees. Ten miles from where The Devil's Tail split from the main forest service road through The Blues, it ended abruptly.

There was no warning, no Twilight-Zone-Sign proclaiming *The End Draweth Nigh*, or *Here There Be Monsters*. Just more of the same; a narrow dirt road roughened by bull rock and years of runoff from the spring thaw. The forest's perpetual darkness, and what might be a thousand hidden eyes watching your passage.

And after a last bracing turn of the goat path the forest service called a road, a new world opened up. A vista of open sky, powder blue from horizon to horizon, and the distant green and gray of the mountains on the other side of a deep dark pit that may very well have been a bottomless canyon.

On the flat before the canyon, a half-dozen small cabins stood flanking a larger cabin, three on each side, like old weather-beaten soldiers in line with their commander. The large cabin, a service station fire lookout until the tower two ridges to the west made it obsolete, had been fighting its battle against The Blues for half a century. The smaller

cabins had stood beside it a mere thirty years, but were no less eroded by the passage of twenty harsh winters, and eighty seasons of disuse. The forest service turned the old lookout into a lodge, built the smaller cabins around it, and rented them out during the summer.

No one had used them in twenty years.

This mid-July day, comfortably cool in the high mountains, a dozen men were at work undoing twenty years of neglect.

Two men crouched on the roof of the lodge tearing out rotted shingles and replacing them. Another cleared season's of debris from a large, sunken stone fire ring.

Gasman #1, Galen, stood idle while the hose trailing from the back of his truck pumped propane into an underground tank, while gasman #2, Erick, inspected the copper fuel lines and fittings running to each cabin.

"Is it shut off yet? Drew?" Erick had to shout to be heard over the pumping fuel truck.

A man in forest service green poked his head through an open window a few feet away. "Yeah," he shouted, then nodded for good measure. "That's all of them except those two." He pointed toward the last two cabins to their right.

"Thanks," Erick shouted back. "Let me know when you have the rest shut off."

"Will do, boss," Drew said.

---

*What a fucking week,* Drew Williams thought as he pulled his head back into the cabin; unexpected holdups every day, that noisy fucking truck pounding his brain to mush, the forced overtime.

No way in hell the place would be up to snuff by Friday evening. Might as well kiss that goddamn fishing trip he'd planned for this

weekend goodbye.

The worst of it was that fucking road. That rutted, rocky bastard would tear his truck apart before this was over, not to mention what it was doing to his back. He hadn't been in this much pain in years, not since the accident had landed him in a hospital bed for a month, and left him pulling light duty for the rest of his working life .

Of course, he was only supervising the work here, but that god damned road was going to kill him.

And all because some rich city cunt decided she had to have this place. How the hell did she even know about it? No one came here anymore.

Drew bent, gasping at the flare of pain in his back, and double checked the gas shutoff valve behind the heater. Closed. Good. Five cabins down, two to go. He wanted nothing more than to lie down on the new bed they'd installed at the insistence of that rich city bitch, pop one of his pills and sleep until it killed the pain. But if he didn't hurry to the next cabin and shut off the gas line ASAP he'd have gasman Erick all over him.

Erick had given Drew hell about having to come out this far on such short notice, and had added a substantial trip charge for his trouble. His disposition had not improved one whit since he'd arrived.

*Fucking government contracts*, Drew thought. If not for some contract that had probably been negotiated from a comfortable office somewhere in Olympia, he'd have told gasman Erick where to stick it and found someone else to do the job.

"Hurry up," Erick yelled, for what might have been the hundredth time that day. "We have a half-hour to finish this leak check or we'll go into overtime!"

"You poor overworked baby," Drew said, but not loud enough to be heard over the pumping truck. "Wouldn't that be a damned shame."

Drew hurried to the next cabin.

---

Leak test complete, propane tank filled, Erick shoved a bill into Drew's hand and gave a curt goodbye. Drew gave the propane truck the bird as it vanished around the corner onto The Devil's Tail.

His crew, plus the two carpenters they'd contracted to repair the cabins, were sitting around the stone ring having a break, and a break sounded just fine to Drew. He'd have a piss and a smoke, in that order, then maybe sneak away for a lie down in one of the cabins.

He'd rather have a Percoset and a cold beer to wash it down with.

The lodge's septic tank was full, years of snow runoff and rain had managed to fill it somehow, and the crap man wasn't due for another day. Probably a cracked line from one of the cabins. *Hopefully* just a cracked line. If the tank itself was compromised, there was a whole new set of problems that would probably include the EPA. The toilets in the cabins and lodge were off limits for now, so Drew took the trail through the woods toward the lake, and the only outhouse.

The lake was small and clear. Constant flow from the underground spring that also fed the lodge's well kept it from stagnating. It even had a healthy population of trout. Drew had considered bringing his fishing rod if they did have to work through the weekend, maybe sneak off and throw a line in while the others were working. It wasn't worth his job though, or his retirement. Five years to go now. Just five years and the forest service could take their job and cram it.

Something moved in the trees to his right, and Drew jumped, sending a new lance of pain up his throbbing spine. He scanned the trees before moving on, but saw nothing. Being this far out in the Blues made him nervous as hell. The Devil's Tail belonged to beast, not man, and though

it was probably just a startled deer, or maybe a branch-hopping squirrel, mountain lions and bear were too plentiful out here. The bigwigs in Olympia were pushing to reintroduce wolves to the area too. Damned if they weren't bound and determined to kill him before he retired.

When they'd first arrived this trail had been almost completely swallowed up by the forest. Clearing it so they could take a crap safely had been the first order of business. Other trails led into the woods around the small lake, but he'd steered his men away from those. He did not want anyone going down those trails, specifically the one at the far end of the lake. There were things down there better left unfound.

*Let the woods keep them,* he thought.

There was another burst of movement in the trees to his right, but Drew ignored it. He unbuckled his belt with one hand while reaching for the outhouse door with the other.

A loud grunt from inside the privy stopped him. The grunt was followed by an explosive, splattering fart.

"Christ, put a muffler on it," he shouted at the outhouse door, then turned back up the trail, the pressure on his bladder growing insistent.

When Drew reached the lodge, the carpenters were back on the roof, but his crew still sat around the stone ring.

*Lazy bastards,* he thought.

"Drew!"

He turned, and cursed.

"Wadaya, want, Yohan?" He knew what Yohan wanted though. He'd been expecting the man to show up sooner or later.

"Story is someone is renting this dump," Yohan tipped his big John Wayne meets the Great White Hunter hat back and surveyed the area. "Look's like I heard right."

Drew grunted. "How's business?"

"Slow. Who is it, Drew?"

“If I tell you, will you get the hell out of here and let me work?”

“Whatever you say, partner.” He tipped Drew an obscene wink. “However you want it.”

Drew fished his wallet from his back pocket, withdrew a business card, and handed it over. “That’s the lady you want to talk to. She’s staying at the Red Lion in Lewiston, but you can reach her on her cell phone.”

Yohan smiled, gave Drew a nod. “Thank ya’ kindly. It’s nice to know some folks still look out for their own.”

*Their own*, Drew thought with disgust.

But he knew Yohan was right. They hadn’t been friends in a long damn time, but they did still share one interest, and it was in that interest that Yohan had come. Not just a job, but insurance.

He and Yohan had killed a man once, not far from here, and the evidence of that crime was still out there. Waiting for the wrong person to come nosing around.

Having Yohan on the job was the best insurance against that.

---

Drew stalked to the far end of the clearing, to the edge of the canyon. His irritation faded as he drew closer to the edge. The view was dizzying, incredible. One of the best The Blues had to offer.

How many hundreds of feet to the bottom?

He had no idea, but the wonder he felt standing over the drop, right at its edge, was laced with a nervous fear.

*All it would take was one strong gust*, he thought. *Put me right over the edge. I’d die of a heart attack before I came close to hitting bottom.*

Far below where he stood, facing the beautiful abyss, an eagle sailed the wind, letting loose a cry that echoed between the canyon walls.

*That, Drew thought as he unzipped, is not something you see every day.*

He imagined nailing it with a stream of piss as it passed below, chuckled, and let flow. The stream of urine arched out over the impossible drop like yellow rain.

A crunch of footsteps in dry grass startled him from his happy thoughts, and he turned.

“What the hell’s wrong with you? Can’t I take a leak without ...”

Drew’s next word caught in his throat.

A quick glint of sunlight on steel blinded him. A swishing sound, followed by a wet *rip*.

There was no pain, only a moment of disorientation as the world spun around him, and as Drew fell, he caught a glimpse of his headless body standing on the ledge, dick still in hand. His headless body, and the man standing behind it.

The last thing Drew saw as his head tumbled into that beautiful abyss was his own body leaning forward and following in an ungraceful, flailing swan dive.

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

### The Invitation

*Mr. James Eldridge,*

*I am pleased to invite you to attend this year's Hacks Club, a private retreat for authors and editors whose work I admire. The Hacks meet every year at my invitation for a one week, all expense paid getaway beginning August 20.*

*I've chosen you as a potential Hack on the strength of your novel, "Burn." I own a copy of the limited edition, leather-bound hardcover, and found it an enjoyable read as well as a great investment.*

*Most of this year's chosen Hacks are first-timers, like yourself. I typically invite only one Hack for a second year, a Veteran Hack to help potential attendees decide if Hacks is worth their time. Veteran Hacks are chosen because I've found them to be the most interesting of the previous year's Hacks. This year's Veteran Hack (I am positive you know him) is back for his third year.*

*As your host, I will pay all your traveling expenses and arrange for your*

*boarding and food. You will spend a week in seclusion, in the company of some of the finest writers and editors working today.*

*I ask only three things of you in return. One; bring a pen. I will have copies of your books for you to sign and inscribe. Two; be prepared to share stories and personal experiences, both in and out of the book biz. Three; have a good time. Above all else, I want my Hacks to enjoy their time with each other, and with me, your host.*

*You'll find contact information in the enclosed card. Please RSVP.*

*Looking forward to your response,  
Susan Bonkowski, collector and fan.*

*PS. I realize that this is short notice, but one of my Hacks met with ill fortune and is unable to attend. I hope you'll be available to take his place.*

---

The letter arrived by UPS. Jim signed for the envelope, then closed the door against the August heat and took it back to his study, puzzled and a little concerned. The way things were going for him lately, an unexpected return receipt letter could only mean bad news. Usually the UPS man came either with contributor copies of his own books, or contracts. The thin envelope didn't have any books in it, and he wasn't expecting any contracts.

He felt a sudden, cold panic. Maybe it was a contract cancellation, and he was about to become an orphaned author. But no, things were nothing but peachy with his publishers at the moment. He was meeting deadlines, turning in revisions on time, and sales were good. Not mind blowing, but good nonetheless.

He flipped the envelope over and studied the address label. A PO Box in Washington State, a town called Asotin. In lieu of a name, a single word. Hacks.

Jim dropped down into the chair in front of his desk and tore the UPS envelope open. Inside, a smaller envelope, cream colored, with his name printed in calligraphy.

A minute later, when he'd read the letter twice, he shook his head and felt inside the cream envelope, pulling out a small, folded card. Black, with his name in gold. He opened it and found a series of numbers and dots.

*What the hell?*

Beneath that:

Username: Jim Eldridge.

Password: Hacks6.

Then he understood. The numbers were a server address, the path to a website, but one without a domain name. Whoever this Susan Bonkowski was, she didn't want anyone finding this site by accident, or through a Google search.

"So, I'm a hack now," he said. *A second string hack at that*, he added silently, then crumpled the letter, envelope, and card into an angry ball before tossing them into the trash can beside his desk.

He didn't have time for this shit. There was work to do. If he wanted to stay in his editor's good graces, he needed to get busy.

But Jim didn't get his flow back. The damn UPS man had broken his train of thought, and the letter in the waste basket had snagged his

interest, against his will. After twenty minutes, mostly spent deleting new lines of dialog that didn't quite ring true, he saved the document and closed Word.

He opened his Internet Explorer, brought up Google, typed up a search for Hacks Club and found a group of kayakers. Their motto, *We Paddle For Pleasure*, made him smile. Might have been an S&M club, if not for the picture of a kayak rocketing over whitewater.

Next in line were a German Goth-Sex website and pages of links to Xbox and Playstation cheat code sites. He gave up on the third page of Google links, considered for a moment, and surfed to the Horror Writers Association website. He wasn't a member, he'd quit the organization three years back, but he knew a few dozen writers and industry pros who did belong to HWA, and one of his friends, a trustee no less, had loaned Jim his login information to the message board so he could keep track of the book business gossip.

Who did he know who had met with ill fortune lately?

He surfed the message threads for another ten minutes and gave up. The closest he found was an update on Dallas Grant, whose health had been failing for some time now. Nothing recent about that.

What next?

Jim tapped his fingers near his keyboard, resisting the urge to go out for a smoke. He wanted one badly, but he wanted to satisfy his curiosity even more, so he could be done with it and get back to work. He compromised by sliding the window closest to him up and lighting up where he sat. Shelly would throw a shit fit if she caught him, but...

He shoved the thought away. He'd managed to put most of a day behind him without thinking of her. Why ruin a good thing?

If Hacks was an ongoing event, there would surely be something about it somewhere on one of the message boards where procrastinating writers gossiped and goaded each other into flame wars.

He started over with a general search on the Horror Writers Association message board, and found nothing. Next he tried the Shocklines.com board. There were more fans and collectors there than writers, so he didn't expect to find anything there. He didn't. Next, and even more of a long shot, Jim thought, was a charming little place called Message Board of the Damned. Though the normal topic for discussion was horror in print and film, you were just as likely to find anything from political rants, porn spam, to threads dedicated to new and interesting combinations of cuss words.

Jim had never posted there, just lurked and read the threads, but he knew a lot of writers who frequented it.

He did a general search, and to his surprise, found a short thread in the archives from two months back.

---

*Hacks Club Conspiracy*, was the header.

The post originator was one Richard Pedroos, known affectionately to the board members as Dickey Pee, had been banished from the board a few weeks prior for posting the home address of another writer, then threatening to blow his balls off with a shotgun.

Dickey Pee, a self described Maestro of Dark Fiction, composed the post in his customary style.

*I've hearded tails of a socalled Hacks Club, which is the Illuminati of horror fiction and controls are which is published or denied. If anyone hear knows of these Hacks and how I can reach them I would deal with these conspirators, who unfairly blackball me because I am conservative and anti-faggot.*

*Stop being a bunch of pussys and lets do something about this Hacks conspiracy. - Richard Pedroos.*

The board moderator replied first.

*Dickey Pee, if you don't cut out the homophobic rants, I will ban you from this board. As for your Hacks conspiracy, never heard of them.*

The second response came from a writer Jim knew. He worked as a mechanic by day, and was wildly popular with small press collectors and fans. He hadn't crossed over to the mass market yet, and was always quick to admit he probably never would. They would want him to compromise his style, he said, and he'd give up writing all together before he did that.

Jeff Campbell, known by and referred to simply as *Camp* by his friends and fans, would probably remain a mechanic with that attitude, Jim thought. He respected Camp though, and there was no denying that the man was a phenomenal writer.

Camp had posted, *You're a nut-job, and should be sterilized before you reproduce. Later! Camp.*

Jim smiled and scrolled down through a dozen off-topic retorts before he found another relevant post.

*I've heard of the Hacks Club, but don't know if any of the stories about them are true. Seems to be more urban legend than fact. I heard that Hacks was started about 30 years by Elmore Leonard, and that Stephen King, Peter Straub, Brian Keene, Ira Levin, Richard Laymon, Edward Lee, and F. Paul Wilson have all been members at one time or another.*

*I've also heard that careers have been made and shattered at meetings of The Hacks Club, but I don't think they are the reason you can't get published, Dickey Pee. You just suck.*

The unexpected slamming of the apartment's front door startled Jim. He peeked out the window, saw Shelly's car parked behind the neighbor's at the curb. He checked the clock above his bookshelf and was stunned to see it was a quarter past five in the afternoon. He'd been surfing for almost two hours.

He snuffed his cigarette on the windowsill – his fourth he saw from

the dead, crumpled butts lined up on the brick jamb – before sliding the window closed. He'd been chain-smoking without realizing it. He'd barely made it back to his chair before Shelly swept into the room.

In his head, Jim heard the words *hi, honey, I'm home*.

*Yeah, right*, he thought.

She stood over him, her spiked heels adding another 5 inches to her already impressive six feet. She looked like an Amazon in a miniskirt. Her blond hair was wrapped in a bun too tight to have ridden her head through the hot, humid day. She must have rewrapped it before coming home. The heady, expensive perfume she'd doused herself with before leaving for work that morning now had a hint of Brute cologne mixed with it.

Things like this no longer surprised Jim, but they still pissed him off. She could at least keep up the front and try to hide it until the divorce went through, or she'd managed to find a new place.

She gave a false cough and waved a hand in front of her face. "Are you so fucking lazy you can't lift your ass out of that seat to go outside for your cigarettes?"

Jim's smile felt more like a grimace. "Is that a rhetorical question, or do you expect an answer?"

"Bastard!"

"Bitch!"

Shelly turned on her spike heels and stalked out, slamming his office study behind her.

*Fuck it*, Jim thought, and reached into the waste basket. He plucked out the balled up letter, then the card, and smoothed them out on his desk.

---

The entrance page to Susan Bonkowski's website was a no frills affair. White background, no text, no graphics. The page header was blank.

"Shit," Jim said, and slammed his computer mouse on the desktop. All this energy focused on what amounted to a blank webpage.

Then a gray pop-up prompt appeared, asking for a username and password. Jim provided them, glancing at the wrinkled black card for conformation before clicking *Submit*.

An image faded in over the white background, a large cabin, flanked on each side by three smaller cabins. A wall of evergreens stood behind them, and the extreme left, what looked like an abrupt drop into some monumental canyon. Mountains.

The photo was old, grainy, black and white.

A large sign, white letters painted on a large, flat wedge of wood said *The Blue Mountains - The Devil's Tail Lodge*.

Below the picture, *You are invited to this year's meeting of The Hacks Club. Time: August 20-28. Place: The Blue Mountains of Washington State.* Below that, a brief history of The Devil's Tail Lodge.

Jim didn't take the time to read it. On the upper right corner of the webpage was a list of names, and next to each name, icons that read *offline* in red letters, or *online* in green. Jim's name was at the bottom of the list, with a green online icon next to it. The other names, he saw Jeff Campbell's name among them and grinned, were listed as offline, except for the top two.

Jim read the second from the top and laughed out loud. Ryan Stahl, Chief Editor and owner of Delirium Books. Delirium had published Jim's last five novels in limited collectors editions before they went to mass market. It was the Delirium edition of *Burn* that Susan Bonkowski had mentioned in his invitation letter.

Susan Bonkowski's name was at the top of the list.

The three of them, collector, editor, and Hack, were all logged in.

With as much amusement now as curiosity, Jim clicked the chat button below the names.

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

Heather Woods

Jim had allowed himself a nap on the first connection, but fought hard to stay awake during the second leg of his eight hour flight. He meant to see what he could of The Blue Mountains from up high, on his way to the Lewiston, Idaho airport, just across the Idaho/Washington border from Asotin. Not far at all from where his trek to The Devil's Tail was to start. Jim knew from experience if he allowed himself to drift off, he wouldn't wake until touchdown, and he'd miss the view.

To that end he'd gulped cup after cup of strong, bitter airline coffee, and found himself fantasizing about the pretty blonde woman sitting in the opposite row, near the cabin. He wasn't the only one to notice her. After making cruising altitude and giving his obligatory speech over the airplane's loudspeaker, the captain had made a walk-through, and stopped to chat with her. He'd only left her side when a frustrated flight attendant trying to navigate her cart around him, had bumped him hard during her third pass. He'd all but fallen into the blonde's lap, and excused himself back to the cabin, blushing.

Two hours and three trips to the bathroom into the flight, the comfort and quiet of first class overcame him, and he slept. He dreamt absurd dreams of being chased through the woods by an Amazon in high heels and a hockey mask, like Jason wore in Friday The 13th. Instead of a

machete, she brandished a copy of their divorce papers.

Touchdown bounced him awake, and he swore, irritated with himself. He'd had a bird's eye view of a mountain range larger than his home state, a panoramic view that gave new meaning to the word wilderness, and he'd missed it.

*No worries, he told himself. I'll have all the mountains I can stand in an hour or two.*

Then, without even realizing it, Jim laughed.

He'd been doing this for the past two weeks, still surprised to find himself headed for what seemed a dream vacation, over two thousand miles from home. A fan had flown him *first class* across the country, so he could sign books, relax, and tell stories.

Just another of life's little surprises.

A happy one this time.

Jim was still grinning as the flight attendant ushered him and the rest of the first class passengers off the plane to the small airport's single gate.

---

At an espresso stand a short walk from the baggage claim, Jim had a mocha while he waited for his luggage. Usually a nervous traveler, anxious about missing connections, paranoid about his luggage and afraid of terrorists, this time he was too excited to be nervous.

"Are you Jim Eldridge?"

He'd been busy watching the empty carousel, waiting for his bags, and hadn't noticed the good looking blonde from first class standing next to him.

*Another of life's happy surprises.*

His smile stretched wider when he recognized her as the woman the captain had flirted with. Now his view of her was even better. She was

diminutive, trim but nicely shaped, with a manner that radiated class.

“Yes.” Jim nodded and extended a hand.

She took it in both of hers and gave it a squeeze. Her hands were small. Soft, but strong.

Jim’s pulse quickened at her touch. He hoped he wasn’t blushing too fiercely.

“I love your work,” she said. “Your story *Damned In Paradise* made me cry.”

Jim was shocked into silence. *Damned In Paradise* was a short story damned near every short horror market had rejected, and had found life as an afterthought, a filler in a small press collection a few years back.

At last he spoke. “Thanks. I didn’t think anyone had actually read that.”

“Only your hard-core fans,” she said, then winked. “Oops, there’s my bag,” she said a second later, and started for the luggage carousel.

Jim spotted his two bags, and followed.

“Business or pleasure?” he asked, not wanting to let the conversation go so quickly. Then he cringed, because that sounded so goddamn lame. Being a writer didn’t automatically make you a good conversationalist, Jim knew. Boy did he know.

“A little of each,” she said, reaching the carousel and waiting for her bag to reach her. “You?”

“Same,” he said. “Meeting my editor and a few friends,” he added, wanting to sound impressive. Somehow he didn’t want to tell this pretty woman he was here for what amounted to little more than spending a week as some super-fan’s pet writer. His bags arrived before hers, and he scooped them up.

“Well, I better run now. My ride is probably waiting outside. Nice meeting you.” He set one of his bags down and offered his hand again, but she did not take it.

“Here’s my bag. Hold on for a second and I’ll walk out with you.”

*Light traveler*, he thought.

“Sure. Anything for a hard-core fan.” He cringed again. That was even worse than *business or pleasure*.

She laughed, grabbed a bag, a large yellow duffel that would have looked more at home in a locker room, then took his arm with her other hand and led him away.

As they neared the lobby’s exit Jim’s heart dropped. A man stood just outside the door in front of a limo, holding a sign that said Eldridge/Woods. Heather Woods, one of his fellow Hacks and the biggest name of the gathering, was probably waiting inside. He was looking forward to meeting her, but was also a bit nervous. He was a fan, and understood from experience what a letdown it usually was meeting your idols.

The woman holding onto his arm, on the other hand, he could spend more time with her.

*Farewell, pretty lady*, he thought as he pushed the door open. *All good things come to an end*.

The heat came as a bit of a shock after the cool interior of the airport. A fine sweat broke out instantly on his forehead.

Then the fair lady released his arm and pointed at the limo. “Look,” she said. “There’s our ride.”

Jim stopped, rocked forward a bit as she grabbed hold of his arm again and tugged him forward. When she turned to him, a sly smile on her lips, he tried to speak, but all he could manage was a weak cough.

He tried again. “You’re Heather Woods?”

Her smile widened, apparently pleased with his discomfort.

“Oh, you’ve heard of me then?”

---

Yes, Jim *had* heard of Heather Woods. Who hadn't?

Heather Woods was an honest to God true-life success story in the wonderful, wacky world of publishing. A relative newcomer to the business, she had been published for five years, had only started writing two years prior to that. He'd read that tidbit in an article about her once. Her first novel had sold for the kind of money Jim could only dream about.

Since then she'd become a favorite target of would be and less successful writers. Jealousy, Jim knew, partly because he'd felt some of the same. With only one book, she'd launched the kind of career that coaxed otherwise sane people into the irrational business of fiction writing. She'd never had anything to do with the large, but rather tight community of genre writers, a diverse and far spread group of people connected by the miracle of the Internet, and Jim thought that was part of it too. She had not paid the same dues they'd been forced to pay; the nose rubbing and schmoozing, reams of rejection letters from bottom-of-the-heap magazines that paid little, if anything at all.

Jim had wondered if their summary dismissal of her was the reason she'd never become more involved with them. Mostly, he supposed, she was just too busy *writing*.

Her novels, campy suspense yarns, he'd heard them called, and sometimes dreck, generally received so-so reviews and were snubbed by the critics, but routinely landed on the New York Times Bestseller list. Dumbfounded by her improbable success, Jim had finally broken down and bought her fourth novel.

He'd finished it in a single afternoon.

It made sense to him then. The critics hated her books because they were pure fun. Other writers, reviewers, and wannabes hated her because she was better than them. Clearly, inarguably better.

That was, in Jim's humble opinion, the simple reason behind her

success.

He'd been a fan since then.

Yes, Jim *had* heard of Heather Woods, and he was beyond thrilled to hear that she had, evidently, heard of him too.

---

Jim talked almost non-stop during the limo ride, but remembered very little of the conversation. He'd switched to fan mode, and as Heather didn't seem to mind, seemed interested in what he had to say in fact, he didn't try to stop himself. At some point she'd turned the conversation to him, and Jim felt himself pulled deftly into a discourse that felt almost like an interview. Personal stuff, but not too personal.

Then, abruptly, the conversation tapered off to silence.

"I'm sorry," she said a minute later, looking out the tinted rear window of the limo. They were crossing a narrow, busy bridge. The Snake River, if he remembered it right. He saw a sign that said Welcome To Washington as they approached the other end.

"About what?" Jim asked.

But she didn't answer. Jut stared out the window, slumped back against her side of the seat, head lolling slightly with each bump.

"Heather?"

"I didn't go out today," she said softly. She sounded like a woman talking in her sleep. "I couldn't get out."

Jim shivered a little, reached out and touched her arm. "Heather?"

Her head rolled toward him, facing him, but not seeing him. Her eyes were closed to slits, showing only slivers of white.

"Please," she said. *Pleading.*

"Heather?" Jim gave her a little shake.

Heather jerked awake with a gasp, face pale, eyes wide open. She

scanned the inside of the limo, looking like someone lost, then settled with a sigh.

“Are you okay?”

Heather put a hand over her face, rubbed at her eyes. “I am so embarrassed. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

The limo took a sharp turn and she fell against him.

“It’s okay, Heather. What happened?”

“I just zoned out for a second,” she said, straightening in her seat. Her previously shining expression now deadly serious. Jim was sad to see it go. He wished she would smile again.

Heather tapped the tinted glass partition between the driver and them, and it lowered with an electric buzz.

“How much farther to Asotin?”

“Just a few more minutes, ma’am,” the driver said, then gave a stiff little nod at the rearview mirror and closed the partition.

Heather rolled down her window, closing her eyes as a warm wind rushed in, throwing her hair around like a blond nimbus. When she turned to him, the smile was back.

“You mind?” She nodded at the open window.

“Not at all,” Jim said. “What just happened.”

“Oh, that was nothing,” she said, in a tone of voice that suggested she had indeed convinced herself of that. “Just needed a little fresh air.”

*Oh man, Jim thought. Looks like the duffel isn’t the only baggage this pretty lady brought along.*

“This is exciting,” Heather said. Her hand crept over the seat between them and gave his a quick squeeze.

“Yes,” he said, again hoping he was not blushing too fiercely. “It is.”

---

## CHAPTER 4

---

### Earthy Redneck Wit

Everything about Asotin was small. Jim could see from one end of town to the other from where he stood when the driver let him out.

Heather didn't give the man a chance to walk around and open her door, but slid out behind Jim. He watched as she took in the town, her eyes more than bright now. Hungry; taking in *everything* and keeping it. Jim would not be surprised to find this town reincarnated in a future Heather Woods novel.

Townspeople at the quaint little General Store, walking along the street, strolling through the park, watched them, many stopping in their tracks and staring. Jim wondered if they had seen their faces on a dustcover jacket, and he was tempted to cross the street and check the General Store's book rack.

Moments later, the driver removed their luggage from the trunk. He placed all three bags on the ground and slammed the trunk shut, picked them up and led Jim and Heather into the park, toward a small gazebo.

"Good day," he said, giving them a stiff little nod before returning to the limo.

"Hey," Jim said. "You're leaving us *here*?"

The man stopped, turned, gave his stiff nod. "This is where I was told to drop you off." Then, with the hint of a smile, "Don't worry, the others

seem to have made it to where you're going."

And he was off.

---

Barely a minute had passed before a white Jeep pulled up in the park, almost as if it had been parked only a few blocks away, waiting for the limo to leave.

Painted in black, stenciled letters on the doors was *Misery Mountain Guides*, beneath that, a phone number and web address. A man in a large dust-colored Stetson, its brim pinned at the sides and molded to a drooping point up front, poked his head out of the open window.

"Woods and Eldridge?" He called to them. "C'mon, lets go." His voice was slow, with a country twang that sounded affected.

Jim suddenly missed the curt, quiet limo driver.

"What a colorful man," Heather commented as they rose from their uncomfortable gazebo seats. She reached for her bag, but Jim grabbed it first.

"I've got them," Jim said, grunting as he heaved both his bags off the floor with the other hand.

Heather laughed. "Such a gentleman," she said, but pulled her bag from his hand.

The man in the Jeep opened the hatch from the inside, and Jim and Heather loaded them into the back. Jim closed the hatch, then opened the rear door for Heather.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Were you brought up to be nice to the ladies, or am I just a special case?" she asked.

"A little of both," he said, and climbed in beside her.

"Would you two like a room, or can we get going now?"

"Onward, Jeeves," Heather said, her voice laced with humor.

“No offense, lady,” the man said squinting into the rear view mirror at them, “but you writers are strange.”

---

The man’s sullen, almost offended silence, lasted all of a few minutes. By the time they’d left town, climbing a steep, winding grade into the mountains - no towering evergreens here, just rock and a thick cover of dead, wild grass - he’d turned back to them, steering blindly around a sharp curve with one arm, offering the other to them. “Yohan Johnson,” he said.

Heather took his outstretched hand, unconcerned. “Heather Woods. Delighted to meet you.”

“Jim Eldridge.” Jim gave a quick, one-pump shake, hoping that the introductions were over and Yohan would get back to the business of driving.

“So, what’s going on up there anyway? Kinda’ weird, all you rich and famous folks coming out *here*.”

Jim saw Yohan’s eyes grow suddenly wide, as if the man were passing an undigested ham hock, suffering a minor heart attack, or had an epiphany.

“You folks’re makin’ a movie up there, aren’t you?” He drummed his fingers anxiously on the steering wheel. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Not as far as I know,” Jim said. He didn’t bother to tell the man how far from rich and famous he was. Let him at least keep that misconception.

Yohan smiled into the rear view mirror, then winked.

“I smell ya. Y’all don’t need to worry about me blabbin’.” He straightened in the front seat, puffed his chest out. “I’ll even offer my services. Guide, extra, anything you need.”

"Tell you what, if you can keep this under that handsome hat," Heather said, leaning forward and flicking his hat with a finger, pushing it slightly askew. "You do that for us, and I'll see what I can do for you."

"You got it lady," he said, his voice so serious, so solemn, that Jim had to fight back a chuckle.

Heather sat back, head turned to Jim, and leaned in close. For a moment Jim thought she was going to kiss his cheek, and he went tingly and nervous. Instead, she whispered in his ear.

"Let him dream," she said. "Just as long as he doesn't drag half of that little town up here to audition."

"What's that?" Yohan said.

"Just wondering how far out we're going," Jim lied. "Must be pretty far for Mrs. Bonkowski to hire an expert guide."

"Ain't no *expert*," Yohan said. "Nothing but a ten dollar word for a ten cent job."

"Ah, okay," Jim said, only because Yohan was staring at him as if expecting a response of some kind.

"You know what an expert is, doncha?" Yohan's small black eyes stared into the mirror.

"Watch it!" Jim yelled, as the road in front of them seemed to vanish, leaving a windshield full of blue sky.

Yohan gave the road a quick glance and jerked the steering wheel sharply to the left.

"An ex," he explained, "is a has-been, and a spert is something shoots out your dick."

Jim thought he'd heard Yohan wrong until he saw Heather's mouth fall open, eyes wide with surprise. She lifted a hand to her face to cover a blooming smile.

Yohan's eyes were on the road again, one big fist holding the steering wheel, the other shifting down as the incline became even sharper.

"I ain't no dried up wad," he said. "I'm a professional."

*Earthy redneck wit, Jim thought. Either this guy is as dumb as a horse apple, or I'm just too dense to appreciate his wisdom.*

*Hope I don't have to share a cabin with him.*

---

At the top of the grade, an expanse of flat farmland opened before them. The high mountains were still miles away. In the absence of continued conversation, Yohan turned on the radio. Country music flooded the jeep, and Jim groaned.

Next to him, Heather hummed *Let The Sun Shine In*.

Jim stared out the window at the countryside, quaint farmhouses and men on tractors, harvesting wheat, soy, hay, whatever it was they grew up here. Every few minutes he'd look ahead and see the mountains, a little closer each time.

The country music on the radio broke for local news. Market prices for the various local crops, weather report - *hot, hot, hot!* - and something about a Department of Lands man who'd gone missing. Yohan turned it up a little, frowning.

Heather had given up on *Let The Sun Shine In* and was humming something that sounded suspiciously like *Iron Man*.

The news ended, and Yohan turned the volume down.

"I know that man," he said. The cocky twang, Yohan's affected accent, was gone. He sounded worried. "He was working up around where we're headed when he disappeared."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that," Heather said.

"You think they'll find him?" Jim asked.

Yohan shrugged.

"Lot of rough country. Lots of places the rescuers won't go. Too much

ground to cover." He sighed. "Too many damned mountain lions and bears. Wolves too, now. Been showing up the last year or so, since they reintroduced them back in Montana. Don't know how they're making it all this way, but they are."

Jim supposed that was as good of an answer as he would get, so he let it drop.

"Anyway, that's why Mrs. Bonkowski hired me. To keep you all from wandering off." He flashed a self-satisfied grin at them. "Like a celebrity bodyguard."

Jim's stomach lurched as they caught air over a sharp dip, and he saw another small town before them, maybe a tenth the size of the small river town where Yohan had picked them up.

*Welcome to Anatone*, said an official border sign. Just past that, a wooden sign, like a miniature billboard - *Population: 45 people - 23 horses - 36 cats - 20 dogs*.

Jim wondered briefly why they hadn't thought to include the cattle he saw grazing in barbed wire fenced fields roughly the size of city blocks.

He realized that he was being a bit of an ass, and with a mental apology to the town of Anatone, promised he'd try to keep the attitude squashed. After all, this could be a great time, if he didn't ruin it for himself.

Yohan slowed considerably and turned right halfway through town, onto a road pointing straight at the mountains. A road that quickly turned from paved to single lane gravel, and was quickly swallowed up by the first of the Blue Mountain's evergreens.

---

Yohan piloted them into the mountains at a speed that Jim would not have dared had he been at the wheel.

Beside Jim, Heather bounced in her seat. He wasn't sure if it was excitement or the combination of the washboard road and worn out shocks. Jim held onto the door handle with one hand, bracing himself against the front passenger seat with the other.

They rocketed past a sign. Jim turned just in time to read it before their swirling dust wiped out the landscape behind them.

*Washington Dept. of Lands - Mount Misery.*

"Mount Misery?"

"Yup," Yohan said. Then pointed out at his window with a hand Jim would have preferred he kept on the wheel. "Next range over is called Mount Horrible. The first settlers didn't get on too well here."

"It's beautiful," Heather said, her roving eyes taking in as much as the speeding Jeep would allow.

"Gets better," Yohan said. "Wait'll you see the view from the lodge. Hope you brought a camera."

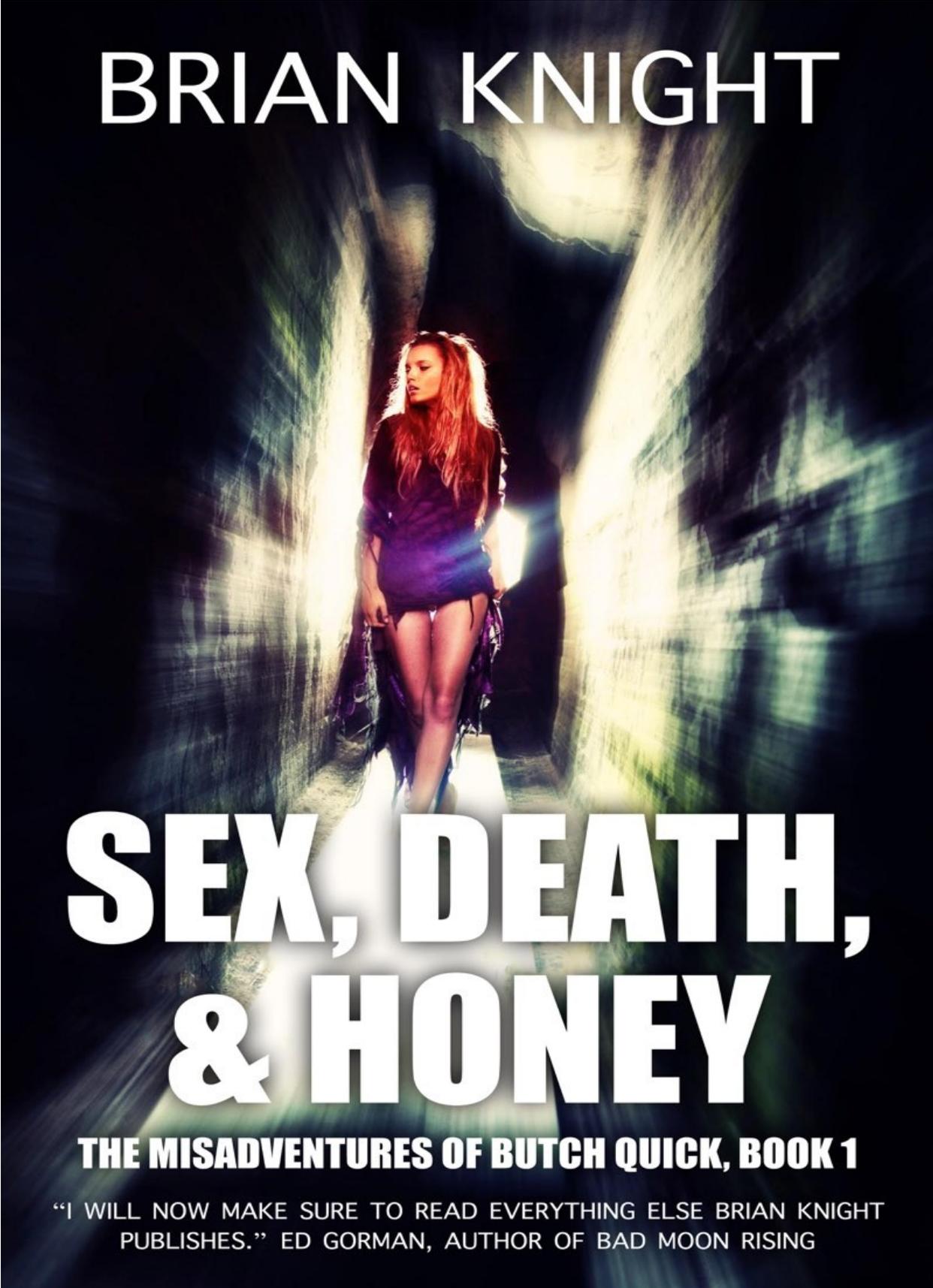
A minute later, Yohan took a sharp, sliding right turn, and darkness swallowed them.

---

# **SEX, DEATH, & HONEY - EXCERPT**

---

**The Misadventures of Butch Quick, Book 1**

A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a purple dress and high heels, is walking through a dark, tunnel-like space. The walls of the tunnel are illuminated by bright, yellowish light rays that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and dramatic.

**BRIAN KNIGHT**

**SEX, DEATH,  
& HONEY**

**THE MISADVENTURES OF BUTCH QUICK, BOOK 1**

“I WILL NOW MAKE SURE TO READ EVERYTHING ELSE BRIAN KNIGHT  
PUBLISHES.” ED GORMAN, AUTHOR OF BAD MOON RISING

*For my Honey, Shawna Knight. Thank you for everything.*

---

## INTRODUCTION BY ED GORMAN

---

*“There are advantages to being a seven-foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty pound Indian with a face like a leather football helmet, but this wasn’t one of them.” - Butch Quick*

I need to start this with a story of my own. Several years ago I was hired to ghost a book about bounty hunters. The everyday kind. Not the Dog ones or any of the other melodramatic kind. The ones whose big signs you pass by in the area near the city and/or county lock ups. Regular folk in other words.

The celebrity I was working with had a show that went in the tank so the project was scrapped. But since I’d spent two months interviewing twenty-some bounty hunters about their jobs I had a decent idea about how they functioned in the world. Some surprises: A good share of bounty hunters are women. Male and female bounty hunters alike tend to ask the police to go along if they think there’s going to be trouble. Bounty hunters rely on computers even more than hackers and writers. Yes there’s always the prospect of danger but unless you’re involved in a reality show you try to hold it to a minimum.

Right off I liked Brian Knight’s version of a bounty hunter because it seemed realistic.

The other thing I liked, the thing that made this unique and fascinating story even better, was the voice. We read different books for different reasons. There are writers I read for plot. Their characters never strike me as more than spear carriers and there's never much wit or insight in the psychology but by God I'm up till three a.m. turning those pages. Then there are writers I read for the way they present and understand their characters. Their plots may not dazzle me that much but I'm hooked on the human drama. And then there's voice. To me this is the rarest of all writerly gifts.

All you have to read are two or three paragraphs and you know you're reading Elmore Leonard. Or Ray Bradbury. Or Lucius Shepard. Brian Knight is young, but with *Sex, Death & Honey* he's developing a voice all his own. For me the first person voice lends itself to a kind of ongoing confession. "I" narrative is filled with opinions whether the writer always intends them or not. And in opinions are truths about how the protagonist (and likely the writer) feels about the world he's presenting.

I liked this book a great deal. I will now make sure to read everything else Brian Knight publishes if that tells you anything.

Oh—and the story itself. Funny thing. Every time I synopsise a book or movie on my blog readers bitch about how lame I am at boiling things down.

So let me say that Mr. Knight presents a) a plot that will keep you up late at night b) insights into various kinds of life that are rich with wisdom and wit, and c) and a voice you'll remember for a long, long time to come.

Enjoy.

Ed Gorman,

January 2012

---

## CHAPTER 1

---

This is Paradise Valley.

The city sits cradled in a valley at the furthest western foot of the Rocky Mountains. Two rivers run through it, the Snake River from south to north, the Clearwater River from east to west, and meet at the port district. Its major exports are paper, lumber, and grain. Its major imports are drugs and pain.

Paradise Valley is also a tourist hot spot. We have the gateway to Hells Canyon, America's deepest river gorge, and the Nez Perce Indian Casino a few miles east just across the Idaho border.

One hundred thousand souls give or take, roughly half of them either lost or getting there. We have meth and marijuana, hookers and pimps, bums and burnouts, and a per capita murder rate that makes our local politicians blush. We don't have mimes and street performers, the pushers and pimps won't tolerate that caliber of scum, so it's not all bad I suppose.

East Paradise Valley, the half of our city east of the Snake River, is the better half, almost respectable. West Paradise Valley . . . not so much.

Hang with me for a while and I'll show you a side to this city that you won't find on the Chamber of Commerce website.

Welcome to Paradise.

---

The West Valley Friday Street Fair was like a low rent Mardi Gras with a family friendly veneer so thin it was almost transparent. On top there were the pretzel and hot dog stands, the coffee bar, even the beer garden tucked back behind Station 3, and every other business along Main Street with a booth or display set up on sidewalks or in the middle of the road. The city closed off four blocks of Main Street every Friday afternoon from Easter to Halloween, and it seemed half the city turned out. There were also pushers, pickpockets, and other assorted lowlife present. This was their half of the city after all. It would be rude not to invite them.

I never had much to do with the street fair. Too many damned people for my liking, and there was never anything there I was particularly interested in.

That late September evening was an exception to the general rule. There was something there that day I was very interested in, and after only a half-hour of ignoring the vendors and dodging hyperactive kids on the peaks of sugar highs, I found her.

Kecia Wilson.

Dark-haired and pale-skinned, slim and short, she looked like a young librarian in her horn-rimmed glasses. I spotted her loitering in a graveled square between buildings usually reserved for Elks Lodge parking. That day there were no cars, just two rows of Porta Potties, six in a row lined up against the sides of the buildings, arranged by the city for its citizens' shitting convenience.

I slipped into the recessed entrance of a closed insurance office and watched as dusk deepened.

Foot traffic in and out of shit-house square was sparse and fluid, never more than a handful at a time and never for longer than it took to do their business and sanitize their hands.

Except for Kecia.

Kecia stayed on the move, never stood in one place for more than a minute, but never left the square. Like she was waiting for someone.

I was counting on that.

Kecia wasn't the person I was after that day. My night's target was a glowing example of West Paradise Valley street-shit named Phil Shepard. Kecia Wilson was a girlfriend and likely partner in crime, but I didn't have any business with her. My business was with Phil.

A skinny young skunk of a man emerged from a crowd around a tattoo booth, leaving a swath of turned heads and grimaces in his wake, and jittered his way over to her. A few moments of conversation, then she nodded curtly toward the second to last stall on the left and turned her back on him.

I watched, waited.

The young tweaker jittered his way over to the stall, hesitated, knocked.

The door opened a crack, and a few seconds later a little more. Enough to see the man inside, his face half illuminated by the flickering glow of streetlamps.

Phil Shepard.

*Jackpot!*

A hand slid out, rubbed palms with the tweaker standing outside, a quick exchange, meth for cash, then withdrew.

I waited for the tweaker to clear out, then crossed the road.

A kid with a plush top hat and a cotton candy ran into me and bounced backward, falling on his ass. His carnival top hat went askew and his cotton candy hit the pavement to be trampled a moment later.

"Watch where you're going you big turd!"

The boy dusted himself off and glared at me before pounding away.

Heads turned to regard me with disapproval and disgust, Kecia

among them.

*Shit!*

There are advantages to being a seven-foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty pound Indian with a face like a leather football helmet, but this wasn't one of them. Once someone noticed me, they usually kept noticing me.

Kecia marked my approach with suspicion, and gasped when I stopped and turned to face her.

"Whatchu lookin' at, dickhead?" She stared up into my face from her not quite five foot vantage point, held her ground but remained ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

I lifted the hem of my shirt, uncovered my badge and cuffs. This move also exposed a bulge in my front pocket; my insurance against the unexpected in what can sometimes be a rough-and-tumble profession.

Kecia's eyes darted from badge to cuffs to bulge, and widened in alarm.

When a young woman sees a bulge in a man's pants, the Ruger LC9 is not the kind of 'Pocket Pistol' that leaps immediately to her mind, but I just let them think whatever the hell they want. The Ruger LC9 is a tiny little gun, it looked like a toy pistol in my hand. Flashing it would be more likely to elicit laughter than respect, so I leave it in its pocket holster unless I need to use it.

I've never tried to be Dirty Harry. I'd rather people didn't know I'm packing until my handy little Ruger is pointed at their nose. It looks a little less like a toy from that perspective.

"Move along please," I said, as pleasantly as I could.

She moved along, and quickly.

I watched until she was lost in the crowd, then proceeded to the magic stall.

I knocked.

“What’s the word, amigo?” His voice was muffled behind the closed stall door.

*Word?*

So that was his girlfriend’s job, to screen the legitimate customers from those who just needed to have a shit. The stall door was locked from the inside, no way to get at him unless he opened it.

I didn’t have the *word*, so I knocked again.

“Ocupado, asshole!”

I knocked again.

“I said go shit somewhere else!”

I knocked again. I could keep this up all night if I needed to.

“Fuck!”

The *Occupied* sign slid to *Open* and the door followed suit.

“*You little . . .*” He stopped in mid-scream, then tilted his face up to mine.

I grabbed the door before he could pull it closed. He knew who I was, my face is hard to forget, but I spoke the words anyway. That’s just the way it’s done.

“Eagle Eye Bail Bonds.”

He moved forward as if to run for it, and I shifted myself in front of him. For a second I thought he was going try to fight his way out, but he seemed to think better of it. People almost always panic when they realize they’ve been caught, and in those moments I find being large and scary looking very much to my advantage.

“You missed your court date,” I said. “I gotta take you back in.”

He smiled, nodded. “I figured you’d come looking for me.”

He released the door and raised his arms to me, wrists close together and ready for the cuffs.

I relaxed. He was going to come quietly. I like it when things go smoothly.

His grin stretched to the edges of his acne-pitted face.

I realized belatedly that I had fucked up.

I've never been bitten in the ass by an electric eel, but if I ever am I have a good idea of what to expect.

I was reaching for my cuffs and keeping both eyes on Phil's grinning face when Kecia hit me from behind with the juice. The next several seconds were lost in a blaze of white-hot pain originating in my right ass-cheek and filling my whole body. My arms snapped down to my sides and my jaw slammed shut. My spine did a musical kind of snap, crackle and pop as it stiffened.

Phil's smug smile faded in a wash of white light.

And when I could see again I was laying in the gravel in front of the abandoned shitter, watching Phil and Kecia run toward the crowded street.

"Ditch that," Phil shouted, and snatched a short yellow wand from Kecia's hand, tossed it between the last two stalls before dragging her into the crowd. Seconds later they were gone, and I was left alone and twitching on the ground.

The party on Main Street continued unabated, only the occasional bored pedestrian glancing my way.

Someone passed me on the right, and another stepped over me on their way to Phil's abandoned stall, snickering.

Later, thirty seconds or thirty minutes maybe, all I knew for sure is that it was darker, I regained the use of my body and removed it from shit-house square. I paused only to retrieve the Kecia's Wasp from where Phil had ditched it. It was a handy little thing. Under a foot long and packing somewhere around 5,000 volts. She'd probably kept it in her bag for just such an occasion.

I decided to hold on to it, maybe for the next time I ran into Phil Shepard and his girlfriend.

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

The lady, Rita, was old beyond her years, fifty going on seventy, her face leathery and wrinkled, riddled with moles and skin tags. She had a respectable set of mutton-chop sideburns, cigarette-stained false teeth, and the phlegmy, bullfrog voice of a longtime smoker.

Her neighbor, Cameron Finke, was an inconsiderate fuckwad, the useless second-generation spawn of a local fat cat. He had a rock band and about a dozen little groupies. They would start tuning up at around nine every evening, and continue to tune up until inebriation or sexual exhaustion shut them down. They were experienced partiers, and blessed with the stamina of the young, so these party /jam sessions usually lasted until the early hours of the morning. Sometimes the band progressed past the tuning up and ventured into the playing of actual songs, a lot of eighties and nineties heavy metal mostly, but to call these songs covers would be an insult to cover bands around the world. They were more like parodies.

Finke held these nightly sessions in a renovated shop accessible by a narrow alley that passed between his square of property and the parking lot of the adjacent mini-mall. My one quick glance through the shop's open bay door the previous evening revealed a drum kit and various instruments on pedestals, a mini-bar and fridge, and a row of thrift shop

sofas.

I knew enough about the guy to be wary of him; a minor drug bust across the state line in Idaho, rumors about a little moonlighting in the meth trade. Your basic West Valley street trash, but with a little more 'fuck you' money than most.

My name is Butch Quick, and I have been called many things, including an inconsiderate fuckwad. I am the mostly useless nephew of another local rich guy. Like Finke, I'm on the payroll of my wealthy relative. Unlike Finke, I don't have a garage band. My Uncle's business interests include Higheagle Classic Cars, Eagle Eye Bail Bonds, and Boomtown, a drinking establishment that passed for a nightclub only because of its lack of competition. Boomtown was the only place *in* town that hadn't given in to the new country music trend. It has live music every night, mostly unknown local bands, but every now and then he scored some real talent. Quiet Riot, John Fogerty, and Joan Jett have played there.

Depending on Uncle Higheagle's current needs I am a repo man, bouncer, bounty hunter, or parts runner. I have no preference; mostly it all pays the same.

Finke manages real estate for his grandpa; a few run down duplex apartments, half a dozen lots between his house and Elm Street, and the mini-mall next to it. The mini-mall boasted a thrift store, a liquor store, the local DMV office, and a large empty space that used to house The Great Wall, an all-you-can-eat Chinese Buffet.

Rita claimed to have lost half of her cats after The Great Wall opened. Having eaten there once myself, I had some sympathy for her claim.

The reason for my interest in Cameron Finke, a 1968 Mustang convertible, was not currently at the property, and having nothing else to do I sat down for a *beverage* and a smoke with the chatty Rita. She was willing to talk, not because she particularly liked me, but because she

sensed a way to screw over the neighbor from hell. She was also several *beverages* into the day and in a very sharing mood.

“. . . and I just know they're smoking dope over there." She made a sound in her throat that I think was supposed to convey disgust. What the sound did convey was a great wad of snot, which she spat to the side of the small glass top lawn table we shared. "I can smell it across the street!"

She shook her fist at the innocuous little house across the street from us and made the phlegmy sound again.

The house was small, white, with a well-maintained square of grass in front and a row of neatly trimmed shrubs along the alley. From the outside the shop looked as average as the house, no sign of the redneck discotech housed inside. Between the two buildings was a slightly larger square of lawn than that up front, fenced, with a Beware of Dog sign.

It was an unassuming place; you almost expected to see a little old lady weeding her garden on the other side of the backyard fence, or a hunched old fella puttering outside the shop.

At the moment there was only Finke's Rottweiler stalking the fence line.

“. . . called the cops and the big dumb-shits stopped here with their lights flashing . . ."

"Is he usually gone all day?" She had arrived back where our conversation had started a half-hour earlier. I decided if I were going to get down to the shit that mattered I'd have to be more aggressive. I was still aching a bit from the night before, not at my most sociable.

She looked incensed, and I thought *here's a woman used to having her say all the way to the end*. After a few seconds she seemed to decide to let it slide.

"Not always." She shrugged, made her deep throat sound, sipped her beverage. She lit a cigarette, slipped into a morose silence, gave me a

reproachful look, clearly meant to imply her displeasure at being interrupted.

*The silent treatment*, I thought, and couldn't help a smile. "Thanks," I said, pushing up from her proffered lawn chair before she decided to forgive me. "I've gotta run."

She rose across from me, fumbling her drink back onto the glass-top table, nearly spilling it. "But you didn't tell me what's he's in trouble for."

"Nothing big," I said, and felt bad as her excitement ebbed. Truth is I kinda liked the old lady. I sympathized with her too. I've had my share of shithead neighbors.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "It's still going to sting him plenty."

I could feel her eyes on me as I walked away, crossing the street in hurried strides to avoid the city's rambunctious traffic. To West Paradise Valley drivers, pedestrian right-of-way was more a suggestion than a rule. If they caught you outside a marked crosswalk you were fair game. My old Ventura, more balls than style but it got me from A to B, was parked in front of the liquor store. I pulled in facing away from the picture window displays, Four Loco, cheap wine, Jack Daniels, but got an eyeful on my way back. Four years on this side of my last drink, and stopping at my car instead of continuing on toward the flashing neon lights and hedonistic lure of the place was almost easy.

Inside the Ventura and facing safely away from temptation, I started the motor, cranked up the AC, turned the radio on, then up. The Doors . . . L.A. Woman. Nice.

I lit a cigarette, cracked my window enough to let the smoke blow out, watched Finke's house.

The Rottweiler continued its lonely and aggressive patrol, nearly shitting itself in its excitement to get at a passing kid.

Fifteen minutes passed. Finke stayed gone.

Time to head home.

Rita waved, then mimicked firing a gun toward Finke's house and winked as I drove by. I winked and waved back.

Often when I'm interviewing people they assume I'm a collector for the Tribal Casino tracking down unpaid markers or hunting for cheats and crooks. I've never seen fit to correct them. It gives me an air of intimidation and adds a bit of spice to their day. The tribal part I get, I don't live on the reservation but as far as most people are concerned an Indian is an Indian. I've stepped foot in the casino exactly once . . . the gift shop, to buy a souvenir hat. I wear it when I'm interviewing people like Rita. It helps *encourage* the wrong assumption. The Tribal Casino doesn't actually employ *collectors*. No one gets in deep enough with them to warrant it. It's small-time, pay as you play. This is Washington State, not Vegas.

So far the only thing I'd learned about Finke's schedule was that he didn't have one. Sometimes he spent the entire day out of his house, sometimes he barely ventured outside it. When he did leave, it might be for hours, or only minutes. Sometimes he was alone, but most often not. His entourage was dynamic, changing almost day to day with only a few exceptions, the tattoo guy, who played guitar for his crappy little garage band, and the body builder, the guy who grunted and barked out lyrics. The position of bassist was as dynamic as the rest of his entourage, the current one a kid who lived in one of Cameron's properties. Rita said the kid usually left early.

Finke was a drummer.

The only time I could absolutely count on him being home was during the nightly party, which seemed to be impervious to angry neighbors and visits from the police, and in the early hours of the morning while he slept off the nightly party. Since I didn't expect Finke to be overjoyed about me taking back his big horsepower toy—they

hardly ever were—I decided to wait until the post-party crash to cancel his contract with Uncle Higheagle. The getup in his shop was encouraging. He probably kept the Mustang parked outside, which meant it was mine for the taking.

Whatever debts Cameron Finke had incurred or laws he might have broken were not my concern. The only thing that mattered to me was the contract he'd broken with my uncle and the red Mustang he'd stopped paying for. One way or another that car was coming back with me.

A standard midnight grab, then home free.

Yeah, that's what I thought.

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

Home was a small one-roomer near the port, larger than your average jail cell, but not a lot. It had a minuscule kitchen and a single enclosed rectangle of a bathroom with toilet, sink, and shower stall. In the rental market such units are called cabins, though this one had none of the homey, nostalgic appeal associated with the name. This is one of a dozen on Fair Street. The cabins were white, shabby, squatting between a gun repair shop on the Twelfth Street intersection and a flea market on the intersection of Thirteenth.

Mine was indistinguishable from the others on the outside, rundown on the inside. Dark wood panel walls, a mint-green linoleum floor that might have been installed about the time disco was born. No TV or radio, no pictures on the walls. The only photograph I owned lay face down on top of my small dresser. I kept it because I had to, but it had been a long time since I'd been able to look at the faces in it.

I am the only longtime resident of this stretch of West Paradise Valley skid row. It was my rock bottom, almost five years ago, and I've never felt the need to move on. The usual tenants are kids working their way up, or addicts and tough luck cases working their way down. The occasional drifter drops anchor here as well, usually to cool his or her heels for a few weeks before moving on to wherever.

I try to meet them all at least once, but only in passing, *never* more than that. I don't make friends with them. We trade a few words, if they're the sort of folks capable of idle chat. I get a feel for them, then leave them alone. I am not a naturally sociable fellow, or a naturally curious one, but I like to know who I'm bunking down next to. I like to know who to watch out for.

I've shared my neighborhood with junkies and alkies, crack whores, crazies, newly single women and young men who would live in a box if it meant breaking loose from parental tyranny. I spent a month with a serial killer for a next-door neighbor, but that kind of thing happens in the best of neighborhoods.

I checked my answering machine, found one message from Uncle Higheagle. The Washington State Police were auctioning off impounded vehicles in Spokane that coming weekend. We'd Greyhound it up together and drive back with new stock for his lot. Nothing about my fuckup the night before, which was good for both of us. Good for me because dwelling on the past is bad for one's spiritual and mental health. I know this because shrinks have told me so. Good for Uncle Higheagle because his ability to overlook my fuckups saved him frequent disappointment.

I armed the security system, checked the clip and safety on my bedside piece, the latest model CZ 75 9mm, the rail-mounted light and laser sight as much for intimidation as accuracy. I didn't have much of value in my cabin but I still valued my life enough to want to hold on to it a while longer.

I don't find guns to be attractive objects, but I own a few and I shoot well. Lots of practice and a bit of training with my old gun-nut friend Posey. Posey loved guns the same way a satyr loves women, many and often, and whenever possible, publicly. He's a state approved instructor, has won all the local shooter's competitions so often that organizers

opted to recruit him as a judge as a way to bar him from competition.

Posey picked all my guns and related accessories for me. The compact Ruger LC9 and pocket holster for discrete protection on the job, the CZ 75 with its flashy accessories for home protection.

I slid my home protection beneath my pillow, set the alarm clock for a nine pm wake up, and lay in bed.

I did not sleep right away, I never did.

After a while I gave into restlessness and decided to read for a while. Reading in bed was the only sure way to put myself to sleep. It was better than Benadryl. I slid the drawer of my little bedside desk open and pulled out the black portfolio. I propped myself up in bed and unzipped it. Inside were a half-dozen photocopied police reports, nearly one hundred crime scene photos separated by case and tucked into snug plastic pockets, and my own extensive handwritten notes.

I was not supposed to have these, but I have a friend in the local FBI office and when the feds took over the Redwolf case she made sure I got copies. Her name was all over my notes, and she was the subject of one of the files. Gina White, one of the toughest women I've ever known, a good friend to have.

Gina had gone through hell and come back alive. She understood.

I ignored the photos, the images were tattooed on my aching brain and I didn't need to look at them, and read my notes for the thousandth time. It had been a long time since anything new went into my copy of the Redwolf files and I had most of the material committed to memory, but I read anyway.

While I read my body relaxed, trying to forget the minor indignities of the past few days and the major dishonors of a lifetime. My mind wandered and eventually shut down.

I dreamed about the first man I'd ever killed.

---

I remember the car, a late '90s Chrysler Neon, bad lines, no style. Not the kind of car I enjoyed driving, but I thought I was going to enjoy crashing it. It was my wife's car, but she wasn't going to need it anymore.

My passenger was a little man, bald, unimpressive on the surface, but beneath, something else. Roy Dickie. He wasn't aware of our destination, but was still less than enthusiastic about the journey. He didn't know the specifics, but got the general idea.

It wasn't good.

"Who are you?" He'd pressed himself back into the passenger seat, as if he hoped to escape me through it. "What do you want?"

I said nothing, just put the gas pedal down a little harder. We were on the highway by the river, two lanes of twisting blacktop with little margin for error. The speed limit on that stretch just outside of Paradise Valley was sixty. I had it up to eighty-five, and climbing . . . but slowly. No style or balls, that car.

I was a fraction of a second slow on the next sharp bend and slid, tires squealing, passenger squealing as well, into the oncoming lane. For a moment I thought the ride was over. So did my passenger. The sudden, sour stench of piss filled the cab. When I was back in my lane and in control again I popped the center console open, found the little travel-size aerosol can, sprayed the little man beginning to blubber in the passenger seat.

New Car Scent, a mix of fresh upholstery and Armor All.

"*Why are you doing thi-his?*" He shouted, his voice breaking into fresh sobs on the last word. The sound of his blubbering made me angry.

The car wandered dangerously again as I reached for him, cupped the back of his head in my right hand and brought it down hard against the dash. The padded plastic split beneath his head. I hoped for a cry of pain,

a satisfying splash of blood, but the inconsiderate bastard passed out cold.

I slowed to a sane sixty and a minute later pulled into a deserted rest area.

He needed to be awake for what was coming next.

It was important.

He wasn't out for long, maybe another fifteen minutes, and as soon as he stirred I pulled back onto the highway, this time driving east toward the city.

"Wakey-wakey," I said when his eyes fluttered open and he lifted his head again. There was a little blood I was pleased to see, just a trickle from the splitting skin stretched over a rising goose egg on his forehead. "Can we start over without all the crying?"

It appeared he could. I was grateful for that at least.

"Why are you doing this?"

"For Daphne and Beth Quick," I said, and that was all.

I stomped the gas pedal down to the floor again, and I could feel myself grinning, inexplicably happy as the needle slowly climbed to illegal and dangerous speeds. Roy began to scream again, and I started to laugh. I couldn't help it.

The needle hovered just below ninety, the road made a sharp left turn.

I turned right instead.

I think he must have figured it out at the last second because he lunged for the steering wheel.

But it was already too late.

---

The alarm went off and I woke with my customary good grace, reaching

for the gun beneath my pillow before thinking better of it and settling for thumping the snooze button with more force than was strictly necessary. I went through a lot of alarm clocks.

I surrendered to reality. Got up, pissed, drank coffee, went to work. I had a Mustang to rescue.

---

## CHAPTER 4

---

I drove the old Ventura to a twenty-four hour grocery store a few blocks down from Cameron Finke's place and walked the rest of the way. By the time I reached Diagonal Street, the main drag that separated the industrial and commercial zoned blocks from the residential on that side of town, I could hear Finke's party winding up. I kept a distance, approaching only as close as the parking lot of the mini-mall's defunct Chinese Buffet, then turned east and walked to the little park near the bridge into East Paradise Valley.

I sat at the bench furthest from the road and watched the moon's reflection move across the surface of the Snake River's sluggish water, smoking my way through a pack of Camel Wides as the night ticked on.

Two blocks over the party continued. If Finke's band ever progressed past the tune-up phase, I couldn't tell. Don't get me wrong, I love good rock music, but what Finke's bunch produced couldn't be called good, nor music for that matter. The drone of loud chatter and laughter challenged it, but was not kind enough to overcome it.

I smoked, waited, checked the time on my cell phone. Twice cop cars passed by on patrol, the second stopping to shine a spotlight at me. I waved and it moved along. Neither car detoured toward the sound of the festivities at Finke's.

I dozed sometime past midnight, and awoke to the sound of 325 horses laying rubber on blacktop. A drunken female cheer rose up to encourage, and a second brief chirping of tires brought laughter.

I had no way of knowing it was the Mustang, but it was, and I did know it. On the whole I think Mustangs are overrated, but dammit I loved that car.

I rose from the bench, knees popping and legs stiff from my long sit-down, and walked toward Finke's. It was time to have a little look.

---

It *was* the Mustang, but by the time I had them in sight, still almost a block away but with a clear view across the mini-mall's rear parking area, the showboating was over. The party appeared to be over too.

Some of Finke's entourage left on foot, stumbling up or down Third Street, one crossed the empty parking lot in my direction, and others slumped behind the wheels of their cars and pickups. Finke was backing the Mustang into his shop, the tattoo guy and body builder standing to either side of the open bay like guards. The moment the Mustang's front bumper cleared the door the two stepped inside and the door descended.

That was the first kink in my night's plans. Aside from the potential legal problems associated with breaking and entering, which I am not allowed to do, extracting a car from an ex-customer's locked garage is a logistical nightmare.

I started walking again, and the drunk who had set out in my direction continued stumbling toward me. I moved down Second Street away from Finke's house at a leisurely pace and pretended not to notice as Finke's friend turned the corner around the rear of the mini-mall and fell in behind me, only a quarter of a block away.

I don't like being followed. It makes me nervous. Especially when I'm

not packing.

I don't go out on repo jobs armed, too much potential for trouble, especially if a passing cop mistakes me for a car thief. If one of Paradise Valley's finest hassles me while I'm picking up a bounty I just flash my official *Bail Bond Recovery Agent* badge and they leave me to it. They don't question the legality of my barely concealed piece. When I'm on a repossession gig I don't have a badge, just a bit of paperwork. It only takes a few seconds to flash the paperwork, but if a curious cop sees my gun I get to stand against the nearest handy wall with my legs spread for the next half-hour or so.

It's a pain in the ass.

I hardly ever need to defend myself anyway. Mostly I'm sneaky enough to never get caught, but when I do my appearance is usually enough to keep me out of a fight. As I've said before both *Big* and *Ugly* have their advantages, but mostly it's my red skin. Strange but true, most white people still believe in their hearts that the next great Indian uprising is just around the corner, and that instead of arrows and spears we'll use casino money to arm ourselves with Kalashnikovs and shoulder-fired rockets.

And on the occasions when *Big*, *Ugly* and *Red* aren't enough, I can defend myself. Some people seem to enjoy the challenge and the real scrappers usually turn out to be the ones you least suspect.

I'm not at all averse to laying out the occasional unruly drunk or mouthy asshole, it's actually very therapeutic, but only recreationally. I like my work to go smoothly. Also, Uncle Higheagle doesn't like me lumping up his customers unless I absolutely have to, even the ones who sometimes forget to make their payments for three or four consecutive months.

The sound of feet scraping blacktop behind me stopped and after a few more steps I stopped too, pulling the mostly empty pack of Camels

from my breast pocket and lighting up. I turned as I cupped my hands against a light breeze, and found my drunken shadow leaning deep into the thrift store's donation bin.

I stood my ground, smoking my Camel down to the butt, and when he still hadn't moved I approached him. Ten feet away, my suspicion hardened to a near certainty, and at five his rough snoring confirmed what I thought. I passed the sleeping man on my way back to Finke's, and heard the rattle of his garage door ascending once again.

Keeping close to the side of the building, I edged to the corner, and saw the Mustang pulling back out into the alley. There was no showboating this time. The lights were off. Something I couldn't identify occupied the front passenger seat next to Finke. The bodybuilder and tattoo guy filled the rear seat.

I could hear the sound of their conversation over the Mustang's idling growl, but couldn't make out the words.

Even as I tried to prepare myself for the disappointment of a wasted night, Finke opened the driver door and slid out. The other two followed, and Finke rounded on them. A few more seconds of indecipherable conversation followed, and Finke continued to the back door of his house, the body builder a few steps behind.

Mr. Tattoo remained behind with the Mustang.

There it was, my only chance to salvage my night's work. If I let Finke get back to his ride they would be gone, and I didn't have a chance in hell of keeping up on foot, long legs or not. To do it though, I'd have to get past, or go through, the tattoo guy.

I cogitated, and the tattoo guy walked around the back of the Mustang, giving Finke's rear door a quick glance.

Not quite ready to give up the building's shadows, I stood, waiting to move one way or the other.

Tattoo moved a few steps closer to the shop's open bay door, and

after a moment of indecision, he left his post and went inside. I'm not above taking a lucky break when one is presented.

Moving quickly from my shadow and into the brightness of the parking lot's security lights, though not quite running, I closed the fifty yards to the Mustang.

Curiosity demanded I have a look inside Finke's shop to see what distraction had made my night's work much easier than it should have been, but I didn't waste any time. I eased myself into the idling Mustang's driver seat, put her in gear, and left the tattoo guy behind, still bent over the line he was snorting from the polished surface of the mini-bar.

I exited the alley onto Second Street, shifting up for my getaway, I heard shouts of alarm and anger from behind. I heard something else too, something I at first thought was the smoky, cracked laughter of Finke's unhappy neighbor, Rita. Before I hit third gear, blowing clean through the stop sign at the intersection and speeding toward the port district, I realized that the sound was not laughter, but agitation, and unless Finke and his associates had somehow shrunk Rita to the size of, say, a largish bird, it was not his neighbor making the fuss.

I pulled the shroud from the cage in the passenger seat, and met Trouble.

---

I'd never seen the bird before so I didn't know if its name actually was Trouble.

"Awk! Trouble! Here comes trouble!"

I used my powers of deductive reasoning, an ability my Uncle often calls into doubt, and deduced. I assumed.

As a rule, one should never trust my assumptions, but as the subject

of my assumption seemed of small importance at the moment I didn't bother to second guess myself.

"Beer me, bitch!" Trouble advised.

"Shut up!"

"Blow me!"

The bird seemed uninterested in reasonable discourse, so I abandoned my attempts to reason with it and concentrated on driving.

Trouble was not so easily dissuaded and continued its verbal abuse as I put blocks between us and Finke's place. I watched for pursuit and saw none. If either of Finke's pals had their own rides, they had not been quick enough to catch my trail. Not completely satisfied with that second assumption, one of much greater importance, I thought, I continued past the gunsmith's shop, past the block of scuzzy cabins that only the poor or shameless could call home, and turned right at the next intersection.

Trouble continued to squawk and bitch and I continued driving for another fifteen minutes, turning and doubling back at random, before I felt safe to go home.

"Pop the trunk, Musclehead," Trouble squawked as I pulled into the spot next to my cabin, the one usually reserved for my beat-to-shit Ventura.

I thought I'd managed to outrun trouble that night, the kind that likes to sneak up behind you and bite you on the ass before busting your beak as opposed to the kind that merely insults you while flapping around its cage.

The thing with trouble is that sometimes it comes along uninvited for the ride.

---

What I knew about caring for birds you could fit up a bug's ass and still

have room for a cork, but I heard somewhere that if you stick their head beneath their wing or throw a blanket over their cage, they go to sleep. I didn't feel like sticking my hands anywhere near Trouble's head, or its meathook of a beak, so I draped the shroud back over the cage and waited.

The bird did not go to sleep, but the cloth muffled its squawks and insults enough that I wasn't worried about waking the neighbors.

I'd take the bird, along with whatever personal shit Finke kept in the Mustang, to Uncle Higheagle the next day, but it looked like I was stuck with the noisy, feathered turd for the rest of the night.

I jogged to the front door, the cage hanging from my left hand, while I exchanged the Mustang's keys for the ring in my pocket.

The bird's barrage of insulting chatter subsided to agitated whistles and hoots.

I let myself inside, setting my unexpected company on the floor beside the closet and opened the door. On the floor beside a clutter of boots and an old toolbox was a rolled up canvas car cover.

I grabbed the car cover and went back to the Mustang, closing the front door against Trouble's ill-natured babble. I heard the bird shout again through the door, singing some kind of jingle. I wasn't paying that close of attention. I was in a hurry to shroud the Mustang before Finke and his chums could get lucky and bumble down my street.

I was ready for the night to be over. Cover the Mustang and get back inside and try for a few hours of dreamless sleep.

*Pop the trunk, Musclehead!*

An odd thing for a bird to say, an odd thing for any animal to say for that matter.

I pulled the cover across the front of the car and unraveled it over the windshield and open cab. I was about to let the shroud's tail fall over the back bumper when my curiosity got the better of me.

I fished the keys from my pocket, shuffled through the half-dozen or so hanging from Finke's pot-leaf fob until I had the right one, then opened the trunk.

---

The girl was young. Eighteen, maybe, but only by the skin of her teeth. Sixteen or seventeen wasn't out of the question, it was hard to be sure the way teenage girls dressed these days.

She was a good-looking girl, or would have been but for the blue-gray hue to her skin and the explosive smell of shit around her. She was half curled into a fetal position, eyes open and glassy, her one visible arm puckered with needle marks, old and fresh.

Dead.

She appeared to have been hastily dressed, post mortem, her tight little denim shorts pulled up but not buttoned, a dark, cherry-shaped birthmark just below her navel exposed. Her tank top shirt pulled on crooked and inside out. There was a small pink purse next to her, thrown in casually at her feet, its contents spilled around them.

I reached for the matching pink billfold poking demurely from the open purse, suppressing the urge to just slam the trunk and run back into my place. I forced myself to reach all the way in and pick up the billfold, knowing damn well that the girl's corpse was not about to sit upright and grab me, unable to transfer that knowing from my head to my gut. When I stepped back again, the girl's billfold in hand, I was able to breathe again.

I opened it and the first thing I saw was her driver's license displayed behind a cloudy and cracked plastic cover. I slid it free and saw the face, a little fresher, a lot less dead, of the woman in the trunk. I had to bend down closer to the trunk's light to read her name.

Candice Reynolds, eighteen. I had no doubt the men she partied with, Finke and his posse among them, would call her Candy while they shot her up and did things to her, telling her in evocative tones how much they'd just love to eat her up.

It's probably what I'd say.

I slid Candy's license back inside its holder, riffled through picture pockets. I found one of Candy looking slightly younger and much more innocent. The backdrop was vaguely familiar, rising green hills with narrow, paved lanes wandering across them like stone capillaries. Then I saw the sand trap and knew the place; Quail Ridge Country Club, set smack in the middle of a well-to-do neighborhood known casually as Snob Knob.

Candice Reynolds was a rich girl gone wild.

I slid the photo out, dropped her billfold back onto the purse, flipped the photo over to see if Candy had thought to note the specifics of the special occasion forever recorded on Kodak glossy; the date, the event, the home address of her next of kin. Anything.

There was writing, old and a bit smudged, but I didn't get the chance to read it.

"Hey, dickhead."

I slipped the picture into my t-shirt's breast pocket as I turned. I never got a chance to finish that turn either. I saw Musclehead's fist in my periphery for just a moment before it connected with my temple.

It was like being punched by an eighteen-wheeler.

First I saw stars zipping through the gray jelly of my brain like fireworks.

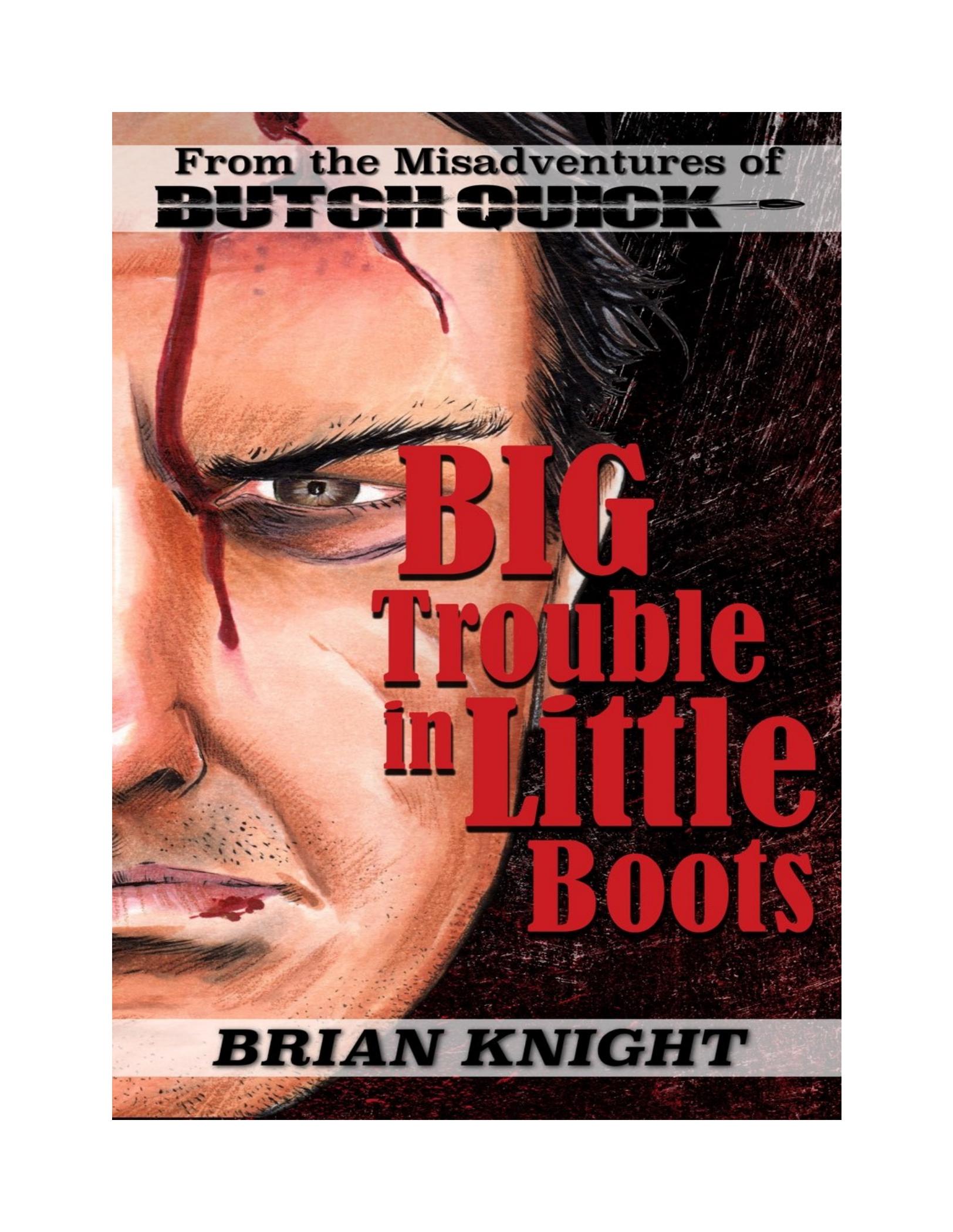
Then I saw nothing for a while.

---

# **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE BOOTS**

---

**A Novella - From the Misadventures of Butch Quick**



From the Misadventures of  
**BUTCH QUICK**

**BIG**  
**Trouble**  
**in Little**  
**Boots**

**BRIAN KNIGHT**

---

## BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE BOOTS

---

Paradise Valley is a lot like Vegas, only smaller and without Sin City's air of style and class. The legal gambling is all done outside city limits at the Nez Perce Indian Reservation Casino, but you can find the drugs and hookers and other fun stuff right on Main Street almost any hour of the day or night.

Nighttime is always best of course. That's when all the most interesting people come out, when you can truly see Paradise Valley in all of its burnt-out, puke-stained, skankiness. It was spring, so the locals were out in force to stretch their legs after a few months of forced hibernation.

And they were all laughing at me. Pointing too.

I tried not to take it too personally. I probably would have laughed if I was with them, but I wasn't in a laughing mood at the time. So far that night I had been shot at, stabbed, cussed out, and punched in the nuts.

I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore the raucous laughter that followed me as I drove down Main Street in lukewarm pursuit of the low-life ball of shit who had ruined what should have been a peaceful night. It was enough to make anybody a little cranky.

My car, the old Ventura that kept me rolling grimly through my parody of a life despite the lumps it had taken over the years, was sitting

on four flats several blocks behind me. My borrowed car was less than hospitable to my nearly seven-foot, two hundred and fifty pound bulk, but I had managed to cram myself inside it in spite of its less than helpful modifications.

The borrowed ride was a 2009 Smart fortwo Passion Cabriolet, probably not the smallest car sold in the good old gas-hungry US of A, but surely in the top five. Its modifications included extensions on the gas and brake pedals, which I'd thankfully been able to remove, and a raised driver's side seat, which I hadn't.

I felt like a grizzly bear riding a tricycle. Probably looked a bit like one too.

The sunroof was my favorite feature of that unfortunate car, and I drove with my head sticking up through it. The opening provided a clear line of sight down the packed street ahead and a pleasant breeze that dried the sweat on my brow and kept my hair out of my eyes. The car's interior was blinged out and modified to accommodate its owner's loud personality and special needs. The engine was stock, more powerful than I thought it would be, but that wasn't saying much. The exterior, glittering bubblegum pink paint, was probably not stock.

Right now you're probably wondering who on Earth would trick out an ugly no-style hippie-mobile like the Smart fortwo Passion Cabriolet, and the answer would be Go-Go Gidget the Dancing Midget.

Who else?

Her name was written down the side of the unfortunate machine in large and swooping purple script.

I could see the black van weaving through the slow traffic ahead, making better progress than I was, but it wasn't at the center of an impromptu rave.

I, unfortunately, was.

They rushed at me from the sidewalks and alleys, surrounded my

midget-mobile and danced around it like savages around a bonfire.

I beeped the horn at them and immediately wished I hadn't.

My crowd cheered in response.

Bodies hit the little car from both sides, rocked it.

"Go away!"

I doubt they even heard me over their own cheering and laughter.

A block and a half down the road, the black van broke free from the sluggish traffic and disappeared down a side street.

Perverts and vans, they go together like crack-whores and Chlamydia.

Stuttering blue and red lights washed over the crowd, and Main Street looked more like a dance floor than ever. A short siren squawk sounded, and the party surrounding me finally began to disperse.

The cop car was still a few blocks back, weaving its way through the traffic toward me as the shitball I was chasing got away.

I took a moment to reflect on the night's misadventure and wished fervently that I'd never set eyes on Go-Go Gidget or her super-fan in the black perv van.

Cole Fucking Alvarez.

---

My name is Butch Quick, and I'm security at Boomtown, the best nightclub in Paradise Valley as my Uncle Higheagle calls it. He owns it, so he *would* say that. I do happen to agree with him. Boomtown is one of the only clubs in Paradise Valley to resist the Achy-Breaky, Boot-scootin' shit-kicker music revolution. It's a rock-n-roll only establishment, and that makes it special to me.

I'm also a repo-man, auto parts runner, maintenance man, a bail bonds recovery agent, and a few other things I'm not sure there's a name

for. I'm whatever my uncle requires in any given situation. The pay's not bad, and it's nice to have a boss who accepts my small eccentricities without too much complaining.

My Uncle Higheagle isn't the richest man in Paradise Valley, but he does okay for himself. He owns Higheagle Classic Cars, Eagle Eye Bail Bonds, ABC Storage, and, of course, Boomtown.

The Boomtown gig isn't an every night thing for me. Only special occasions. New Years night, Superbowl Sunday, wet T-shirt night, shit like that. Nights when Uncle Higheagle manages to snag some high-profile entertainment, Quiet Riot, Joan Jet, Grand Funk Railroad, and other high profile bands usually warrant my special services, which mostly consist of me drifting through the crowd with my arms crossed and my angry face on.

Big, ugly, and angry is usually enough to keep a crowd in line. The red skin helps too. It's been well over a hundred years since the Nez Perce War, but I think that deep in their hearts most white folks still expect us to start beating the war-drums again and take the country back with Harleys and machine guns instead of horses and bows.

That night was nothing unusual. Friday, a slightly larger than average crowd who had come to see Mojo Rising, a regional Doors cover band. Their sound was dead-on, but the lead singer, fat, middle aged, mostly bald, kept loosing his wig while he pranced around the stage pretending to be Jim Morrison.

Two of Boomtown's usual dancers shared the stage with the aging rockers, wigglin' and jigglin' their goodies at the crowd. The blonde one wore a white tank top, short, tight, and knotted beneath her breasts to keep them from tumbling out, and bottoms that looked like a denim g-string. The other girl had black hair and wore a chrome studded leather bikini.

Both looked quite yummy.

I wasn't there for Mojo Rising, or even yummy dancers. Hector, a broad and squat brick-wall of a man, Boomtown's full-time security, didn't need my help managing the lackluster crowd. My assignment that night was to look after a new exotic dancer my uncle had booked for the weekend.

That was a first for him. He'd never pay professional rates for out-of-town talent when Paradise Valley was full of fun and frisky college girls willing to work for tips and free drinks. The local talent pool was semi-pro at best but still more than adequate for Boomtown, and, as I've already said, quite yummy.

I wondered if Uncle Higheagle was trying to raise his profile by booking professional acts. As it turned out, he was just doing a favor for an old friend.

---

Mojo Rising finished their first set and shuffled off backstage. The dancers gave their admirers a final bounce and jiggle before following the band.

There was a lot of disappointed groaning, a few wolf whistles, a lot of eyes following the girls' shapely backsides as they vanished around the stage backdrop. I was close at hand in case anybody got it in their pickled brains to follow the girls, tucked away in my usual dark corner next to Uncle Higheagle's office door between the bar and the stage.

"Hey leather-tits! I got a tip for you!" A scrawny young pocket-rocket in baggy pants and black net shirt, his spindly arms bearing more jailhouse ink than a respectable young woman generally likes to see on a suitor, stumbled from the crowd and shoved a hand down the front of his pants, giving his junk a vigorous manhandling. "Right here honey ... gotcha' tip right here!"

There was laughter from the crowd, a few shout of encouragement. Everyone loves a happy drunk.

Baggy-pants turned around to give them his most charming, drool-shiny grin, then withdrew his hand and hoisted himself up onto the stage.

"An' you can have more than the *tip* if you want ... you can have the whole ... hey!"

I reached him before he could rise, grabbed him by the back of his silly shirt and dragged him back to the floor.

He stumbled, fell to his knees, then rose again and turned to face me.

"Fool, whatchu' doing?" He reached for me with the hand that had very recently been down the front of his pants, then froze. The bluster drained from him as he tipped his head back to look up at my face. "Oh."

"If you touch me with that hand I'll break it off and stick it back down your pants." I pointed over the heads of his audience to a cluster of mostly empty tables at the back of the floor. "Go sit down now. Be good."

He shuffled away with his head down, and his audience dispersed.

"Butch!" Uncle Higheagle shouted over the drone of the crowd and the music playing from the jukebox to cover Mojo Rising's absence. "Stop picking on my customers and get over here."

I kept an eye on Baggy-pants as I walked to meet Uncle Higheagle. He slouched through the crowd, his head down to ignore the laughter and pointing fingers that marked his progress. He didn't stop at the tables I'd directed him to but continued to the exit. The furthest table's lone occupant, a badly put together woman with a face designed to scare children, gave him a lingering look of deep disgust as he passed her.

Hector kept a watchful eye on him as he passed.

My uncle waited at his office door, looking more amused than the situation called for. Joey Higheagle is the relentlessly good-humored man who raised me after my mother, his sister, died in a way that was no

real surprise to anyone who knew her. My temperament was closer to my mother's than his. I hate to think how I might have turned out if he hadn't been around to temper my perpetual anger with his indomitable cheer.

"I'm very impressed, Butch," he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder to guide me inside his office. "You didn't even hit him once."

"The night's not over," I said, and closed the door behind me, cutting the noise down to a low rumble. "I thought I was here to baby-sit a new act tonight. Where is she?"

"Baby-sit!" The voice came from my left, and just about the level of my waist. "Is that a short joke, Bubu?"

I jumped back a step, my ass smacking the closed office door and rattling it in its frame, and searched the room. I found her seated in the corner of the room, half-hidden in the shadow of a potted palm that stood next to the mini-bar my uncle kept stocked for his guests. She had a drink in one hand and an expression on her little face that seemed caught somewhere between amusement and curiosity. Her eyes were wide, fearless, alight with some unholy speculation.

"Holy shit, Joey," she said, her piping voice poised at the edge of laughter. "Get yourself a geek and a bearded lady and you can open a sidewhow."

She sipped her drink and continued to regard me.

I could only goggle at her. I'd momentarily lost the power of speech. All I needed was a helmet and a drool-cup to complete the picture.

She was already in costume, a two-piece that covered just enough to make her a dancer instead of a stripper, turquoise vinyl, purple stockings and boots, feathers of the same color in her spikey blonde hair. Her eyes were pale blue. She was trim and well shaped, sitting in a relaxed pose, one leg swinging, the other bent with foot on the seat's soft leather and her knee against the armrest.

She was four feet tall, maybe four and a half with the boots.

I wondered if my dear old uncle was nurturing a new fetish. I wondered if he was trying to expand Boomtown's customer base by hiring novelty acts. I wondered if my next gig would be playing the Indian in an all giants Village People cover band, and decided that was where I drew the line.

"Hey big guy," she patted the leather next to her barely covered backside. "There's room for two over here."

"Uhhh ...," I said with no clear meaning.

She threw her head back and trilled laughter.

Uncle Higheagle dropped into the seat behind his desk, chuckling immoderately. "Stop screwing around, Butch. This is serious."

He slid open his desk's top drawer and removed a thin manila folder. It was a familiar move, Uncle Higheagle passing me the paperwork on a bail-jumper that I needed to collect for him, but he didn't conduct Eagle Eye Bail Bonds business in his Boomtown office, and as far as I knew none of his bad boys were on the run. He hadn't asked me to bring my Recovery Agent creds.

I stepped across the room, took the folder, opened it.

I skimmed the top page and closed it again.

"This isn't one of your bad boys," I said.

"Correct," he said, and nodded toward the miniature dancer lounging in the corner. "That bad boy is all hers."

My curiosity was officially aroused.

You've heard what they say about curiosity, haven't you?

---

Uncle Higheagle introduced us, and despite Go-Go Gidget's invitation to share booty-space I decided to stand.

I read the bad-boy file.

Cole Alvarez, a thirty-two year old Nevada native with a history of perviness and a little-people fixation. Medium height, medium build, brown hair cropped short, small brown eyes, and a face that would have been at home on a J.R.R. Tolkien goblin. He worked as a janitor at several casinos and clubs around the state, got into minor-league trouble, some drug and alcohol related stuff, arrested for exposing himself at a Little People of America convention at the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas. Then he'd fallen madly in love with Go-Go Gidget and became a serious pain in the ass.

She'd first noticed him in Nevada, at every show in every venue from Las Vegas to Laughlin, and after that in California, then Oregon. His first kidnap attempt was in Beaverton, and while he was busy being cuffed and stuffed she'd blown town and landed in Montana. A few months passed and she didn't see him again. He caught up to her again in Stateline, Idaho, a funny little town on the border with Washington that was nothing but strip clubs. A narrow escape, the deviant dickweed ran off, and an old friend of Uncle Higheagle's, Mr. Ferris Glass of *The Looking Glass*, a Stateline establishment of dubious legality, arranged for her to come here.

A trap for Mr. Alvarez, if he would fall for it, and a pretty typical Higheagle business arrangement. He got a weekend's worth of entertainment for his club at a severely cut rate, the usual tips and drinks his regular girls worked for, and Gidget got me, a personal bodyguard with a bad reputation and confirmed body count.

I hated having a reputation. More trouble than it was worth.

"Isn't the word *midget* offensive?" I asked.

Gidget shrugged, finished her drink and stretched in her seat. "Go-Go Gidget The Dancing Little Person just doesn't have the same ring."

It's a matter of semantics I guess. She wasn't a dwarf, her body's

proportions were perfectly average. Well, quite a bit better than average actually. She was just very, very small.

So what do you call a little person who isn't a dwarf?

Munchkin?

Probably not.

Elf?

Hell no.

What the hell, if she wasn't going to worry about it then neither would I.

"So," I said, and felt a sinking sensation in my stomach that meant I probably wasn't going to have an easy night, "you're expecting him to show up and I'm supposed to clobber him?"

"Absolutely not," Uncle Higheagle said, sounding almost sincere. "I expect him to be hiding somewhere in northern Idaho until he thinks it's safe enough to run back home. If he does show up all you need to do is make sure you spot him early and keep *her* in your sight until the cops arrive. Your job is to take care of her ... nothing more."

"Screw that," Gidget said. "I want you to tear his head off so *I* can shit down his neck-hole! I wanna tie his dick in a knot and wear his balls as earrings."

*Delightfully vicious*, I thought. *Big trouble in little boots*.

"No ... no," my uncle protested, with a sorrowful expression and a stern shake of his head. "We have to do it right, everything legal, no excessive violence."

My uncle fixed me with an especially stern and knowing look, as if I went out of my way looking for deviants and psychopaths to rough up, which I assure you is not the case. I don't have to look for them. They always seem to find me.

"And you," he pointed at Gidget, looking like a man telling off a kid for misbehaving. "No running off this time. Once this guy is juggled

you're sticking around to testify against him."

She looked slightly abashed, though the drink in her hand and the stripper clothes spoiled the illusion of a chastised kid.

There was a long and uncomfortable silence between us. The low buzz of the Friday night crowd and classic rock playing low over Boomtown's sound system only emphasized it. He shifted that stern gaze back and forth between us.

"Are we all clear on our parts tonight?"

"Yes, Joey," Gidget said. She rolled her eyes and relaxed back into her chair.

"Yes, Uncle," I said.

I didn't relax though.

I was now part of *a plan*. The fact that I hadn't come up with the plan myself didn't matter. As long as I was involved it would probably go wrong, and badly.

It's just my luck.

---

I waited at my accustomed place beside Uncle Higheagle's office door as Mojo Rising re-assembled on the stage, looking even more middle-aged and tired than they had earlier in the night. They repositioned themselves around the stage's strange new centerpiece, the singer actually cracking a weary smile as he adjusted the Jim Morrison wig on his head.

The stage's new centerpiece, hurriedly assembled by Hector and Mojo Rising's one-man stage crew, was a cage. It was ten feet tall and five to each side, polished chrome bars, a pole running from the floor to ceiling, just enough room inside for a four-foot tall dancer to get a good swing around it without whacking her head. There was a swing, it looked like

the perch in a birdcage, extending from the platform on top.

The band began to play, a low and rambling instrumental with traces of *Riders On The Storm* in it. The regular dancers strutted up to the front of the stage again and regarded the setup with curiosity and amusement before taking up posts on either side of the cage.

Then Go-Go Gidget came onstage, almost flew onstage, a series of acrobatic summersaults and front flips around the drum kit, between the guitarist and bassist, into the open back door of her cage.

Her full sized counterparts laughed, applauded, cheered.

The momentarily stunned crowd began to get into the spirit.

Mojo Rising's mellow instrumental segued into a fast and upbeat rendition of *Peace Frog*, and the show began.

---

It was a good show. Mojo Rising played their second and longer set with more enthusiasm than earlier, seemed to catch extra energy from the revitalized crowd. The singer got down on his knees for *Love Her Madly* and partnered up with Go-Go Gidget, laughed out loud during the bridge when she tugged the silly wig from his head and threw it backstage, even did a lap around the stage with Gidget riding on his neck.

The regular dancers got into the spirit too and ended the show by lifting Gidget up between them and kissing her cheeks.

I missed most of the fun. Uncle Higheagle told me to keep an eye out for Mr. Alvarez, so that's what I did. I enjoyed the music but only caught occasional short glimpses of the show. When the band finished up their second set at midnight, their final number was *Break On Through*, and the band made their bows, Mr. Alvarez had still not shown his face.

Mojo Rising made themselves scarce after the show, leaving their

roadie to pack up their instruments and amps. Uncle Higheagle gave him a small bonus to take the cage down and stow it behind the backdrop. Leather-tits downed one last free drink and escaped before the crowd around her got too thick, but the girl in the denim g-string stuck around to milk her tab for all it was worth. Within minutes she was surrounded by guys attempting to pay for them. The bartender finally gave up trying to give their money back and stuffed it in the tip jar.

Gidget sat at the far end of the bar and drank alone. Her admirers had given up trying to make nice after I chased the first few away. She'd changed out of her stage costume, into jeans and a tank top. Her spiky blonde hair was feather free now and sagging a bit.

"What's with the cage?" I was honestly curious.

"Men like seeing women in cages," she said, not looking up from her drink. "I like it because I can lock myself in if the crowd gets loses its shit."

Then she did look up, swayed a little on her seat, and smiled up at me. She was past drunk now and well on her way to smashed.

"Have a drink," she said. "Sit down and relax for fuck's sake."

"I don't drink," I said, and remained standing. I was on the job, there was no relaxing.

"If you don't drink, then why do you work in a bar?" She seemed as honestly curious about that as I'd been about her cage.

"The company," I said after a moment's consideration.

It was kind of true. Now that I was perpetually sober I could appreciate just how funny the drunks around me were. Drunk people say the funniest shit.

Two men passed us then, one looking grim and harassed, the other talking at him loudly between fits of the giggles.

"So I said it didn't make any sense .... if the guy shit his pants then wouldn't he take the time to change them when he went home?" He

giggled, stumbled, leaned heavily against the bar beside Gidget, grabbing his grim friend's arm to keep him from escaping.

"And do you know what he said? Go on, just try to guess."

He tried to hoist his numb ass up on the stool next to us and slid off. He giggled again.

"What did he say?" the grim man rubbed his forehead and frowned as if he was afraid his drunk friend would tell him.

"He said ...," a pause to stifle more laughter, "... he said *the shitting of the pants is a metaphor!*"

By one o'clock the crowd had thinned considerably, denim g-string left on the arm of a chubby fellow who looked like a used car salesman, Gidget sank deeper into her cup, and Cole Alvarez continued to not be a problem. It looked like Uncle Higheagle was right. Gidget's stalker had finally got the hint and decided to fuck off.

"Last call," the bartender informed the remaining dedicated drinkers.

"Well shit," Gidget regarded the last half-finger of whiskey in her glass and pushed it away. "I really wanted that fucker to show up tonight."

She fixed me with her pale blue eyes, her gaze unfocused, and began to slide slowly off the edge of her stool.

I caught her before she could tip over completely.

"Hey big fella ... you do come in handy." She smiled blearily and slid the rest of the way from her seat, into my arms. When I tried to put her back on her seat she locked her arms around my neck. "Oh come on. The night doesn't have to be a total loss."

The bartender favored me with a brief, disapproving look. A few stragglers at the bar turned quickly away, sniggering. The homely woman, still sitting at the table in the furthest corner, still alone but hanging in there, gave me a death glare.

"Uh, Gidget ..." I started, but lost the ability to speak when her tongue

did something very unexpected to my neck.

"What?" She asked after putting her tongue back in her mouth.

"That probably isn't a good idea." Not to say I wasn't interested, but sometimes the trouble Little Butch got me into simply wasn't worth the fun I had while getting there.

"Probably not," she said, then did the thing with her tongue again. "But Joey said it was your job to take care of me, so how about you take me back to my room and *take care of me*?"

"Oh, Butch," Uncle Higheagle said.

I turned, Gidget's grip around my neck tightened and she wrapped her legs around my waist.

Uncle Higheagle stood at his open office door shaking his head in disapproval, but looked like he might start laughing at any second. "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

It was difficult to marshal a response while Gidget held me in her death-grip, enthusiastically rubbing her good bits against me. Luckily for me the need to respond passed quickly.

Uncle Higheagle's eyes flicked to something behind me and widened.

I've seen bad go to worse enough times to recognize the warning signs.

I spun, Gidget clung on tighter and groaned with sudden vertigo, and saw the ugly woman from the far corner only a few feet away now, snarling.

"You get your hands off her," the woman screamed, and with an unexpectedly masculine voice. Her adam's apple bulged and bobbed with each word, and I saw the sparse hair on her wrist as she withdrew her hand from the purse hanging around her neck.

She ... he, drew a small gun and pointed it at me.

There were screams and an immediate exodus to the front exit. I could see Hector fighting his way toward us, shunting customers aside

with each step he took, but the sheer numbers fighting to get past him were too much and he went down beneath them.

"You put that down, lady," Uncle Higheagle said, and tried to step past me.

The gun wavered in his direction and I stepped sideways to block him.

My instinct for stupidity surprises even me sometimes.

"I said get your filthy hands off my Gidget!"

I obediently raised both hands and Gidget's weakening grip around my neck broke. She fell to the floor with a squeal and a thud.

The homely woman/man/thing snarled, and I could see my death in her/his eyes.

Underneath the wig and the makeup I finally recognized the muddy brown eyes and goblin profile of Cole Alvarez.

That was when Hector broke free of the crowd and charged, tackling Alvarez from behind.

Alvarez fired and missed, making a small hole in Uncle Higheagle's office door instead of me. He shouted in outrage as his high-heeled feet left the floor and his brown wig flew off his head.

"I got him, I got him!" Hector shook Alvarez like a rag doll until he lost his grip on the peashooter he'd pulled, then dragged him slowly backward. "Get her outa here!"

*Good idea*, I thought, and was about to do just that when Alvarez plunged his right hand back inside his purse.

What now?

Pepper spray?

A blade?

Poison lipstick?

I lunged forward before he could withdraw whatever it was, tripped over a certain miniature exotic dancer, fell forward into Cole Alvarez's

switch blade just as he flicked it open.

Holy fuck did that hurt.

It went into my left arm, into the bicep, and stuck there quivering slightly when I lashed out with my right and made him fall down. The punch wasn't solid, it glanced off the top of his sweat-greasy head, and his fall wasn't especially hard either. He landed on top of Hector and rolled away with a roar of frustration.

Hector lay where he landed, stunned and shaking his head.

Alvarez kicked his shoes off, elegant black pumps that matched his skirt and the light knitted shrug he wore over an earth-tone blouse, and ran bare foot across the deserted floor. The bartender stood with a rag in one hand, a bowl of pretzels in the other, his lower jaw somewhere near his sternum and watched as Alvarez bent in mid-stride to grab his lost wig. A moment later he was shoving his way out into the early morning dark.

I groped, half blinded by pain, for the quivering handle of the switchblade stuck in my left arm. Gidget groaned from the floor behind me, dead drunk or stunned from her fall to the floor. I wondered where my uncle was, remembered the single shot from Alvarez's pistol, and was about to make a connection between the two and fly into a serious panic when he ran past me. He screamed, something inarticulate, his braids flying out behind him. There was a streak of bright red down his face and I had the crazy idea that he'd taken the time to apply a little war paint before giving chase to the troublesome shit-monkey.

Mojo Rising's roadie appeared from backstage for a shot of something strong before he called it a night.

"What in the fuck happened here?"

"Shit, man," Hector sat up and shook his head, trying to shake his marbles back into place. "Hey, Butch! You got a knife in you!"

I looked down and found Go-Go Gidget staggering past me, rubbing

her head, oblivious to what had just happened. Then she stopped and turned her face up to me.

"You asshole!" She stepped forward and before I could defend myself, punched me in the crotch. "You dropped me!"

The pain in my balls eclipsed the pain in my arm for a moment, and I sank slowly to my knees.

Satisfied that she had paid me back in kind, Gidget climbed the nearest stool and slapped the bar top. "Hit me again, booze-boy!"

"I *always* miss the exciting shit," the roadie said, and disappeared backstage again.

---

My Uncle Higheagle stomped back through the front door less than a minute later, an unaccustomed scowl arranged below the streaks of bright red trickling down his cheek.

Not war paint. Blood.

"I'm fine," he said, waving away my attempt to help him.

I settled back onto Gidget's vacated seat to contemplate the unpleasant task ahead. Alvarez's blade was still sticking out of my arm and the wound was beginning to swell around it. If I waited much longer it would be like pulling a nail. I reached for the handle and just couldn't bring myself to grab hold of it.

"He didn't shoot me," Uncle Higheagle said, plopping down on the stool next to me. He wiped the blood from his face with his forearm to show a single long gash beneath his eye. "I got this diving for cover when he shot my fucking door."

"Got away?" I pinched the switchblade's handle between a thumb and forefinger, gave a little tug, decided it could wait a bit longer. "*Shit that hurts!*"

Uncle Higheagle favored me with a decidedly unfriendly look. "No, he didn't get away. I folded him up and tucked him in my back pocket for safe keeping."

His gaze shifted to the blade stuck in my arm and before I could protest he took hold of the handle and yanked it free.

"Quit shouting," he said. "My head feels like it's going to pop."

I quit shouting, decided to make due with a few simple groans of pain until the fire in my bicep subsided.

"Better?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, and gave my arm an experimental bend, and it was a little better. It hurt, but not as bad as I expected.

"Where is she?" He held out a hand and his bartender slapped a half-bottle of Rittenhouse Rye into it. He took a long pull then offered it to me. "Firewater?"

"I'll pass," I said. I'd given up booze and didn't plan to start up again no matter how stressful the night got. "She's in the changing room toilet puking. Hector's keeping an eye on her."

He nodded, then leaned toward me and tipped the bottle over the bleeding hole on my arm.

The dull throb in my arm exploded into flame-bright pain as he splashed Boomtown's best 100 proof antiseptic into the knife wound.

"Wouldn't want that to get infected," he said in way of an apology.

"Thanks," I groaned through clenched teeth.

That was when Hector stumbled back onto the dance floor, blood spilling down his face from his split scalp. He stumbled and fell against the stage. We had him surrounded before he hit the floor. The bartender pressed a clean white bar towel to his scalp, and it was soaked within seconds. Uncle Higheagle crouched down beside him.

I hung back a few steps and watched the narrow hallway to the changing room, held back only by the slimmest thread of a possibility

that the bleeding man might have some useful information to impart.

"What happened," Uncle Higheagle asked. He leaned in closer until his nose was almost touching Hector's blood-tacky forehead. "What the hell happened?"

Hector opened his eyes and looked up, focused somewhere over my uncle's shoulder, then found his boss and reported the situation.

"Motherfuger got in through the back ... broke my fugin head." He tried to rise again, only made it a few inches off the floor and dropped back to his ass. "He got her boss. She gone."

"Fuck!" Uncle Higheagle and I shouted in perfect unison and perfect agreement.

I had taken my eyes off of her, and now she was gone.

---

I sprinted down the hall, past the changing room's open door, then around the final sharp corner to the back exit. It was closed but not latched. I rammed it with my right shoulder and flew into the dark back street behind Boomtown just in time to see the roadie's black van disappear around the corner a half-block away, squealing its tires and throwing dust in a rooster tail.

*Not too late, I thought. Got to be quick.*

I turned and took my first step to the line of cars parked at the back of the building, the employee parking spaces. Only three remaining; my old Pontiac Ventura, Uncle Higheagle's '58 Mercury Turnpike Cruiser – a fuck-ugly cruise ship of a car, but a convertible at least – and Hector's newish Charger. Three cars, twelve flat tires, and one more shouted expletive.

I was fucked.

Go-Go Gidget was double-fucked.

And like a bad joke, a holy apparition dressed in a clown costume, I saw the lonely car spotlighted in the mostly empty parking lot on the other side of the dark back street.

Custom bubblegum pink paint, a glitter from behind the glass that may or may not have been rhinestones embedded in a custom leather dash-pad – in the interest of clarity I should tell you that was in fact exactly what it was – and the words Go-Go Gidget in gaudy and swooping purple script across the side, just in case there was any doubt remaining in my mind as to who owned this unlikely machine. It was parked next to a small covered trailer painted the same garish pink, just large enough to stow her broken down stage cage and a good assortment of tiny little dancer outfits.

The previously mentioned Smart fortwo Passion Cabriolet, waiting for me on fully inflated rubber.

*How in the hell am I going to fit inside that thing?*

Barely, it turned out.

I sprinted back to the changing room, found the keys in her handbag, and was in lukewarm pursuit less than a minute later.

---

So here we are, back where we started, yours truly stuffed into Gidget's little Go-Go mobile with my head sticking out of the open sunroof, chasing the black van down Main Street Paradise Valley with the local law crawling up my ass.

Definitely the low point of my week.

I'd like to say it was the lowest point of my year, or even month, but that would be a lie. I may tell you some outrageous shit from time to time, but I won't lie.

The blue and red lights of the pursuing cop car flashed closer and

brighter, and the traffic directly behind me pulled to the sides to give Paradise Valley's finest a clear path. The party people of Main Street decided it was time to peel off and seek entertainment elsewhere.

Its road clear, the cop cruiser ate up the last half-block between us in a few seconds. A brief blat of the siren, then an arm extended from the open driver's side window, a pointing finger encouraging me to get the fuck out of the way.

I drifted into the left lane as directed but didn't slow, and a moment later the cruiser pulled along side the Go-Go mobile and paced me. A woman's face glared out from underneath the blue lid.

"*Are you from Boomtown?*" She shouted, a good cop voice audible above the roar of her cruiser and piping futuristic hum of Gidget's Smart car.

I replied with an exaggerated nod, wanting to keep my mouth closed for as long as possible. I had already swallowed all the gnats I could handle, and had only just avoided a nice fat Junebug.

"*The black van?*" Her focus oscillated between me and the corner where Alvarez had vanished.

"Yeah ..." I turned my head to spit out a bug.

She nodded and faced forward again. "*Go back. We've got this!*"

She hit the go-juice and her police interceptor roared ahead. The road before us was clear now. With any luck she would have units on route to head the fucker off.

I could call it a night now. Report back to Uncle Higheagle, slap a bandage on the oozing hole in my arm, get back home for some much coveted shut-eye.

Then I thought about my uncle's promise that we'd look after Gidget, keep her safe from the man who has chased her across a half-dozen states, and I imagined him having to tell his friend in Stateline that we'd thoroughly screwed the pooch.

*Shit.*

With the road ahead still mostly clear I stomped the gas to the floor. Gidget's Go-Go mobile lurched forward with all the enthusiasm of a bumper car, and by the time I turned the corner to follow them the party on Main Street was in full swing again.

---

Paradise Valley PD seemed to have the situation in hand when I caught up. They spiked the tires five blocks down East River Road and boxed him in neatly between the oak-shaded green of River Park and Slicks Marina New & Used Boats.

Honestly, would you buy a used *anything* from a man who calls himself slick?

The black van was stopped at an angle across the centerline. Two cruisers blocked the road in front of it and my friend from Main Street was parked across the centerline behind it. She stood just outside her cruiser's open door, her service pistol leveled over the roof. Her cap lay on the asphalt behind her and her hair hung down her back in a ponytail.

It was just like a scene in a movie. The whole night seemed awash in strobing fire and ice hues.

I slowed and brought Gidget's car to a stop well short of Officer Ponytail's cruiser and waited to see what would happen. To see if Go-Go Gidget was still alive, to see Cole Alvarez get clobbered, cuffed, and shoved into a police cruiser's bad-boy seat. I had to see both of these things with my own eyes before I could call it a night.

My Uncle Higheagle made a promise. I meant to keep it.

The van's rear door was already open. I watched it, waited, and gusted out a sigh of relief when an officer approached it with his gun drawn and helped a staggering, but clearly alive, Gidget out. Her hands

were tied behind her back and a blindfold covered most of her face, but her legs were free and working. The officer took her by the arm and backed away, leading her to safety.

"*Now!*" A shout rang out and Officer Ponytail slid from her safe place behind her cruiser. "*Hands behind your head!*"

I saw a shadow of movement inside the van's cab, and then she yanked the door open and pulled him from the cab. He hit the pavement with a shout of pain, and she dropped onto him, one knee pressing into the center of his back while a second officer approached quickly around the front of the van with his gun trained on their prisoner's head.

Officer Ponytail holstered her weapon and cuffed him with a quick precision any dominatrix would envy.

There was something wrong with the picture, and after another long moment I realized what it was.

The cuffed and battered man wore a threadbare t-shirt and old torn jeans.

Mojo Rising's roadie.

Where the fuck was Alvarez?

I searched the fence line around Slicks, what I could see of the road on the other side of the cruisers, the paved path through the park, past the play equipment, into the deeper shadows where the path disappeared into the trees ...

... And spotted a pair of scrawny legs beneath a familiar black skirt slip into the darkness.

"*He's getting away!*" I screamed, and the cops seemed to notice me for the first time.

"*Stay back, sir!*" Someone shouted.

"*The fuck outa here!*" Someone else advised.

"*Over there!*" I pointed down the paved path. "*He's getting away!*"

Officer Ponytail trotted to where I sat, still stuffed inside Gidget's

ridiculous little car.

"Relax, we have him." She stopped well short, her hand hovering near the butt of her weapon. She regarded me with suspicion. "The women are safe. Go home."

"*Goddamnit! You got the wrong guy!*" I jabbed a finger toward the park again. "*Alvarez was dressed as a woman, and you let him get away!*"

Suspicion turned quickly to alarm and she spun on the spot to perform a quick head count of the rescued hostages. It didn't take long. There were only two heads to count, and one was gone.

"Damnit!" She sprinted away, but not toward the park.

*Fuck it*, I thought, and put my borrowed car back in drive.

"*The fuck you goin'?*"

"*Sir, stop now!*"

"*Hey, where's the ugly broad?*"

I ignored the useless chatter and warnings and drove as fast as the little car would take me across the park, along the walking path, and stopped where it vanished into the dark and narrow corridor through the trees.

The cops were behind me, moving to catch up, but their pursuit was lacking a certain urgency I felt the situation required, so I continued to ignore their shouts and unfolded myself from the cab of Gidget's car.

I followed Cole Alvarez down the dark trail, hoping I wasn't too late to catch him. Knowing he'd try again if we gave him the chance.

The cops were closing in behind me.

One way or the other I knew this cluster-fuck of a night would be over soon.

---

I'd walked that path before with my daughter, but never in the dark.

Years ago, when I still had a daughter to walk through the park with. I knew that the smooth and flat asphalt would turn quickly to a cracked and buckled mess. The tree roots running beneath the old asphalt had pushed it out of shape, broken and lifted it. If I wasn't careful I'd fall on my face and break it. Make it even uglier than it already was. Low hanging limbs whipped at me. I held my good right arm up in front of my eyes to keep the low limbs from poking them out.

The first hump in the asphalt nearly tripped me up. I'd just gotten my balance back when I stubbed my toe on a curl of root that humped up through the path. I stumbled again but stayed upright.

I could hear panting and heavy footfalls closing in from behind, then a cry of pain from ahead.

The shout from ahead was a happy surprise. I was closer than I thought.

Then I remembered something else about Cole Alvarez. He'd left his shoes back at Boomtown. Unless he'd managed to snag a pair of running shoes in the meantime, he was barefoot.

I put on an impulsive, and probably unwise burst of speed, almost missed a turn in the path, then saw light ahead. I was almost back into the open air. There would be enough light ahead to see the troublesome fuck-stick clearly by, and once I saw him, I would have him.

I fixed my sights on the light at the end of this tunnel through the oaks, and saw the thick club of dead wood Alvarez swung at me just in time to realize it was going to hurt like hell when it hit me.

It hit me, right across the chest.

It hurt like hell.

But I've been hit harder and hurt worse.

I grabbed hold of his club before he could draw back for another swing and yanked him from his cover.

He shouted in surprise, stumbled but kept his feet. He snarled and

tried to yank the club out of my hands.

That didn't work for me. Not at all.

I yanked the club out of his hands and tossed it aside.

He faced me without fear. His heavily roughed cheeks flushed red with anger. His mascara ran with tears of frustrated rage.

"*She's mine, you fuck!*" He took another step toward me and stomped his bare foot on the cracked and crumbling trail. "*Why can't you all just leave us alone?*"

Sometimes words are useless things. I may not be the brightest bulb in the shed but even I know that.

I grabbed him by the front of his blouse, a tasteful number with a high cut cowl neck, pink floral pattern on chocolate brown. I punched him in the mouth.

His wig flew off again, his purse slipped from his shoulder and landed by his bare feet. His eyes crossed and rolled down toward his nose, as if he was trying to see how badly I'd messed up his lipstick, and when I let go of his blouse he fell over backward and twitched for a few seconds.

There were no more words after that.

There is something elementally satisfying about punching people who deserve it. Something primitive, a throwback instinct buried deep in the amygdala of the human brain. It felt so good I wanted to do it again. I resisted the urge, sat down next to the trail, and closed my eyes.

I thought of my scuzzy little cabin on Port Drive, a shithole on a street full of shitholes in one of Paradise Valley's worst neighborhoods, but it had the one thing I wanted more than anything else at the moment.

A comfortable bed and several hours of uninterrupted sleep.

I heard heavy footfalls and heavier breathing, a shouted *fuck* as someone stumbled on the broken and uneven asphalt, and I knew my simple wants would be denied, at least for the next few hours. The best I

could hope for in my immediate future would be a free ride in a back seat of a car that would smell like piss, puke and blood, I've never been inside a cop car that didn't smell like a festering and frothy mix of several unpleasant bodily fluids, and one of those hard plastic seats they keep for people like me in the interrogation room.

Depending on which cop I got, maybe a lump or two on my way to the uncomfortable seat. I've met a few cops like that in Paradise Valley. They aren't the rule, but they aren't the exception either.

"*Hands on your head, asshole!*" He was close enough to spit on me, but screamed anyway. He sounded far too excited, almost happy, to have an excuse to pull his weapon and scream a bit. I didn't need to open my eyes to see the gun pulled and trained on me. I could almost feel it on me, like an angry finger poking into the center of my chest. "*Now goddamn it!*"

I sighed, put my hands on the top of my head, my badly abused left bicep gave an unhappy little throb, and waited for cold steel to close around my wrists.

It didn't happen.

Officer Ponytail arrived and saved me that particular indignity.

"Damn it Patton," she arrived out of breath, sounding more irritated than angry. "What in the hell are you doing?"

I felt it was safe to open my eyes again at this point, so I did.

She stood a few feet behind him with her arms crossed, regarding him with a weary kind of impatience. I've seen the same look on the faces of women in Uncle Higheagle's office after they've forked over that month's rent money to bail out a badly behaved husband.

"If you're going to cuff someone how about sleeping beauty." She nodded toward Alvarez, who had started to stir uneasily.

Officer Patton reluctantly dragged his gaze from me to regard Alvarez, and a satisfying expression of alarm replaced his narrow-eyed glare.

"Holy shit! She's a dude!"

Ponytail sighed and stared upward at the night sky. I could almost hear her counting to ten in her head, then looked down at me.

"Mr. Quick?"

"Yeah."

She nodded, then watched Officer Patton roll Alvarez onto his stomach and cuff his arms behind his back. Alvarez looked to be coming around, which I suspected would make Officer Patton happy. He'd have someone new to yell at.

"You sure have a way with the ladies."

"So I've heard."

Then she smiled and turned back to me. "So how about we head back to my place and get to know each other a little better?"

---

Her place was located in the city complex between the courthouse and jail, and a little too busy for a serious sharing of hearts and minds. My *date* with Officer Julia Ross, AKA Ponytail, was blessedly short, and I was able to snag a power nap on the bench seat in the hallway outside her office afterward. I awoke to find Uncle Higheagle sitting next to me, looking more cheerful than anyone had a right to that early in the AM. Julia was leading a hung over and badly shaken Gidget past us for her Q&A.

"We got the son-of-a-bitch," Uncle Higheagle said, and gave me a companionable punch on the shoulder. "Ferris is going to be over the moon. That asshole busted his place up pretty good."

"We got him?"

He shrugged. "It was a team effort."

I decided not to split that particular hair. I was too tired to give a shit.

I leaned back and closed my eyes again.

"None of that," my uncle said. "We're getting out of here as soon as Gidget's finished. You know, I think that little lady has taken a shine to you."

A dull, phantom throb in my balls begged to differ, but I let the comment pass.

"Where's Alvarez?" I had expected to see him by now. I tried to tell myself that the cops couldn't be dumb enough to let him get away again, not even good old Officer Patton, but I wasn't entirely convinced. I've had too much experience with the local cops. Most are good, but too many of them were incompetent Dirty Harry wannabes.

Uncle Higheagle laughed. "He's at the hospital getting his jaw wired. You need to learn to pull your punches."

I, naturally, disagreed, but let that pass too. I did feel better though. A little, anyway. The hole in my arm had hurt like hell, but it would be healed up well before Cole Fucking Alvarez would be speaking clearly or eating solid food again.

"How's your arm?"

"Not bad." Julia tried to send me to the hospital after my interview but I'd declined. I flexed it once and the move produced only the slightest twinge. The gauze taped over it showed a small spot of blood, but the wound was closed now. "Nothing a bandage and a few aspirin couldn't fix."

*And some sleep*, I wanted to say, but didn't. A good ten uninterrupted hours of solid shut-eye would put me as right as I was ever likely to be.

---

I met the next Monday morning as well rested as I could have hoped for, stepped out to meet the impatient cabbie parked in front of my cracker

box house thoroughly caffeinated and ready to assault another work day. Okay, so I wasn't in what you would call a *good* mood, it was Monday morning after all, but I was less miserable than usual.

My uncommonly buoyant mood lasted for about almost a block, and by the time the cabbie deposited me in front of Higheagle's Classic Cars I was ready to wring his neck.

He sped away, breaking into the psychotic Monday morning traffic with a blast of his horn and squealing tires.

Zeke Bower, a shifty little fucker who looked like Snidely Whiplash in a sport coat, and my uncle's one full time salesman, was on the prowl. He lurked beside a bald, fat little man in checkered shorts and a polo shirt. The fat man leered hungrily at an old '64 Chevy Corvair convertible, black with red trim and interior. Pretty car, but a little on the cramped side for a wide-body like him. I thought old old Snidely would have to grease him up to get him behind the wheel.

Zeke nodded in my direction and tipped a discreet wink. I returned the nod and put my back to him.

The shop was tucked away behind the sales office, and I paused on my way past it to see my Ventura up on the lift just a half a foot above the oil-stained concrete. The four flats were stacked off to the side and Curtis, Uncle Higheagle's greasemonkey, was slipping the last new tire on.

I guess a few flesh wounds and a jab to the nuts was worth the new rubber and rims.

The back entrance to Uncle Higheagle's office was just past the shop. The small, discreet sign above it didn't say Higheagle's Classic Cars, but Eagle Eye Bail Bonds. This was where my uncle conducted business with some of Paradise Valley's more colorful citizens, which was what he was doing when I walked in.

---

The bad boy sitting in the seat across from Uncle Higheagle's desk was your run-of-the-mill West Paradise Valley shit-head, pinched for possession of controlled substances and resisting arrest. Seems he'd tried to pay the arresting officer off with some of what he'd been smoking. The prosecutor wanted to hit him with intent to distribute, but there was a little issue with some missing evidence.

I didn't know any of that when Uncle Higheagle introduced us. That was info I picked up later as the case first gathered speed, and got a little too interesting for my liking.

"Good morning, Butch," Uncle Higheagle said, rising as I passed by his desk to pat my elbow. When he sat again he turned his attention back to the man across the desk from him. "Phil, I'd like you to meet my Enforcement Officer, Butch."

Phil turned big, bloodshot eyes on me and gave a tiny nod before trying to pretend I wasn't there. He was twitchy and pallid; his sweaty face a map of angry red pimples topped with whiteheads that looked ready to burst.

Uncle Higheagle continued with the introductions as if we'd all just met up at a party. My uncle liked to introduce his jailbirds to me. He said he liked them to see the guy who'd be coming after them if they decided to get slippery, said it helped protect his investment. I think he just liked to fuck with them.

"Butch, this is Phil Shepard. We're just finishing up a little business. If you hang around for a few minutes I have some work for you."

I nodded and moved off to the side.

Their remaining business was short, my uncle reminding Phil of his responsibilities under the agreement they'd entered into and what would happen if Phil violated it. A few minutes later Mr. Shepard was on his

way out, giving me a quick, almost spastic glance as he passed me.

When the door clicked closed behind Phil I took his seat across from my uncle.

"So, where's our little friend?"

"Officer Ross informed Gidget that she would be required to give evidence against Cole Alvarez and advised her not to leave the city until after his trial."

I nodded knowledgeably. "She split didn't she?"

"Saturday night," Uncle Higheagle confirmed. He shrugged, examined Phil's paperwork again, shoved it into a file folder on his littered desk. "I don't think it'll matter. The prosecutor has enough witnesses without her."

I hoped like hell I wouldn't have to be one of them. I was not on the best of terms with Paradise Valley's reigning DA.

"What have you got for me today?"

Nothing too exciting I hoped. I'd had my fill of excitement for the week. I thought I was due for a bit of boring. Sometimes it seems like my life is one misadventure after another. I wanted a little time off before the next one.

---

A few months later.

The West Valley Friday Street Fair was like a low rent Mardi Gras with a family friendly veneer so thin it was almost transparent. On top there were the pretzel and hot dog stands, the coffee bar, even the beer garden tucked back behind Station 3, and every other business along Main Street with a booth or display set up on sidewalks or in the middle of the road. The city closed off four blocks of Main Street every Friday afternoon from Easter to Halloween, and it seemed half the city turned

out. There were also pushers, pickpockets, and other assorted lowlife present. This was their half of the city after all. It would be rude not to invite them.

I never had much to do with the street fair. Too many damned people for my liking, and there was never anything there I was particularly interested in.

That late September evening was an exception to the general rule. There was something there that day I was very interested in, and after only a half-hour of ignoring the vendors and dodging hyperactive kids on the peaks of sugar highs, I found her.

Kecia Wilson.

Dark haired and pale skinned, slim and short, she looked like a young librarian in her horn-rimmed glasses. I spotted her loitering in a graveled square between buildings usually reserved for Elks Lodge parking. That day there were no cars, just two rows of porta potties, six in a row lined up against the sides of the buildings, arranged by the city for its citizens' shitting convenience.

I slipped into the recessed entrance of a closed insurance office and watched as dusk deepened.

Foot traffic in and out of shit-house square was sparse and fluid, never more than a handful at a time and never for longer than it took to do their business and sanitize their hands.

Except for Kecia.

Kecia stayed on the move, never stood in one place for more than a minute, but never left the square. Like she was waiting for someone.

I was counting on that.

Kecia wasn't the person I was after that day. My night's target was a glowing example of West Paradise Valley street-shit named Phil Shepard. Kecia Wilson was a girlfriend and likely partner in crime, but I didn't have any business with her. My business was with Phil.

A skinny young skunk of a man emerged from a crowd around a tattoo booth, leaving a swath of turned heads and grimaces in his wake, and jittered his way over to her. A few moments of conversation, then she nodded curtly toward the second to last stall on the left and turned her back on him.

I watched, waited.

The young tweaker jittered his way over to the stall, hesitated, knocked.

The door opened a crack, and a few seconds later a little more. Enough to see the man inside, his face half illuminated by the flickering glow of street lamps.

Phil Shepard.

*Jackpot!*

A hand slid out, rubbed palms with the tweaker standing outside, a quick exchange, meth for cash, then withdrew.

I waited for the tweaker to clear out, then crossed the road.

A kid with a plush top hat and a cotton candy ran into me and bounced backward, falling on his ass. His carnival top hat went askew and his cotton candy hit the pavement to be trampled a moment later.

"Watch where you're going you big turd!"

The boy dusted himself off and glared at me before pounding away.

Heads turned to regard me with disapproval and disgust, Kecia among them.

*Shit!*

There are advantages to being a seven-foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty pound Indian with a face like a leather football helmet, but this wasn't one of them. Once someone noticed me, they usually kept noticing me.

Kecia marked my approach with suspicion, and gasped when I stopped and turned to face her.

"Whatchu lookin' at, dickhead?" She stared up into my face from her not quite five foot vantage point, held her ground but remained ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

I lifted the hem of my shirt, uncovered my badge and cuffs. This move also exposed a bulge in my front pocket; my insurance against the unexpected in what can sometimes be a rough-and-tumble profession.

Kecia's eyes darted from badge to cuffs to bulge, and widened in alarm.

When a young woman sees a bulge in a man's pants, the Ruger LC9 is not the kind of *Pocket Pistol* that leaps immediately to her mind, but I just let them think whatever the hell they want. The Ruger LC9 is a tiny little gun, it looked like a toy pistol in my hand. Flashing it would be more likely to elicit laughter than respect, so I leave it in its pocket holster unless I need to use it.

I've never tried to be Dirty Harry. I'd rather people didn't know I'm packing until my handy little Ruger is pointed at their nose. It looks a little less like a toy from that perspective.

"Move along please," I said, as pleasantly as I could.

She moved along, and quickly.

I watched until she was lost in the crowd, then proceeded to the magic stall.

I knocked.

"What's the word, amigo?" His voice was muffled behind the closed stall door.

*Word?*

So that was his girlfriend's job, to screen the legitimate customers from those who just needed to have a shit. The stall door was locked from the inside, no way to get at him unless he opened it.

I didn't have the word, so I knocked again.

"Ocupado, asshole!"

I knocked again.

"I said go shit somewhere else!"

I knocked again. I could keep this up all night if I needed to.

"Fuck!"

The *Occupied* sign slid to *Open* and the door followed suit.

"*You little . . .*" He stopped in mid-scream, then tilted his face up to mine.

I grabbed the door before he could pull it closed. He knew who I was, my face is hard to forget, but I spoke the words anyway. That's just the way it's done.

"Eagle Eye Bail Bonds."

He moved forward as if to run for it, and I shifted myself in front of him. For a second I thought he was going try to fight his way out, but he seemed to think better of it. People almost always panic when they realize they've been caught, and in those moments I find being large and scary looking very much to my advantage.

"You missed your court date," I said. "I gotta take you back in."

He smiled, nodded. "I figured you'd come looking for me."

He released the door and raised his arms to me, wrists close together and ready for the cuffs.

I relaxed. He was going to come quietly. I like it when things go smoothly.

His grin stretched to the edges of his acne-pitted face.

I realized belatedly that I had fucked up.

I've never been bitten in the ass by an electric eel, but if I ever am I have a good idea of what to expect.

I was reaching for my cuffs and keeping both eyes on Phil's grinning face when Kecia hit me from behind with the juice. The next several seconds were lost in a blaze of white-hot pain originating in my right ass-cheek and filling my whole body. My arms snapped down to my sides

and my jaw slammed shut. My spine did a musical kind of snap, crackle and pop as it stiffened.

Phil's smug smile faded in a wash of white light.

When I could see again I was laying in the gravel in front of the abandoned shitter, watching Phil and Kecia run toward the crowded street.

"Ditch that," Phil shouted, and snatched a short yellow wand from Kecia's hand, tossed it between the last two stalls before dragging her into the crowd. Seconds later they were gone, and I was left alone and twitching on the ground.

The party on Main Street continued unabated, only the occasional bored pedestrian glancing my way.

Someone passed my on the right, and another stepped over me on their way to Phil's abandoned stall, snickering.

Later, thirty seconds or thirty minutes maybe, all I knew for sure is that it was darker, I regained the use of my body and removed it from shit-house square. I paused only to retrieve Kecia's Wasp from where Phil had ditched it.

It was a handy little thing. Under a foot long and packing somewhere around 5,000 volts. She'd probably kept it in her bag for just such an occasion.

I decided to hold on to it, maybe for the next time I ran into Phil Shepard and his girlfriend.

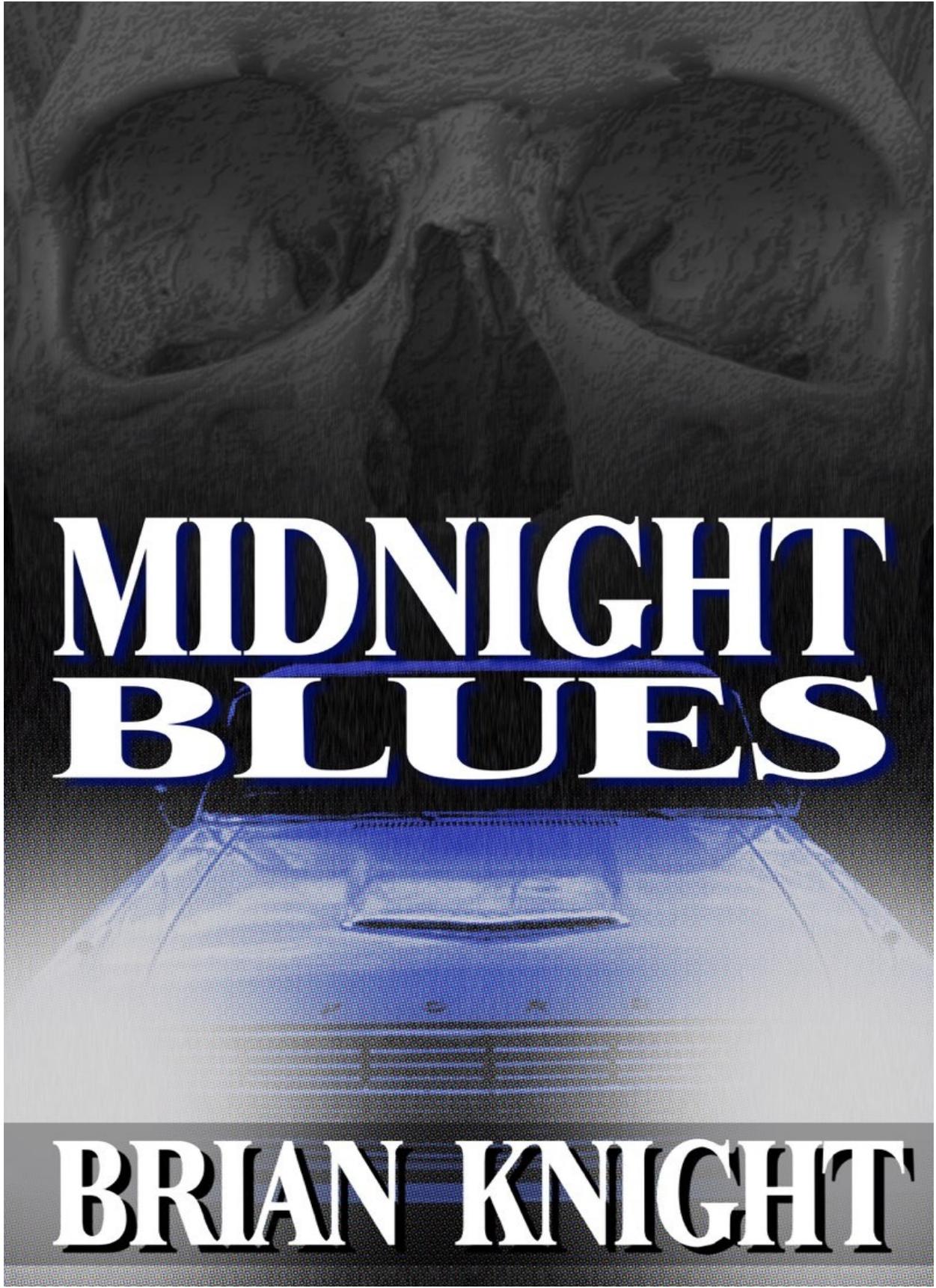
**THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES WITH SEX, DEATH, & HONEY.**

---

# MIDNIGHT BLUES

---

A Novella



**MIDNIGHT  
BLUES**

**BRIAN KNIGHT**

---

## MIDNIGHT BLUES

---

There was this little rest stop on Washington Highway 129 at the bottom of the Rattlesnake Grade, just before the Oregon border. I don't remember the place's name, but I do remember the glass front cooler beside the door in the dining area. Its shelves were stacked with Styrofoam cups, and there was a *Live Wurms* sign taped to the door. I had to re-read the sign to convince myself I'd read it right the first time.

Wurms, just like in some old sword and sorcery novel.

That was where I found the fat guy with the beard.

---

Jerry Conway sat at the booth nearest the *Wurm* cooler, alone, drinking a bottomless cup of coffee and taking minuscule bites of the greasiest hamburger he'd ever eaten. When Jeffrey Linkin pushed through the door Jerry looked up at him, marking the man quickly before returning to his meal.

Jerry hadn't seen that man in over twenty years, but recognized him at once.

Jeffrey was fatter than he'd been back then, and the years had softened what was once a great, solid looking tree trunk of a body into

swinging flaps and rolls of flab. His belly swung like a flesh pendulum beneath the hem of a stained and sweaty t-shirt. His beard, once dark brown and closely cropped, was now light brown streaked with gray, grown half way down his mammoth chest.

Jeffrey's bulging, reddened eyes fell over Jerry for a moment before seeking out the woman behind the register. He hadn't recognized the old man, or the old car parked outside. A woman, slightly shorter, slightly fatter, followed him inside, and the blessed silence died badly under a barrage of her complaints.

"Shut the fuck up, woman. Get us some worms," Jeffrey said, dropping a slab of an arm on the counter and scanning the reader board.

"You're not gonna make me touch the slimy sum-bitches!" Jeffrey's woman turned and slammed belly first into the back of Jerry's chair, crushing him against his table. Coffee splashed over the side of his cup, wetting the table and his cold french fries.

"Hey, watch it," she squawked.

"Got a problem, gramps?" Jeffrey abandoned his perusal of the menu and strode toward Jerry.

"No problem," Jerry said once he'd recovered his lost breath. He smiled politely at Jeffrey, then turned to the woman. "Beg your pardon, ma'am."

The woman, not Jeffrey's wife he saw, she wore no band, seemed satisfied. She didn't accept his apology, but contented herself with one last irritated look, before turning to the worm cooler.

Jeffrey stood over Jerry a moment longer, his steady, empty gaze as much a threat as his balled up fists.

As a young man, Jeffrey had been handsome, could have passed for a young, fat Alan Alda, but the years and an undisciplined lifestyle had turned him ugly. Just past forty, and his face was wrinkled, the skin rough and blotchy. His nose was crooked and bulbous, busted capillaries

wound across it and his cheeks like a spider's web.

Jerry saw the cashier in his periphery, watching Jeffrey warily as she stepped toward the wall-mounted phone.

At last, Jeffrey's fists relaxed, and he returned to the counter.

Jerry finished his burger at his leisure, thanking the waitress when she returned to wipe up his spilled coffee and offer a refill.

The silence that held before Jeffrey's arrival did not return, his woman kept up a steady stream of chatter, which Jeffrey replied to with the occasional grunt.

Much of what she prattled on about was pure, blithering nonsense, but what he could make sense of only confirmed what he already knew.

They were taking advantage of the first hot summer days to camp and fish the Grand Ronde River.

"Gotta drop a load. Try not to fuck anyone while I'm gone." Jeffrey laughed at her caw of indignation and rose, not even glancing Jerry's way as they passed each other, Jeffrey moving toward the door and the bathroom entrance around the side of the restaurant, Jerry on his way to the register to pay.

The heat outside was like a hammer blow to the chest after the restaurant's cool interior.

Jerry walked to his car, the old Falcon that had taken him across so many miles, stopped beside it, and laid his hand over the hot metal of the hood. It burned, but Jerry did not remove his hand. He took in the pain like nourishment, closing his eyes against the glair of the afternoon sun.

When he opened them again, the metal beneath his hand had changed; the faded and weathered blue now vibrant and glossy as it had been the day he bought it. Sitting in the passenger seat, smiling and beckoning him, was the love of his life. His Betty.

Unable to accept this as he had the pain of hot metal beneath his hand, Jerry closed his eyes again. When he opened them again, Betty was

gone. The upholstery of her empty seat was faded, torn, worn. Cracks forked across the dash pad. The paint was faded and chipped.

The Falcon's fresh off the lot days were well behind it, as were his.

And Betty was no longer with him.

Jerry walked to the east end of the restaurant building, shaded from the early afternoon sun, and stopped outside the bathroom door.

He heard a grunt from within, then another sound too wet to be a fart.

Jerry opened the door and stepped inside.

A urinal and sink were crammed between the wall and the closed stall door. Jerry saw his face in the cracked mirror over the sink and quickly looked away.

"That you, thunder cunt?" Jeffrey spoke from inside the stall, punctuating with another wet, splattering sound. "That you baby? Got a blumkin for papa?"

*Blumkin?*

Jerry pulled the stall door open, drawing a straight razor from his back pocket as he stepped inside.

"What the fuck?" Jeffrey shouted, more in surprise than anger, then grunted in pain when Jerry stomped on his foot, pinning it to the floor.

Jerry grabbed a fistful of beard with his left hand and yanked up hard, lifting the man's chin and exposing his throat.

Before the fat man could make another sound, Jerry finished him.

A single stroke opened the man's fat throat, and the last of his breath whistled out through spraying blood. Jerry jumped back in time to avoid most of it, only his his arms and the toes of his boots were splattered by the spray.

The spraying tapered off to a flow, and the flow to a trickle. The fat man's pump finally gave up.

Jerry bent down in front of Jeffrey's blood drenched lap, slipped on a

latex glove, and cringed as he reached beneath the man's hanging gut and grabbed his penis. A second slice with the razor severed it. Jerry dropped it between the man's thighs into the toilet bowl, straightened with a cringe, and flushed.

He cleaned his spattered arms and razor in the sink, then walked to the Falcon.

He was gone before Jeffrey was missed.

---

I hadn't thought about that car, or about Betty, in years. I blocked it, I suppose. Didn't want to remember it. Couldn't cope with the memory of what happened that night so long ago. Maybe it was my failing as a husband that pushed those memories back into the dungeons of my subconscious. My ultimate failure as a husband and a man.

My cowardice drove me to forget.

Then all at once, long after my second marriage ended in divorce, well into my third bachelorhood and old age, the dreams started.

They have not stopped.

Those memories and images plague my waking hours, memories of my first bride, my only true love. Betty. Snapshot images of what happened that night, and the old Ford Falcon.

---

Lester Key was a short kid with a thin mustache and a letterman jacket, Jerry learned later that he'd stolen it from a high school football player at knifepoint because he liked the colors.

Jerry found him in a little town outside of Boise, Idaho. Mountain Home, it was called. A small desert town, not a single mountain for

miles.

Lester was a salesman in a Ford dealership, of all places.

Jerry cruised the lot until he found a parking spot, then killed the Falcon's engine. The digital ticker sign on the dealership's sign alternated between a short list of the previous year's models currently on sale – Unbelievable Deals on Brand New Wheels! – and the time and temperature, which was five fifteen PM and a whopping one hundred and ten degrees respectively.

Sweat dripped from the tip of Jerry's narrow nose as he stepped out of the Falcon. It could have been a symptom of the sickness growing in him with such agonizing slowness, but it was probably just the heat.

"I'll be damned! Look at that!"

Jerry turned and saw a man walking toward him, his shape wavering with the heat that baked up from the blacktop.

The salesman, lines of sweat streaking his face, gawked at the Falcon, then grinned at Jerry. "Now that, sir, is an honest to God classic."

He stepped forward and took one of Jerry's skeletal hands between his own, giving it a few vigorous pumps before dropping it and drawing away with barely masked disgust on his face.

Jerry knew the look well. It wasn't the first time he'd seen it. His skin was far too pale, with the sticky cold texture of dead fish, and there was far too little meat covering the bones beneath it. The hands of a horror movie monster, or a corpse.

Jerry couldn't blame the man at all for the slight shudder and involuntary backward step.

The salesman recovered quickly enough. "You just don't see too many of these old birds flying around anymore. No one gave a damn about them once the Mustangs came out. Now you can't throw a rock without hitting an old Mustang, but the Falcon is one rare bird."

The man stepped aside and drew Jerry's eyes to a row of new cars

parked behind him with a gesture. "The new Mustangs are something else though. Nice lines and more balls than a nigger at a Klan rally."

He paused, giving Jerry a moment to appreciate an obviously well tested joke. When Jerry didn't laugh, he pushed on. "I just thank God they didn't try to remake the Pinto."

This time Jerry did smile, a pathetic imitation of good humor, and nodded his agreement.

"So, what can I do you for?" The man fell smoothly back into his pitch. "Looking to trade up? Maybe take a ride in the new and improved Mustang?"

"Maybe," Jerry allowed, but held up a withered hand, the salesman flinched back another step from it, to stop the man before he invested too much more energy in him. "I'm here to see Lester Key. A friend referred me to him."

The salesman's Good-Golly Miss-Molly grin melted at the corners, melting wax in the late summer heat. It passed briefly through stunned disbelief before landing smack-dab in fuck off and die country. His stake in Jerry officially at an end, he dropped his routine and stalked back into the dealership's glass faced reception area. A moment later, Lester Key came out, seeming to wilt in the heat.

Jerry knew him at once, could see the Lester of years past in the man's tired face. It was unsettling. Jerry never knew when he was seeing things true anymore. Stouter than he'd been as a young man, and without the pebble attempt at a mustache, but his face had not aged much in the decades since Jerry had seen him last.

"Afternoon, Mr..." Lester offered his hand, not seizing Jerry's as his go-getter counterpart had, but waiting for Jerry to close the handshake.

Jerry accepted the offered hand, but did not offer his name.

"Lee Thomas recommended you," Jerry said, throwing out the name of an old school friend, long departed for the greener pastures of the

Seattle Metropolitan area. As far as Jerry knew, his old chum had never been anywhere near Mountain Home. "You sold him a car a few years back."

Lester grimaced through the handshake, but endured it. He was honestly and openly perplexed, but accepted the story with a shrug. "Don't recall your friend, but I'd be more than happy to sell you a car."

"To be honest, I do like the looks of those new Mustangs, but I'd go for just about anything so long as it came with air conditioning."

Lester twitched his gaze to the Falcon for a fraction of a second before shielding his eyes to scan the lot. Then, as if the old car had sunk hooks into him, working him like a marionette, his eyes snapped back to it. His heat-flushed cheeks went ashy, and the sweat dried on his brow as if he'd gone suddenly cold.

When he spoke to Jerry again, there was a tremor in his voice. "Do I know you?"

Jerry shook his head slowly, sudden moves often spawned headaches that lasted hours, and said, "No sir, but this isn't the first time I've heard that question. I guess I just have one of those faces."

Jerry smiled, and Lester returned the smile, but there wasn't much comfort reflected in the gesture.

"I'm partial to blue, if you have one in that color."

---

This is not the same man, Jerry thought, feeling something closer to regret than pity tug at his old heart.

Lester Key was a timid, awkward mouse of a man. Jerry wondered how he made a living as a salesman. There was little small talk as Jerry drove, and no sales pitch.

"Mind if I take it out on the highway?" Jerry asked even as he entered

the onramp to highway 84.

Lester looked uncertain, uneasy. He glanced at his wristwatch, then at Jerry. Their eyes met for just a moment before Lester began to squirm in his seat. They were already on the highway when he replied.

“Sure, but we only have a quarter tank, so we can’t go far.”

This felt like the bachelor’s equivalent of *My wife is expecting me soon* to Jerry, a way of telling Jerry to make it quick, while warning him that the Mustang didn’t have enough miles in it to bother stealing.

*Maybe I’m just reading too much into it.*

“We don’t need to go far,” Jerry assured him, offering up the harmless old man’s smile once more.

“So, how long have you owned the Falcon?”

“About a year,” Jerry said truthfully. “Thought I might try to restore it, but my health isn’t so good these days, and it’s just too much work.”

The late summer sun hung low on the western horizon, nearly blinding them. Traffic on their stretch of desert highway was sparse. Behind them, headlights flashed on, then off again.

Jerry saw a sign ahead pointing the way to Bruneau Dunes, and eased his way onto the off ramp.

“Ready to head back?” Lester asked.

“Just about,” Jerry conceded.

“Then have we sold you the Mustang?”

“Just about,” Jerry said again, offering a slight nod.

Jerry wasn’t impressed with the fancy new car. It was comfortable, and cool, yes, but there were far too many gadgets in it. It was fast and handled well, but it was such an impersonal piece of machinery. A good automobile was a work of art. This thing looked more like a spaceship than a car, something right out of Star Trek.

They turned onto a patched and pitted two-lane road, putting the highway in his rear view mirror. Far behind them, another car exited the

highway, but otherwise they were alone.

“Don’t know how much we can offer you for trade in on that old Falcon, but Steve had an eye on it. You could probably get a better deal if you tried to sell it to him outright.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jerry said, slowing as they approached a historical site pullout with the history of Bruneau Dune on a large sign. *Largest moving sand dune in North America*, the sign proclaimed.

“Excuse me?” Lester’s confidence faltered.

“The Falcon isn’t for sale,” Jerry elaborated, stopping in front of the sign.

Before Lester could say another word, Jerry pulled his razor from his pocket and flipped the blade out. Old age and cancer had made Jerry sick, and it had made him tired. It gave him headaches and robbed him of his strengths, but it had not made them slow.

Lester screamed as Jerry lunged at his, swiping the razor at his throat. He raised his hands over his face, and Jerry’s blade opened him at the wrists.

Jerry sliced again, and again, Lester swatting feebly at the blade. New cuts opened on his palms and arms.

Lester shrieked and bled, making a mess of the new Mustang’s clean interior.

Tiring of the game, Jerry changed direction with his last lunge, aiming low and puncturing Lester’s belly, then unzipping the man’s guts with a single, upward slice.

Lester moaned, sobbed nonsensicals, determinately stuffing his own guts back into his open cavity while Jerry unzipped his fly.

His hands were already bloody, but Jerry pulled a latex glove out of his pocket and slipped it over his right hand. He gripped Lester’s shriveled penis with his gloved hand, stretched it out, and cut it off.

Holding Lester’s member out with two fingers like something dead,

Jerry pulled the clean ashtray open, then dropped it inside and slid it shut.

Lester opened the driver's side door and fell to the dirt outside, but Jerry ignored him, carefully wiping down the steering wheel, stick shift, dash, and door handle with his bloody, gloved hand. When he finished, the cab was painted with blood, but any fingerprints he might have been left would be spoiled.

He wiped his blade clean on the passenger's seat, and cringing with his many aches, climbed out of the Mustang.

Lester had crawled several feet, leaving ropes of his own guts behind him, but was still now.

Parked behind the new Mustang, the old Falcon idled.

Empty, and waiting.

---

"Oh, how cute!"

Jerry recognized the voice, but it took him a moment to place its owner. The neighbor girl, the fairer half of the young couple who lived next door to him. "Look at Mr. Conway."

You could assume, as I did, that she was referring to the Falcon rather than its owner. Let me tell you, there's nothing at all cute about a sick, scrawny, seventy-plus old man with a bad back rolling around on the concrete beneath his car.

Seventy-plus going on ninety, thanks to our friend, The Big C.

I was honestly surprised she even knew my name. I had only spoken to them a few times in the months they lived next to me, and only in passing. *Good morning, beautiful day*, things of that nature.

Her man grunted, dismissal, disinterest, admiration, it was hard to tell. He was a classic car guy, but his taste was more in the line of

hotrods, like his 67' Barracuda.

A moment later the very same 'Cuda roared to life, then laid rubber out of their driveway.

That kid knew his cars. That 'Cuda was a real nice ride.

I took a short rest, laying the back of my head against the cool concrete, and waited for my muscles to quit throbbing.

It was late spring, a year before the summer of Jeffrey Linkin and Lester Key. I'd driven the Falcon home only a month earlier, but kept it inside the garage. It was the first any of my neighbor's saw it.

The Falcon was in running condition, but just barely. The interior, still mostly original, was a mess. Someone had replaced the old 144 straight six engine and original Ford-O-Matic transmission with a slightly newer 170 straight six and C4 tranny. Both were leaking profusely, I had to lay down towels under it to keep the spilt fluid and oil mess to a minimum.

The carburetor was out of tune, the suspension in ruins, bushings and shocks blown, but the body and chassis were straight as an arrow.

I worked on the Falcon every day, draining my savings to pay for hard to find salvage and mail order parts. I worked on it most nights too, when the fear of dreaming kept me awake and my midnight blues set in.

Midnight Blues. Betty's favorite old blues song.

I smiled and closed my eyes for a moment, not sleeping, but daydreaming of sleep.

Working on the Falcon soothed me. It was like being with her again. Besides, what else is a retired English teacher going to do with his spare time? Read? I've read all my old books a dozen times over the years, and there was nothing new worth reading.

That was the first decent, warm spring day of the year. Sunny, clear, with birdsong and the industrious sounds of a neighborhood come to life after its winter hibernation.

I had accomplished a lot by then, but still had more to do.

I was replacing the missing transmission inspection plate that morning, still without any clear idea of why I'd undertaken the expensive restoration to begin with. I hadn't taken it out of the driveway since bringing it home, and didn't really plan to. I still had my driver's license, but hadn't registered the Falcon, and hadn't planned to. I hadn't driven my last car much in the previous few years. I preferred the buss.

Something compelled me, that's all I knew, and so I did it. An old man's nostalgia maybe, driven by buried memories only recently unearthed in uneasy dreams. Maybe it was the thing growing in my brain, messing with the wiring up there.

My motivation didn't interest me much. It was a triviality, nothing more. If there was any real reason for doing it beyond sentimentality or sickness, it had not declared itself to me yet.

It was a way to pass the time, and better than frumping around the house, watching bad television programs, or waiting for my daughter, a child of my first marriage, to call. She never does.

"Hey, mister!"

This voice I didn't recognize, so I ignored it.

"Hey you, under the car!"

Clenching the final plate bolt in my hand, I slid out from under the raised front end and sat up. My back ached, my arms throbbed, and my head pounded. Once this job was finished, I would take a long, medicated nap.

I caught my reflection in the Falcon's chromed front bumper and almost laughed. Old motor oil coated my face and hands. I looked like a bad blackface actor in an old movie.

The boy was ten, give or take, scrawny, with bushy brown hair and glasses perched crookedly on his nose. His clothes, a white t-shirt and faded blue jeans, were grass stained. The boy was familiar, but only vaguely.

“Need your lawn mowed?”

I looked over the front yard briefly, and yes, it was a little overgrown. Not bad, it was still early spring, but if I hadn't been occupied with other things I would have done it myself already.

To tell the truth, it was refreshing to see a young man earning his coin instead of sitting in front of the idiot-tube, though I suspected the boy's work ethic had more to do with the man behind the wheel of the nearby truck than ambition.

I knew shirtsleeve poor when I saw it.

“Why not,” I said rising slowly to accommodate my griping back. “How much do you charge?”

The boy eyeballed the front yard. “Fifteen for the front. I'll have to see the back to say.”

A little steep I thought, but what the hell do I know? I had only earned a quarter per yard at his age.

“Just the front,” I said. I could do the back yard myself for the prices he charged, but I'd give him fifteen for the front. A working kid deserves a break.

He mowed while I finished with the inspection plate, ensuring my transmission wouldn't go to pieces over something as minor as a piece of gravel. That was the last of the dirty work. Everything from there on out, from replacing the upholstery and cracked dash pad to cleaning the rust off the rear quarter panels, was mostly cosmetic.

The old Falcon ran about as good as I could make it run.

I went indoors to wash up in the kitchen, and watched the boy finish his work from the window over the sink.

The boy seemed not just vaguely familiar now, but very familiar. Still, I couldn't remember how I knew him.

I grabbed a cold soda for the boy. I didn't drink them, the carbonation killed my stomach, but I kept them around for my daughter's rare visits.

While I put my tools away and backed the Falcon off the tire ramps, the boy finished.

“Nice car, mister,” he said, but the expression on his face clearly belied the compliment. It was the look of a man who is trapped in an elevator with a bad fart, and is trying hard not to shame the farter.

Maybe he was trying to be polite, even in this day and age there are a few polite children, or maybe he was angling for a tip.

The cold soda would have to do for a tip. Fifteen dollars was quite enough pay for the pitiful square of grass the boy had cut.

While I paid the boy, his father stowed the mower in the bed of his truck.

He was very tall, six and a half feet at least, gangly, with an uncombed mop of brown hair.

His hair was longer than the last time I had seen it, and thinner. His face had not changed much. It was whiskery, bland, forgettable, except for that one crazy eye that always seemed to stare somewhere over your left shoulder.

“You okay mister?”

I wasn't sure if I was or not, and couldn't have answered anyway. Seeing that face again was like a blow to the chest, stealing my breath.

Next to me, the Falcon started. Not the choppy cough and hum of an old engine comfortable with its downgraded role in the automotive world, tired, but still happy to serve. It was the full-throated roar of a street rod, ready and anxious to eat pavement. It lurched forward, stopping at the end of my driveway, its horn beeping.

The man, Al Killroe, screamed, scrambling backward, away from the Falcon.

He looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

A very angry ghost.

Then he looked at me, his eyes popping wide in our shared

recognition, and fled back to his truck.

The boy, Al's son, ran too. His soda spilled to the blacktop as he struggled to boost himself inside.

They sped away, before he'd managed to close his door.

Beside me, the Falcon gave one last blast from its horn, then quieted, the engine dying.

I parked the Falcon back in the garage, pulling the battery cables before rolling the door down and stepping inside my house. I spent the rest of the day frumping around the house, watching bad television programs, and sitting in my easy chair, thinking about something that wasn't quite fate, but was almost like it.

It was a textbook term I've heard from a few pseudo-intellectuals from my old school's science department, more philosophy than science.

*Synchronicity.*

The quantum physicists believed in it anyway.

I myself was beginning to wonder.

The dreams, the memories, the Falcon. Then, out of nowhere after three decades, the man.

Al Killroe.

Everything coming together at once.

I fell asleep sitting in my old, sprung chair and dreamed of cruising in the old Falcon when it, and I, were still fairly new, and Betty still cruised beside me.

When I awoke later that night ...

---

When Jerry awoke, he was sitting behind the Falcon's steering wheel, parked in the furthest, darkest corner of a scuzzy roadside bar parking lot. Bad country karaoke poured from the front doors like stale beer as

people came and went, arriving in singles or as part of large groups, leaving mostly in pairs.

*I can't remember the last time I saw so many ugly belt buckles and big cowboy hats.*

Jerry sat quietly for a while, trying to remember how and when he'd come to this place.

The why of it was perfectly obvious.

Parked fifty feet away in a row of cars hidden from the highway by a neon billboard, was a familiar pickup truck.

The neon lettering on the billboard identified the cowboy karaoke dive as *Stateline Saloon*.

Stateline, an area spanning a few miles of Idaho's northern border with Washington, was nearly a hundred miles from his home.

Jerry glanced at the fuel gauge and saw the needle resting just below the half tank mark. No more or less than that morning when he'd driven it out of the garage.

Another mystery for another time, Jerry decided.

The object folded in his hand, smooth wooden handle and cold steel. He knew exactly what it was and what he was going to do with it.

His shaving razor.

Clutching the razor in his right hand, Jerry stepped from the Falcon and walked to Al Killroe's truck, keeping as much as he could in the shadows.

For a moment, it seemed, he had the parking lot to himself.

Jerry tried the passenger door, found it unlocked, and swung it wide. The front of Al's dual cab looked like someone had upended a dumpster inside it. Fast food wrappers, empty cigarette boxes, soda cans, and an assortment of odd trash littered the floor and front passenger seat. The dual cab's back seat was better, so Jerry slid into it, closed the door behind him, and lay down on his side.

He dozed.

Sometime later, two minutes or two hours, could have been either, Jerry awoke. Voices outside, a man and a woman.

Arguing, angry.

“Go fuck yourself!” The woman’s voice offered this suggestion, and cut Al’s comeback short by slamming her car door between them.

The sound of an engine firing up, the glow of headlights washing over Al’s truck, then a gradual return to darkness as she left him behind.

Jerry waited, tense muscles aching.

Then at last the door opened and light flooded the cab.

Jerry expected Al to discover him immediately, but the man did not.

He was far too drunk, and only just managed to tumble through his open door and drag himself inside.

Long seconds passed, and Jerry thought the man had passed out.

A shame. That was not how Jerry wanted this to happen. Jerry wanted Al to see him, wanted him to be awake and aware.

The sound of retching, the acrid, sour smell of puke filled the cab, and Al sat up with a groan, pulling the door shut as he fumbled the keys.

The cab’s dome light winked out, and Jerry rose.

Al fired the engine, reached for column shifter, and froze when he saw Jerry’s face in the rear view mirror.

The buzz and hum of the truck’s CD player spinning a disc, then music filled the cab. Not country but something hellishly loud and incomprehensibly fast. The singer screamed the song’s lyrics.

Al screamed along with them.

Jerry grabbed a fistful of the man’s hair, yanked back, and flipped the blade from the razor’s handle.

Al’s eyes , Jerry could see them reflected back at him in the rearview mirror, followed the razor’s progress toward his throat until it passed from his field of vision.

Jerry had a moment to wonder when he had last sharpened the blade, but needn't have worried. The edge parted the skin of Al's throat and sliced through his cables with surprising ease, nicking something that might have been Al's vertebrae as he finished the stroke.

Blood sprayed the truck's windshield and dashboard in dark fans.

Jerry held Al's head firmly against the headrest, letting the open wound bleed out until he was positive the job was finished. Before leaving, he unbuckled the dead man's pants, grimacing in disgust as he pulled out the man's penis.

He cut it off at the base of the shaft, and before leaving wiped down every surface, he might have touched with a greasy napkin from the floor.

Jerry spun the cap off the truck's diesel tank and pushed Al's penis down its throat.

The bar started to empty as Jerry crossed the parking lot, the pack's drunken chorus of singing, shouts, and laughter overcoming Al's hideous music.

Jerry weaved between staggering drunks and badly parked cars, and just before trading the gravel and dust of the parking lot for the highway's blacktop, the Falcon's lights winked out.

When they lit up again a second later, he was pulling into his own driveway

---

Cancer moves slowly in the old, or so the doctors tell me. After almost two years of walking around with this thing in my head, I'm inclined to believe them. I'm getting sicker and weaker by slow degrees, but I'm still getting older too, so who's to say it's the cancer killing me?

The bottom line is, at this point old age is as likely to kill me as the

tumor in my brain.

The things the doctors do blame the tumor for are my frequent bouts with insomnia and the clarity with which old memories now come back to me. They liken these flashes to hallucinations. They feel more like trips back in time to me.

Worse than the sleeplessness and hallucinations, if that's what they are, are the blank moments. Sometimes only minutes or hours, other times complete days.

That thing in my head is screwing things up, shorting my brain out one synapse at a time.

During one of my blank spells, the longest clocking in at over a week, the young couple next door moved out and a single, middle-aged man replaced them. Also during this blank time, the Falcon's torn upholstery was restored, and the cracked dash pad replaced. During another, the Falcon's old AM radio started working again.

After yet another, only a few hours long by the time on the digital watch I'd taken to wearing to clock my blank spells, I awoke sitting behind the Falcon's steering wheel. The cracked and darkened enamel under my hands looked new again, a flawless, clean white.

I was whispering a name over and over again.

Patrick Miles.

The first road sign I passed identified the dark stretch of road as Montana state highway 90. A mile later there was another welcoming me to Livingston. Livingston, Montana was a nine-hour drive from my home.

Patrick Miles.

Somehow, I was not at all surprised that I knew exactly where to find him.

The Falcon had told me.

---

The old blue Falcon wound an almost random path through Livingston's business and residential districts. After a half-hour of blind cruising, Jerry found himself on a dark street at the far end of town. Old houses lined the littered streets, a few abandoned and on the verge of total ruin. The street dead-ended in a gravel cul-de-sac where Jerry turned around, then parked. He turned his headlights off and waiting.

A half-block away, a young woman pulled laundry from a clothesline. She wore a simple white dress white dress with a black scarf and boots. Black hair fell down her shoulders and over her forehead in waves, and her pale skin seemed to glow in the light from her front porch. Even from a half-block away, Jerry saw her bright red lips. Full lips, lips that could steal a man's heart and sanity with a single kiss.

Jerry knew if he were close enough to see the color of her eyes, they would be the bright and striking pale blue of arctic ice at sunrise. He had first seen that color one summer working on a fishing boat in Alaska. The second time was when he'd first looked into her eyes.

Betty's eyes.

Only the strangeness of the surrounding neighborhood convinced Jerry this was not another waking dream. He had never before been to Livingston, Montana.

Then the headlights came, blinding, burning away the image of the woman at her clothesline. The sulfur stink of the man's rattletrap truck preceded him, and just when Jerry wondered if the man meant to ram the Falcon, he turned left, vanishing through a part in the trees, toward the river on Livingston's southern border.

Jerry waited another five minutes, watching the woman pull laundry from her lines and pile it into a wicker basket, then followed the truck down a narrow dirt path, the Falcon's headlights turned off.

Patrick's truck idled at the end of a concrete boat ramp, only feet away from the water's edge. The thing sounded tired, an abused thing nearing the end of its life. Its headlights lit the water. Patrick sat in a folding chair in front of it, a beer in one hand and a fishing rod in the other.

If Patrick had heard the Falcon's approach, and with his own truck still running Jerry didn't think he had, he gave no notice. Some sixth sense alerted him to the presence of another though, and he turned to see Jerry walking beside the concrete ramp toward him.

"Hey now," Patrick greeted, cheerily enough. He raised his beer hand in salute, then finished the can off in a long, sloppy gulp before dropping it to the dirt beside another just like it.

"Evening," Jerry said. "Good night for a fishing trip. Any luck?"

"Yep," Patrick said, squinting in Jerry's direction, half blinded by the truck's lights. He held up an empty fish stringer and smiled. "It's all bad luck though."

Jerry returned his smile. "Bad luck indeed."

Patrick waved it off and traded the stringer for a fresh beer from the cooler beside his chair. "Not the point anyhow. Gettn' away from folks and enjoying the peace of the river is what's it's all about. The fish are only a bonus."

Jerry nodded, started forward again.

"Join me?" Patrick held out the beer to Jerry, and the old man paused for a moment, almost startled.

"Thanks for the offer," he said at last. "Have to decline though. Had some bad health the past few years. I had to give up my vices."

Jerry stopped behind the man, his scrawny frame blocking some of the glair.

Patrick popped the top on the can's tab and took a long drink. "I'll have one for both of us then. You come here to kill me too?"

Jerry said nothing, just stood, folded straight razor cupped in his palm.

“Eh, sure you did. Didn’t think nothin’ of Al getting his clock punched, somebody was gonna do it eventually. When I heard about Jeffrey, I had to wonder a little. He never had the brains God gave a box of rocks, that guy. Loved trouble, but it got me thinking about old times.”

He tipped the can back again, drank deeply, then dropped the empty can.

“Then there was little Lester. Lester the Molester, we called him back in school.” Patrick chuckled. “He went straight, stayed out of trouble. When I heard about Lester, I figured it couldn’t be long until you came for me too.”

“How’d you know it was me?” Not a denial, just curiosity. Jerry tightened his grip on the razor’s handle.

“Who the fuck else?” Patrick gave Jerry a look of mild contempt. *Do I look like an idiot?*

He turned back to the water and reeled his line in.

“Why though?” Patrick set his fishing rod aside and turned slightly in his chair to regard Jerry. “After all these years I mean. Why now?”

“Couldn’t say,” Jerry said.

Patrick shrugged, a gesture that seemed to say *what the hell does it matter anyway?* “I haven’t forgotten what I did to ...”

“Don’t you dare say her name.”

Patrick chuckled.

“Still sore after all these years? I ain’t forgotten what I done. Lord knows I tried, but I can’t. Things like that didn’t seem like a big deal when I was a kid, but it looks like I’ve grown a conscious.” He popped the top on another beer. “It true you cut off their pricks?”

Jerry nodded, edged a thumb onto the flat of the blade.

“Well, much as I deserve it, I can’t let it happen that way.”

Jerry stepped forward, flipping the razor open with a flick of his wrist, then stopped.

Patrick's fishing rod hand suddenly held a gun.

Patrick raised the gun to his temple without another word.

Behind Jerry, the Falcon revved, flashed its lights, honked.

Startled at the fatal moment, Patrick's hand flinched as he pulled the trigger, and the shot that should have taken the top of his head off tore his face off. His eyes and nose vanished in a spray, leaving a dripping ruin where they had been.

The blast toppled Patrick sideways out of his chair. His shrieks rang painfully in Jerry's head. Somewhere in the distance, a dog howled in reply.

Horrified, but determined to finish the night's work, Jerry knelt over Patrick, pinning his flailing arms beneath his knees. He plucked the gun from Patrick's hand, then brought the razor to his throat.

"Drop the gun!" A voice sounded from the darkness behind them.  
"Drop it now!"

Jerry searched for the source of the voice, but couldn't find it.

A blast sounded, the slug kicking up dirt and concrete chips before buzzing off across the river.

*Hope no one was over there.*

Jerry tossed the gun aside before the fool could throw another slug.

The man stepped from the darkness, his pistol trained on Jerry.

"Don't you fucking move," he said, dialing out on the cell phone in his other hand.

Jerry palmed the razor again as the man closed in, legs tensed to spring or sprint.

"Yes, I'm at the south-east sportsman's access. Someone's shot. I have the shooter." The man paused, looked past Jerry. "Send an ambulance too. I think the guy is still alive."

Jerry shifted his gaze back to Patrick, and yes, the man was still alive. His screaming had stopped. His breath came and went in short, sharp gasps. His whole body trembled.

“Enjoy the show, you filthy old bastard? Like looking at other men’s wives?”

The Falcon revved, distracting the man for a second. Not long enough for Jerry to think about moving though, so he didn’t try.

“Filthy, sneaking old cocksucker,” now that the shock of discovery was fading Jerry could see real rage in the man’s eyes. “You like what you saw?”

Jerry said nothing. He had enjoyed it, and this man knew it.

“Be a few more minutes before the cops show. More’n enough time to pop you between the eyes and put that gun back in your hand.”

The man meant to do it too, Jerry could see it in his eyes.

The Falcon roared forward, skirting the old truck, headlights blazing to life.

The man spun around, firing a shot in reflex, Jerry shouted in outrage when he heard the slug pierce metal, and the Falcon ran him down.

His screams ended abruptly as the front wheel veered onto his head, squashing it like a melon. It came to a stop with its chromed bumper touching the truck’s fender.

For a moment Jerry stood, facing the Falcon.

The headlights dimmed slightly, then brightened again.

Patrick moaned, and Jerry returned to the business of the night.

Crouching over the man once more, Jerry drew the razor and placed it on Patrick’s throat.

Patrick whispered.

Keeping the razor close to his throat, Jerry leaned closer to listen.

“Watch your ass,” the dying, faceless man whispered. “Macker knows too.”

Jerry finished him with a single stroke of the razor, and while the man bled out, unzipped his fly and pulled his pants town to his knees.

The Falcon seemed to growl in approval.

When he was finished, Jerry threw Patrick's penis as far out into the water as he could, and rose again to find the Falcon's passenger door standing open.

It honked, once, and Jerry climbed in. The door closed itself behind him. Before he could slide into the driver's seat, the Falcon moved on its own.

It backed in a tight arch, throwing a rooster tail of dirt as it passed the idling truck and tore down the trail.

Lights appeared ahead, a steady blinding white and strobing blue and red.

*"Stop the vehicle now and exit with your hands up!"*

The Falcon sped up and Jerry watched in shock as the accelerator flattened to the floor.

*"Stop now!"*

"Easy now, old girl." Jerry's voice tremored. He braced a hand against the dash, preparing for impact.

The Falcon honked once, as if in reply, then flashed its brights at the officers.

Two shots fired in almost perfect unison as the Falcon's headlights went dark.

Jerry waited, eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the impact of steel on steel and lead on flesh.

The impact did not come.

The Falcon, slowed, then stopped.

When Jerry opened his eyes again he was parked in his own garage, holding the dashboard in a death grip.

The Falcon's engine purred.

---

For a few seconds I only sat there, feeling the usual sense of dislocation. My body and senses were in the garage with the Falcon, but my mind was still somewhere in Montana, rushing headlong toward death at the hands of Livingston's finest.

My heart hammered in my ears, my head pounded. I felt woozy, sleepy.

My eyes slipped shut. I forced them open and found Betty sitting beside me in the driver's seat.

Her head drooped, her eyes slipped shut.

Panic flared and I lunged across the cab, over a seat where Betty no longer sat, and turned off the ignition.

Carbon monoxide poisoning had already affected me, but I had the strength left to open the door and slide out onto the cool concrete of the garage floor. I crawled to the garage door, clawed my way up the wall, and hit the open button.

Once outside in the open air, I collapsed. It was several long moments before my head cleared and my legs would support me again. When I was able to stand again, I looked into the garage, and saw back in time.

---

Jerry took in the scene, a horribly familiar one, with welling dread. It was the same garage, but with subtle differences. The workbench was clean and organized, rarely used and always put back in perfect order when he did use it. Boxes of Christmas ornaments stacked against the far wall bore dust, but not the signs of seasons upon seasons of age that would darken the cardboard in years to come. The garage was clean, the colors

somehow brighter and sharper.

The Falcon, *Midnight Blues* Betty called it after her favorite old blues song was also clean and in near new condition despite the years it already had on it. The paint was vivid, the color of a clear evening sky rather than the darker hue of midnight, but that didn't matter to Betty. The car was *Midnight Blues*, that was all.

The sickening stink of exhaust overcame the fresh cut summer grass, blades of which still clung to his pants.

*Is that what I was doing while she killed herself? Mowing the lawn?*

He'd forgotten that.

He'd forgotten a great many things, but they were all coming back to him now in his twilight. The midnight blues at the end of a life he'd grown weary of years before.

Jerry, a much younger Jerry free from the aches and cripples of old age, sprinted to the Falcon's driver side door, yanked it open, and pulled his wife out.

"Betty!"

She did not respond. Didn't even acknowledge him.

He slapped her face, shook her. "Betty!"

He knew she couldn't hear him. She was already gone.

---

I don't know if I shouted right out loud, but I think I must have. My throat burned and my eyes stung with fresh tears. The same tears that had fallen over three decades ago, and never once since.

I knelt at the open door, a weak old man in the grip of a devastating total recall.

The Falcon idled.

*We aren't finished yet, Jerry ... more to do still .*

Fresh air wafted in from the open bay door, diluting the stale and deadly atmosphere.

A circle of cold steel pressed against the back of my head.

“Hey there old guy,” Macker said, crouching down beside me. “Been get’n ‘round, haven’t you? Been out settling a few old scores?”

“I have,” Jerry said. “Down to one by my count.”

A short moment of complete silence, then, “You got Pat?”

“I did.”

“Well now, looks like I came just in time then.”

Macker stood, holding the barrel of his gun against the base of Jerry’s skull and pulling the old man up with his free hand.

“I feel like cruisin’.”

---

It took me a long damned time to track down the old Falcon, old Midnight Blues, but I finally found her. Not just another Falcon, but the same one, using the VIN number from the owners manual I found after searching through boxes of decades of mortgage statements and pay stubs. Thanks to my local library and the modern miracle of the Internet, I tracked it to its latest registered owner, only forty-five miles away in Orofino, Idaho.

Old Midnight Blues had been all over the country since I got rid of her thirty years ago, following Betty’s suicide, but she ended up almost exactly where she started.

When I bought her back, she was sitting in a backyard littered with junk cars

“Gonna have to tow it yourself,” the man, a backyard mechanic with a penchant for old cars, told me. “Ain’t run in a few years. I was getting ready to part it out when you called.”

I ignored the man and slid into my familiar seat. When I turned the key, the ignition chattered and the engine coughed, but it didn't start. The second time I tried, it did.

"I'll be dipped in shit," the man marveled.

Bill of sale tucked into my breast pocket, I moved the column shifter into reverse, and Midnight Blue responded, albeit reluctantly.

"Hey, what about that?" He pointed to the Oldsmobile I'd driven to his house.

"Title's in the glove box. Keys in the ignition," I said, and pulled away. "It's all yours."

I hadn't planned to do it, but after sitting in Midnight Blues again, when she ran for me, I didn't want to look at the Olds again. It felt like the last of my good days had been waiting for me in the cab of the Falcon, just waiting for me to return.

---

Jerry drove for a half-hour, maybe a little longer while Stephen "Macker" McDornell kept the gun trained on him and barked directions. Macker could have spared the effort. Jerry knew exactly where they were going.

Jerry didn't know whether it was pure coincidence, Macker giving away his own sick sense of nostalgia, or Midnight Blues getting into his head, but it hardly mattered.

"The scenic spiral highway," Macker reminisced. "Lovers Lookout. Best view in the city."

He tapped the barrel against Jerry's cheek and laughed.

Jerry ignored him, slowed for the coming switchback.

The spiral highway climbed the mountain north of the city in a series of steep stretches and sharp switchbacks. Near the top was the scenic overlook with a fantastic view of the city. Best viewed at night, Lover's

Lookout was a nighttime destination for couples of all ages

“Almost there my man,” Macker said. “Back to the scene of the crime. Or party. All depends on how you choose to remember it.”

Jerry heard this all but let it flow over him. A small voice spoke somewhere in the back of his mind. It spoke with perfect confidence.

The voice of Midnight Blues.

Jerry drove on with Macker occupying Betty’s seat.

Back to the scene of the crime.

---

Lover’s Lookout. Best view on the city.

It was the place Betty and I lost our virginity to each other in the back of my father’s 55’ Studebaker. It was the place I asked her to marry me four years and three breakups later.

It was the place she always said yes to me.

It was our anniversary, and what better place to end the night than Lover’s Lookout.

There was a pickup parked nearby, but there were always broken down cars on the grade. No one else was around.

We parked for a while, talked, pointed out where we thought our house was amid the galaxy of lights below.

Betty asked me to take a picture of her next to Midnight Blues, the city lights below a perfect backdrop, so I backed up to the edge of the pullout while she posed on the back of the Falcon.

I never got the shot.

I remember Betty’s scream, then a dull buzzing invaded my head. My next memory is of laying face down in the gravel, a fist curled into my hair and a knee pressing hard against my back, pinning me to the ground.

*Let me up*, I tried to say, but all that got out was a groan. He heard me, laughed.

"You can party later pops. It's our turn."

"Come on Macker. Let him watch at least."

"Why the hell not," said the man pinning me to the ground, and yanked my head back.

They had Betty on her back, one man, Lester, holding onto one arm, and another, Jeffrey, the fat guy with the beard, holding the other. Patrick stood by and watched, a grin splitting his pimply teenager's face.

Al lay over her, his pants bunched around his ankles, pushing in and out. In and out.

Betty cried.

The Falcon rocked back and forth to the tempo of her rape.

I screamed, fighting to break loose, but Macker was too strong.

"Move your fuzzy ass!" Jeffrey, straining to keep her arm pinned.

When Al finished, Jeffrey took his turn.

Then Lester had his turn, the others laughing at him when he went limp inside her and couldn't finish.

Then Patrick.

Betty had quit struggling by then. I didn't know if she was dead or passed out. A part of me wished she were dead. Better that than to survive and have to live with the memory. Maybe she had just gone to some better place in her mind, a temporary escape.

At last, the hand gripping my hair released me, and the knee pinning me to the ground eased up.

Full of anger, full of fear, full of rage, I screamed and pushed myself from the ground.

Macker was there to block my way.

"Ain't your turn yet, slick."

His boot swung forward, connecting with my face in an explosion of

pain, bright white fading to yellow, fading to red, violet, midnight blue, then black.

When I regained consciousness, Macker was on top of her, grunting like an ape with each forward thrust while the others stood by, passing a joint and cheering.

I couldn't stand, so I dragged myself forward. When I tried to push myself up I blacked out, and when I opened my eyes again, they were gone.

Betty sat alone in the Falcon, weeping.

The blood on the Falcon's trunk looked black in the moonlight.

---

Jerry pulled into the scenic overlook and parked a few feet from the new fence erected around the drop-off.

---

The police found the men, the boys. None of them over seventeen, all of them drunk and stoned to the moon.

A judge convicted them all of rape, throwing Macker an extra few years for assault.

None of them did more than ten years in prison.

Betty was dead, a suicide, by the end of their first year.

---

"Hop out partner!" Macker sounded cheery, almost excited.

When Jerry didn't move at once, Macker popped him on the back of his head with his free hand. "Move it old guy! Gotta get this party

started!"

Jerry smiled. The voice spoke inside his head.

"Yes sir," Jerry agreed. "It's party time."

Even as he reached for the door handle, it levered up on its own and swung open. He heard a *click-creek* as Macker opened his own door.

Jerry rose, turned to watch Macker.

Macker never made it out of the Falcon. A single foot touched the ground, a single hand, his gun hand, made it through the open door.

The door slammed shut hard enough to shake Midnight Blues. Beneath the slamming sound was a crunch, like snapping twigs. Or breaking bones. The bleating horn mixed with Macker's shrieks of agony, creating a single nightmare chorus.

He pulled at the handle again, but the door lock snapped down. Macker gave a wrench on his trapped hand, and it came free with a sinewy tearing. Blood poured from Macker's shortened fingers as he turned and lunged for the driver's seat. The seatbelt slithered over his lap and clicked closed, tightening around his waist, flattening his middle age paunch. Tightening until it doubled him over in his seat.

The open driver's door jerked out of Jerry's hand, slamming into his scrawny chest and knocking him to the ground. Then it slammed shut, sealing Macker inside.

The trapped man leaned sideways, stretching for the key in the ignition. His face was livid with pain, his eyes bugging in panic. He screamed, but no sound escaped the Falcon. He reached the key, turned and pulled it from the ignition.

The Falcon's engine purred.

Jerry rose, clutching his bruised chest, and his last image of Macker was a screaming, doomed man, punching the window with his remaining fist.

Midnight Blues backed slowly to the edge of the road, revved its

engine, then surge forward. Its headlights brightened, brightened, brightened until midnight on Lover's Lookout became noon bright.

Jerry shielded his eyes against the glair, squinting at the Falcon's last suicide run.

Midnight Blues plowed through the fence, roaring into the abyss.

For a moment, it seemed to hang, suspended in a corona of bright white light.

Then it fell.

Jerry ran to the edge, hanging onto a bent fencepost as he peered over the edge.

Midnight Blues was gone.

---

I was relieved it was over, but disappointed. I felt no sense of completion, no sense of justice. They were all gone now, but Betty was still raped, still ruined. She was still dead, and I was still alone.

I waited for Midnight Blues to come back for me, she's done it before, but I waited in vain.

After a while I stepped away from the drop and walked away.

I found a few of Macker's fingers and a boot with a bloody stump of leg still inside. The gun lay next to them.

I picked up the rest of Macker and threw them over the edge. I considered my options for a moment. There were two, a long walk home and perhaps another five years of being old, sick, and lonely, or the gun.

I kicked the gun to the edge, then over it, and started my long walk home.

Nothing has changed since the coming of Midnight Blues. I'm still a coward.

If I knew then what I do now, that the thing in my brain would begin

to shrink, never going away, but not killing me, I might have reconsidered the gun.

That was ten years ago.

Neighbors come and go, old friends and acquaintances die, my daughter married and moved to the other side of the country, and I'm still here.

Alone ... until tonight.

Last month my old symptoms returned. The sleepless nights, waking dreams and blackouts. The thing in my head, the tumor, has awakened. It's growing again.

Tonight Midnight Blues came back for me.

She's still angry. Angry with me, the man she trusted to protect her. The man who let her down, then let her die. She's lonely too, as lonely as I am.

She's in the garage now, engine purring, waiting. As tired as I am, as much as I want to be with her again, I'm still afraid.

She won't wait forever though. If I don't go to her, she'll come for me.

She's calling to me.

I have to go now

---

# **DON'T TOY WITH ME**

---

**A Short Story - From Dragonfly**

---

## DON'T TOY WITH ME

---

Shelly, my wife, found it on display near the entrance of Toy-Mart and fell in love with it. I hated the thing. I thought it looked like the love child of a spider monkey and a hamster. This toy, the latest interactive nuisance to storm the unsuspecting public, was a bundle of circuits, gears, and sensors called Monkey-Man, and was guaranteed to drive any parent stupid enough to buy one insane.

Monkey-Man stood about a foot high with stubby legs, long spindly arms, three-fingered hands that hung to the floor, and a thin torso. Every inch was covered with fur except for its face, which was molded from soft, pink latex. Its face was like that of a small, rosy-cheeked child, its mouth and eyes were closed in inactivity masked as sleep. I knew from the commercials that once it was turned on, its periods of inactivity, a preprogrammed slumber, would be few and far between.

"I love it," Shelly said, eyes aglow as she pulled a box from the front of the display. The one she held had dark brown fur with a large, white patch on its belly.

"I hate it," I said. "It looks like your cousin Eli."

"Well," she said not taking her eyes from the box, "it's a good thing we're not buying it for your birthday."

Her mind was already made up. We were buying the damn thing

regardless of what I said. There were many things I loved about Shelly, but her stubborn streak was not one of them. In the time we spent arguing over the gift, four of the boxes had vanished from the display. A young mother, unable to satisfy her screaming little monster with the limited variety of colors left on the display, made a desperate grab for the box in Shelly's hands. With a threatening glare, Shelly pulled it away.

"Bitch," the young mother said, dragging the screaming kid past us into the store.

"It's almost two-hundred bucks," I tried to reason. "Why don't we just buy her that car she's had her eyes on?"

"Don't be silly, hon. Tansy's only eight, she can't drive."

"That thing is going to drive me nuts, Shelly."

She didn't say a word, simply looked at me with that stubborn, unyielding expression she has.

"I'm drawing the line here, Shelly. It's me or the monkey."

"Tansy is going to love it," she said, passing me on her way to the checkout.

---

Shelly waited until after the party to bring out the silver-wrapped box with Monkey-Man in it. She said she was afraid the extravagant toy might take the focus off Tansy, but I think that maybe she was starting to question buying it. It seemed to me that it's the sort of thing she would have loved at that age. I think she was afraid Tansy would consider it a baby toy. I knew Shelly was mature enough to handle the disappointment, but not in front of a dozen kids and their parents.

Tansy did like the Monkey-Man, but it was not the jumping and screaming reception Shelly first imagined. She hid her disappointment well, seemed almost willing to be disappointed. Monkey-Man was taken

from its box without fanfare, stood carefully on the kitchen's tile floor, and turned on.

To me at least, the moment was unsettling. Its latex eyelids popped open to reveal realistically detailed green glass eyes. They slowly closed again as its little mouth stretched open in a face-contorting yawn. They opened again and moved from side to side, finally fixing on the closest person, Shelly.

"Coco wakey-wake. Sleep long time." Coco stooped slightly with a barely audible mechanical whir, placing the knuckles of its half-closed hands against the floor for balance, and took two lurching steps forward.

We waited. Shelly and Tansy crouched on the floor before Coco, I stood with my mouth open in shock. I didn't know the damn thing could walk.

Again, ignoring Tansy, who had moved closer and lay with her face barely inches away from the furry toy, its eyes turned toward my wife.

"Name?" it inquired in a voice that was gravely and oddly intelligent sounding. "Please."

With ashen face and wide eyes, she stuttered her answer, "Shelly."

"Coco love Shelly," the Monkey-Man said, then began at last to behave in a way more expected of a mere toy, milling about the kitchen almost randomly, chattering nonsensically to a party hat that lay in its path.

I wasn't surprised after that when Tansy showed little interest in the toy, I think she felt hurt. I was surprised, though, when I found Coco sitting on Shelly's nightstand a week later.

---

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Shelly snapped. "Put Coco back!"

I dropped it back on its fuzzy ass and spun around, startled. Coco came awake with a squeal and waving of arms.

"Whoa! Coco fall," it said, turning its head back and forth in confusion. Then its shiny, green eyes settled on me, and it said, "Don't drop Coco no more."

Shelly stood in the doorway of our bedroom, arms crossed and glaring at me.

"You leave Coco alone," she said. "I don't go snooping around and playing with your shit."

"Pardon me," I shouted back, waving my hands in surrender. "I didn't know the two of you were so close. I'll leave you guys alone now."

I pushed past her into the hall.

She stepped in front of me and grabbed my arm.

"Well, we are getting close," she said. I could tell she was calming down. She was using her sexy pouting voice. "I share all of my problems with him. I vent and bitch at him all day long and all he does is smile and nod and tell me he loves me."

She seized my other arm and pulled me against her. "You should be grateful to Coco. He's like a gay friend. By the time you get home I'm all talked out and ready to play."

We had sex right there on the floor, in the open doorway between our bedroom and the hall. Tansy was staying over at a friend's house that night so we weren't worried about interruption. At one point I looked up and noticed Coco's eyes were open again. It appeared to be watching us. The look on its face startled me, broke my rhythm.

Shelly grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and pulled me back down. At the moment I wrote the incident off as an event of my imagination or a symptom of lack of blood to the brain, but I know differently now.

Coco looked pissed off.

---

I awoke sometime in the middle of the night from a nightmare I couldn't remember. Shelly lay beside me, naked and smooth to my touch. I considered waking her, but a sudden chill in the room and the way she pulled away from my touch with a startled moan changed my mind. Instead I reached past the alarm clock on the mantle for my smokes and lighter. They were gone. Wearing nothing but my shorts, I rose and ventured from the room into the darkness of the hallway.

I felt suddenly restless, uneasy with the deathlike silence of my home. I decided to have my cigarette in the living room, maybe even a cold beer while I bored myself back to sleep by watching some late-night infomercials. I noticed the change in lighting, someone had left a lamp on, and I followed its phantom glow into the living room.

I found Coco sitting on the couch, smoking one of my cigarettes and thumbing through a stroke magazine from my secret stash in the garage.

It looked up and, to my further shock, Coco spoke to me in plain, adult English with a low, crusty voice.

"Gay friend," it snorted in disgust. I could hear the grinding of small gears as it turned a page and slowly opened the centerfold. "How the hell do you like that?"

I remember nothing after that, only awaking the next morning with a pounding headache and a disturbing case of the unimals.

Coco was back in his place on Shelly's nightstand, looking around the room and chattering to itself. Behaving exactly as advertised, a high-tech toy and nothing more.

I said nothing to Shelly about what I had seen.

---

Over the course of the day I'd pretty much convinced myself it was a dream, but nonetheless I decided Coco was history. I got rid of it discreetly while Shelly was picking up Tansy. I sneaked up on it while it slept and turned it off, stuffed it in a plastic bag, and buried it at the far end of the vegetable garden. It was a couple hours before she noticed it was gone. I was sitting on the couch in the living room, an open soda on the coffee table and a bag of potato chips in my lap, pretending to pay attention to a local college game. I knew the question was coming and I was bracing myself, trying to keep my game face on. I knew she was becoming weirdly attached to the damn thing, I just didn't know how attached until I saw her face. She was on the verge of tears.

"Have you seen Coco?" she asked frantically.

I kept my eyes on the television, trying to remain calm, but I could feel my heart leaping beneath my ribs. "No, hon. I haven't seen the cocoa. Did you check in the cupboard above the fridge?"

"Damn it I'm talking to you!" she said, stepping between the television and me. "Where is my Coco?"

*My Coco?*

"Damn Shelly, don't yell at me! I don't know where the monkey is."

She turned and stormed away. I heard her questioning Tansy a few minutes later.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Shelly brooded, and I was too freaked to talk. Tansy barely ate, she kept on looking at her mother with heartbreaking puzzlement. Shelly left the table eventually, disappearing outside.

"What's wrong with Mom?" Tansy asked.

"I don't know," I lied.

---

I was lying in bed reading when Shelly stormed in. Her face was flushed and her eyes scrunched into angry little slits. Watching me from the cradle of her arms, its dark fur matted with weeds and dirt, was Coco.

"I found him on the back patio," she said.

I opened my mouth to speak, to plead ignorance to the charge in her eyes, but she cut me off.

"He told me what you did. Get the hell out of my bed, you son of a bitch."

---

The couch was old, too soft in some spots, too firm in others, and lumpy throughout. I did sleep eventually, though, and again was plagued by nightmares. I can't remember the dreams in their entirety, only flashes, images, the most frightening of which still makes me sick. Shelly, lying naked on the sheets of our bed, painted like a street corner hooker and writhing in ecstasy. Her eyes were open and staring ahead, but they were not *her* eyes. They were white, glassy orbs without a hint of color. Dozens of blood-red candles burned, placed around the room wherever there was a surface to support them. The walls were crimson in their light.

Standing between her parted legs was Coco, its three-fingered hands kneading the flesh of her thighs. A cigarette jutted from its sneering mouth. A furry prick as long as its body wobbled in the air before him.

I awoke with a scream and saw Coco sitting on my heaving chest like a fairytale goblin. Its fur was brushed and clean, but the whiteness of its chest was marked with a grass stain that would never come out.

It smiled at me, a smile like poison, and with a movement too quick to trace, sprang off my chest and vanished silently into the darkness. On my chest it left a reminder, a symbol of my new place in his home. It was my wife's wedding ring, twisted and mangled from its former shape,

crushed into a meaningless lump of gold and diamond. For the first time in fifteen years, since the death of my father, I cried.

---

Over the next week Shelly grew colder toward Tansy and me. She lived in her room, coming out only for quick trips to the corner store. She would return with a brown paper bag tucked under her arm, folded shut to hide the contents, and disappear back into her room. Food, I imagined, since she wasn't eating with us. I didn't see Coco at all that week, it never left the room.

I cashed in my accumulated sick leave and spent that week at home. I was afraid to leave Tansy alone in the house with her mother and that...thing. I made arrangements with my mother, and early Friday morning she picked Tansy up for the weekend. When Shelly stumbled out of her room at one o'clock for her daily trip to the corner store, I followed her.

I was half right about her shopping trips. She bought doughnuts and soda. It was the rest of her cache that convinced me the madness wouldn't end unless I ended it. Three ten-packs of size D batteries and a dozen red candles.

---

I waited until the dark of night to go back home. The place appeared to be dead. Every window was dark, including my bedroom window, which was covered from the inside by a heavy wool blanket. I could not imagine, even in the darkest corners of my mind, what might be going on behind that guarded window. I crept up to the front entrance of my house like a prowler, my dead father's old revolver tucked into the front

of my jeans. The gun had been in storage for almost ten years, since about the time Shelly became pregnant with Tansy. She would not have a gun in the same house with her child. I couldn't remember the last time I had fired it.

I moved as quietly as I could through the dark passage between the family room and my bedroom, Shelly and Coco's bedroom now. Sometime during the last week, while I was too wrapped up in denial to notice, the house had ceased to be my home. As I neared the closed bedroom door I began to feel like an unwanted visitor in the home of an unfriendly acquaintance. I reached out warily and touched the door. I didn't want to open it.

The hall flooded with blood-colored light as I inched the door open. My ears filled with a horrible sound, a collage of mechanical movement and orgasmic pleasure bound with grunting, demonic lust.

Coco was on top of her, grunting and heaving, thrusting with quick mechanical precision. It wasn't the Coco I remembered, though. It was taller, gangly. Its short ears had grown and turned up on its head like furry horns. Its feet were wide and scaly, and long claws that tipped its fingers drew blood as they kneaded Shelly's breasts.

Shelly whipped around beneath Coco like an agitated snake, arching her back, gripping his furry ass with both hands and pushing him in farther. Her tongue darted into the open air as if tasting it.

I don't know how long I stood there watching them, maybe a minute, maybe an hour. I was helpless before the image, my wife, my world, intimately tangled with that toy from hell. When they climaxed, I cried out in disgust. That was when she saw me. Her eyes, glassy white orbs, opened in shock. Then she shrieked at me, a sound of uncorrupted hatred, and I knew I was too late to save her. Coco had fucked every last ounce of humanity out of her. She was no longer my Shelly.

"You," Coco roared, leaping from the bed. He closed the distance

between us with slow, deliberate steps. His clawed, three-fingered hands reached toward me, clenching and unclenching rhythmically. His foot-long prick bobbed with each rough step, preceding him like a wet foxtail. By luck and luck alone, that was where my first shot hit him.

Coco stumbled backward, howling in pain as his penis fell in shreds at his feet. I shot him four more times in rapid succession and watched as his body flew across the room in pieces. Coco's body, with one leg and part of the head still intact, landed against the closet door with a hard, plastic thump. The leg twitched once, and then it was still.

What was left resembled nothing more than a smashed toy.

"Bastard," Shelly screamed, and leapt from the bed to where Coco lay.

I had one round left. I pointed the revolver at the back of her head and braced myself. Whatever evil had lived in Coco was now a part of her.

I dropped the gun and left her like that, naked and haggard looking, cradling Coco's shattered body to her chest and crying like she still had a heart.

---

The community at large was outraged by my light sentence. While most agreed that I had suffered some kind of breakdown, they still wanted me locked up forever, if not longer. I was found innocent of attempted murder by reason of insanity and sent packing after less than a year in the booby hatch. Though the state of Idaho is confident that I am one-hundred-percent back in my right mind and a threat to no one, I am still not allowed contact of any kind with my ex-wife or my little girl, Tansy. I told my PO I wanted to move out of town, and he agreed that it was probably a good idea. He helped me find a construction job down in Sand Point, where I would still be close enough to check up on, and I was

on my way.

As my bus pulled out of the station, I saw them, Shelly and Tansy, standing side by side at the corner of Main and Jefferson. They were watching me, Tansy with a look of barely controlled panic and fear, Shelly with a look of infernal satisfaction. Her belly was swollen in the final stages of pregnancy.

I haven't seen them since.

I can't help but wonder who the father of that unborn child might be. As hard as I try, I can't stop thinking about it.

---

# NIGHT OF THE DOG

---

A Short Story - From Dangerous Toys (coming soon)

---

## NIGHT OF THE DOG

---

Dave Lancaster saw the little dog as he took the off-ramp to Midway, Idaho. It stood hunched over something in the ditch, its shoulders tensing and relaxing, its head darting down over something he couldn't see. He slowed from thirty-five to twenty-five just in case the little hairball decided to join the flow of traffic. Not that there was any traffic heading into Midway. Traffic on Highway 90 was sparse as evening edged toward twilight, but *no one* was visiting Midway.

The dog was a pug; flat face, stubby legs, corkscrew tail and bugging eyes, the butt-ugliest dog in the animal kingdom. Dave had never seen a pug that didn't look like it had suffered severe brain damage. He had no idea how such a useless animal had made it this far out of town, and considered, briefly, trying to catch the little monster to take it back, but decided against it. He'd put a lot of work into the Nissan, a souped up gold Maxima Limited SE, black leather interior, and didn't want the little monster crapping up his upholstery.

Dave had passed this little shit-splat town twice a week on his way to the job in Wye, Montana, and home again, and always stopped for a Bacardi and a Spoiler, The Midway Diner's half-pound burger with the works and a plate of fries. Once he got back home he'd be back on salads and Weight Watchers until he left Sunday night, at least until he'd

melted a couple inches off his middle. His fiancé said she wanted him fit for the wedding, and had taken to slapping his gut in way of a greeting.

The dog looked up at Dave's approach, and he saw what it had been picking at, something small and bloody in the weeds near the white line. It tensed, eyes bugging out, and bared a mouthful of sharp little teeth. It launched at his car with a volley of barely audible yips, then disappeared beneath the bumper.

"Whoa!" Dave stomped the brakes, but too late.

It yelped, then crunched beneath the front driver's side tire. A jet of blood splattered the blacktop in front of the car.

"Shit!" He pounded the dash, checked his rear-view to make sure he was still alone on the off-ramp, then put on his flashers, backed up, and killed his engine. The moment of silence that followed ticked away like the cooling of a still motor.

After a few seconds he sighed and popped the trunk. He found his gloves next to the toolkit, old leather, well worn and grease-stained. He pulled them on, slammed the trunk closed, and walked around to face the mess.

The crumbling asphalt was a mess of blood and hair, but the dog was gone.

*No way it got up and walked away, Dave thought.*

He ducked down and peered beneath the car, saw nothing, and finally found the pug squeezed up inside the wheel well hanging from the tire, its jaws opened well past their breaking point, teeth embedded in the rubber. Determined to kill the Nissan even as it squashed him.

Road pizza.

It was squashed all right, damn near flat. Loops of intestine hung from his rectum, swinging like rubbery turds. One eye dangled from its socket, stared at him from the side of his crushed head. The other eye was gone, the crushed socket oozing a thick mixture of blood and eye-

jelly.

Dave turned away, fought to keep his lunch down.

The pug's corpse squeezed out a final, wet doggy fart – its final *Fuck You* to the world.

“Fucking really?” His stomach lurched, then settled again, and he grabbed the dog with gloved, shaking hands, his anticipation of his Friday night Spoiler gone.

He had to pull hard before the dead animal relinquished its hold; the damn thing's teeth were embedded to the gums in rubber. Broken vertebrae crunched in its neck, he was afraid its head would come off, but it finally pulled loose.

Little as he wanted to, he leaned in closer to the flattened dog and read the tag on its collar. No address or phone number, only the animal's name.

Xander.

He grunted and held it out at arm's length.

*Stupid fucking name*, he thought.

The adrenalin of his scare was wearing off and Dave began to feel the evening's chill. Steam rose from Xander's body. It was hot in his hands, even through his gloves.

“Sayonara, you stupid pancaked fuck.”

Dave bent to place the corpse where some city road crew could see it, and saw what Xander had been picking at before joining the bottom of the food chain.

A tiny hand picked clean of flesh, a mangled arm and small torso half-hidden in the tall grass. A scrap of pink cloth lay next to the baby, all that remained of its dressing gown.

He turned away and blew his lunch onto the pavement between his feet.

He stood like that for seconds that seemed to stretch out to minutes,

waiting for the shock, and his roiling stomach, to settle.

“I did not just see that.” He spoke as if trying to reason away a delusion, but he knew what he’d seen.

There was a liquid gurgle from below, and for a moment he thought he was getting ready puke again. Then he realized the gurgling was not his stomach. He looked at the dog, hanging limp from one fist.

It lifted its head, growled at him. Its dangling eye pulled back toward the empty socket, then popped back into place.

Dave screamed, dropped Xander to the blacktop, stomped on him until the growling ceased, and ran for his car.

---

The final few miles to Midway passed in what seemed an eye-blink, and Dave blew past the Welcome to Midway billboard and its accompanying 25 MPH sign (We Love Our Children – Please Don’t Speed) at 75. He didn’t touch his brakes until he saw the town’s single stop light a half-block away. It blinked red at Midway’s only controlled intersection, and Dave slid sideways through it, stopping in the dead center of town. There were no other cars on the road, no pedestrians. Midway’s resident State Patrol car sat in its usual spot across from the Midway Diner, but the trooper that belonged with it was not in evidence.

Dave laid his palm down on his horn, breaking the town’s eerie silence, then spun a half circle beneath the blinking light and slid to a stop inches from the state cruiser. He beeped the horn again for good measure as he climbed out, but no one came to investigate.

“Hey!” He slapped the cruiser’s hood, then ducked down to peer through the tinted glass into an empty cab. “Anybody!”

Nobody.

A slick smear of blood marred the cruiser’s waxed black paint. He’d

forgotten to take the gloves off, and that beastly little fuck's blood was smeared all over them. He peeled them off and dropped them to the street, then turned in place, scanning the streets and yards, sidewalks and storefronts.

Midway's single skuzzy bar was lit up and apparently open for business. A neon *Open* sign glowed in the window, and a sandwich board on the sidewalk read *Screw AA – come on in and get drunk with the boys*, but the usual drunken babble and racket of country music was absent.

The town was silent, still. A car idled crookedly in front of the antique phone booth next to the small Public Works shop. The door was open, and a single shoe lay on the blacktop beside it.

*"Where the fuck is everyone?"*

Dave ran for The Midway Diner.

---

He found them in the diner.

Not everyone from Midway, but enough of them to leave one hell of a mess.

Parts of them were strewn around the floor, tables, and counter. Scraps of torn clothing, shoes, some with the bloody stumps of calves protruding, a John Deere hat with a large bite taken out of the brim. Bones with ragged strips of flesh, a gore slicked skull with the top crunched off, hollow but for a few blobs of gristle and brain. Dripping, empty rib cages, all flesh and organs absent. A scrap of scalp with bright orange hair, the almost fluorescent orange of a bad dye-job, was all he could find of the waitress who had served him countless meals on his trips to and from the job.

Every surface was drenched with blood. He looked down and found

himself standing in a still-tacky pool of it.

The smell hit him a moment later, the sick coppery scent of blood, the stench of torn bowels, the rich miasma of flesh just beginning to rot. Dave turned for the door, pushing it open with his shoulder as he burst back into the fresh air, and came face to face with perhaps the last living person in Midway.

---

He was a large man, tall, wide, and fat, three hundred pounds of farmer stuffed into old threadbare bib overalls. His face was bearded, pasty, shining with sweat and speckled with blood. The white shirt beneath the straps of his bibs was dark with age and accumulated filth. His big clunky boots were maroon with dried blood.

He held a large ax in a two-fisted grip in front of himself, almost like a shield.

Dave screamed and stumbled back, almost falling through the doorway back into the abattoir that had once served the finest burgers in northern Idaho.

The man screamed and jumped back a step in tandem. His massive gut jiggled inside the seam-stretched bibs, and he raised the ax as if to swing.

Dave's hand fell on top of cold steel, and he grabbed it in reflex, dragging it in front of himself. A large steel bowl, speckled with rust and full to the rim with crushed cigarettes, welded to a steel pole set in a concrete base.

Dave lifted and swung it, dumping cigarette butts down his front.

"Stay back!" Dave swung his makeshift club in a clumsy arc. "Stay the fuck back!"

The big man tensed, then lowered his ax.

"No man, you got it wrong," he said, lowering the ax further and raising one empty hand, palm out. "I didn't ..."

Dave swung again, and with all the force he could muster. The concrete block smashed into the offered hand.

The big man howled, dropped his ax, cradled his hand to his chest.

"Shit man, don't do that!"

Dave swung a second time, a slow and clumsy swing that clipped the man's elbow and sent him staggering back a step.

The pole slipped from Dave's sweat-slicked hands and crashed through The Midway Diner's shaded front window.

Dave slipped past the big farmer and sprinted toward his waiting car.

*Get outa here, he thought. Jesus fuck I get outa here!*

"Damn it, wait man!"

Dave turned to find the big man running after him.

"You can't leave me here," the man shrieked. "You gotta get me outa here!"

"The fuck I do," Dave shouted, and slid to a stop in the gravel, thumping into his car. He yanked the door open, slipped behind the wheel, and threw a rooster tail of dust and gravel as the big farmer fumbled at the door handle.

"Don't leave me!" The man gave chase, but Dave left him in the dust of Midway's Main Street.

*I'm not stopping until I get home, he thought.*

He'd phone he state police as soon as he was back in cell range, but there was no way he was ever coming back to this slaughterhouse.

He did stop though, just short of the sign reading *Thanks for visiting friendly Midway. Come back soon.*

The dog, Xander, was trotting down the broken yellow line into town, dragging what remained of the naked, savaged baby in its too-wide mouth.

Dave stomped the brakes without thought, leaning over the dash as

Xander stopped and sat in the middle of the road.

For a moment man and dog stared at each other, then Xander stood again, and Dave saw the little dog seemed to have grown to twice its previous size. It gave its head a shake, whipping the dead baby back and forth like an old chew toy. At last the tiny neck tore and the body flew free. Xander advanced at a trot, then a sprint, and leapt up onto the Nissan's hood.

There was no sign of the dog's previous injuries. The broken body had healed, the dangling intestines back where they belonged, the torn hide was unbroken, the missing eye was restored. The head had grown even more than the body. Xander was now a living caricature of a pug. A hundred long and pointed teeth cradled the baby's head in a sinister grin.

Xander gave a snort, blowing snot and blood on the windshield, and then crunched the head in its jaws and gulped down the pulp of flesh, brain, and skull.

*Get the fuck out of here!*

Dave popped the clutch, Xander stumbled but kept his feet, but the car stalled. Dave made a desperate keening whine as he cranked the ignition.

Xander looked suddenly up, past Dave to the road behind him, and leapt over the hood.

Dave turned and watched Xander sprint toward the big man in his bib overalls.

The man saw Xander coming, stopped, screamed, turned tail back toward town.

He didn't get far.

Xander, now the size of a large pitbull, leapt at the retreating man's back and bore him down. Dave heard the mingled screams and growls, saw blood and limbs fly, saw an outstretched hand disappear with a snap of Xander's jaws, and his paralysis broke.

Dave laid rubber and left the demon dog to its meal.

---

He hit the exit at sixty-five and slid through two empty westbound lanes, chasing the setting sun. He checked his cell, cursed at the *No Service* notice, and scanned the empty lanes. He had no hope of finding a state trooper, they were never around when you actually needed one. It would be another half hour to De Borgia, the nearest to town, maybe twenty minutes until he entered cell range again if he maintained his current speed.

*Fuck current speed*, he thought, and stepped down on the gas.

He'd reached the Nissan's top speed; just over one hundred and sixty miles per hour, when he glanced in the rear view and saw a strange shape far behind him, but gaining.

"No," he said, refusing to believe his eyes, but the shape resolved as it closed on him. "No!"

The large shape continued to gain, and continued to grow.

And began to bark.

Dave focused on the road ahead again, barely avoiding an old, battered Falcon, swerving to pass and ignoring the impotent bleat of the old car's horn.

Xander barked again, and Dave watched in his rear view as the pug casually bumped the Falcon nose first into the ditch. The old car flipped and rolled, its weak headlamps highlighting a rag doll form flying from the smashed windshield.

"Fuck me!"

Dave swerved around a small pickup, blew by a short box truck, passed a road sign reminding him that he was almost to De Borgia, checked his phone and almost shouted in relief. Almost ran into the ditch

as he dialed, checked the rear view again and found Xander finally beginning to slow a few car lengths back. No sign of the trucks he'd passed.

Xander, the size of a small truck himself now, sprinted on with his tongue lolling through a strangely goofy pug grin, his eyes bright in the Nissan's tail lights and pointing in slightly different directions.

Dave had always thought pugs were fuck-ugly.

"911. What is your emergency?"

Dave almost dropped the phone in his surprise. Had not really expected the call to go through, not with the way his luck was running.

*"There's a giant fucking dog chasing me,"* and realizing how lame he must sound, *"it ate a fucking baby!"*

"What is your name, sir?"

*"I'm on highway 90 near De Borgia,"* he shouted, *"and this fucking monster is going to eat me!"*

"Sir, what is your ..."

Dave screamed and dropped his cell phone, didn't even have time to yank the wheel as he came up too quickly on an old hoopty Lincoln, and rammed it. A forward snap as he came to a violent stop, the bite of his shoulder and lap harness, the punch of the airbag, and a short nap.

---

Dave awoke no more than a few minutes later by the light of the sunset shining through his cracked windshield. The hood of his Nissan was crumpled, blowing steam. The Lincoln was stopped half in the ditch. No one stirred from it.

The Nissan was dead, probably forever, but it was not still. It rocked forward and back, down and up, in a rhythmic motion.

He reached for the door handle, then yanked his hand back. A giant

paw pressed against the door, pinning it. A single claw had punched through the glass. He turned to the passenger door and saw the same.

Slowly he turned, pushing the deflated airbag out of his way, and saw the rear windshield obscured by the bristly fur of Xander's belly, rubbing and bumping in sync with the rocking of the crashed car.

"Fuck me," Dave said again, almost sobbed, and watched the rear seat's back rest bulge, relax, bulge, relax, bulge, and finally fall away as the giant dog's thrusting penis smashed it down.

Dave screamed again and pulled his head away as Xander's penis shot forward between the front seats.

The car bounced. Above him, Xander panted.

"Sir? Are you okay? Sir, can you answer me?" His cell phone lay on the floor between his feet, but Dave ignored it.

He curled up in the driver's seat as best he could and waited for it to end.

---

## ABOUT BRIAN KNIGHT

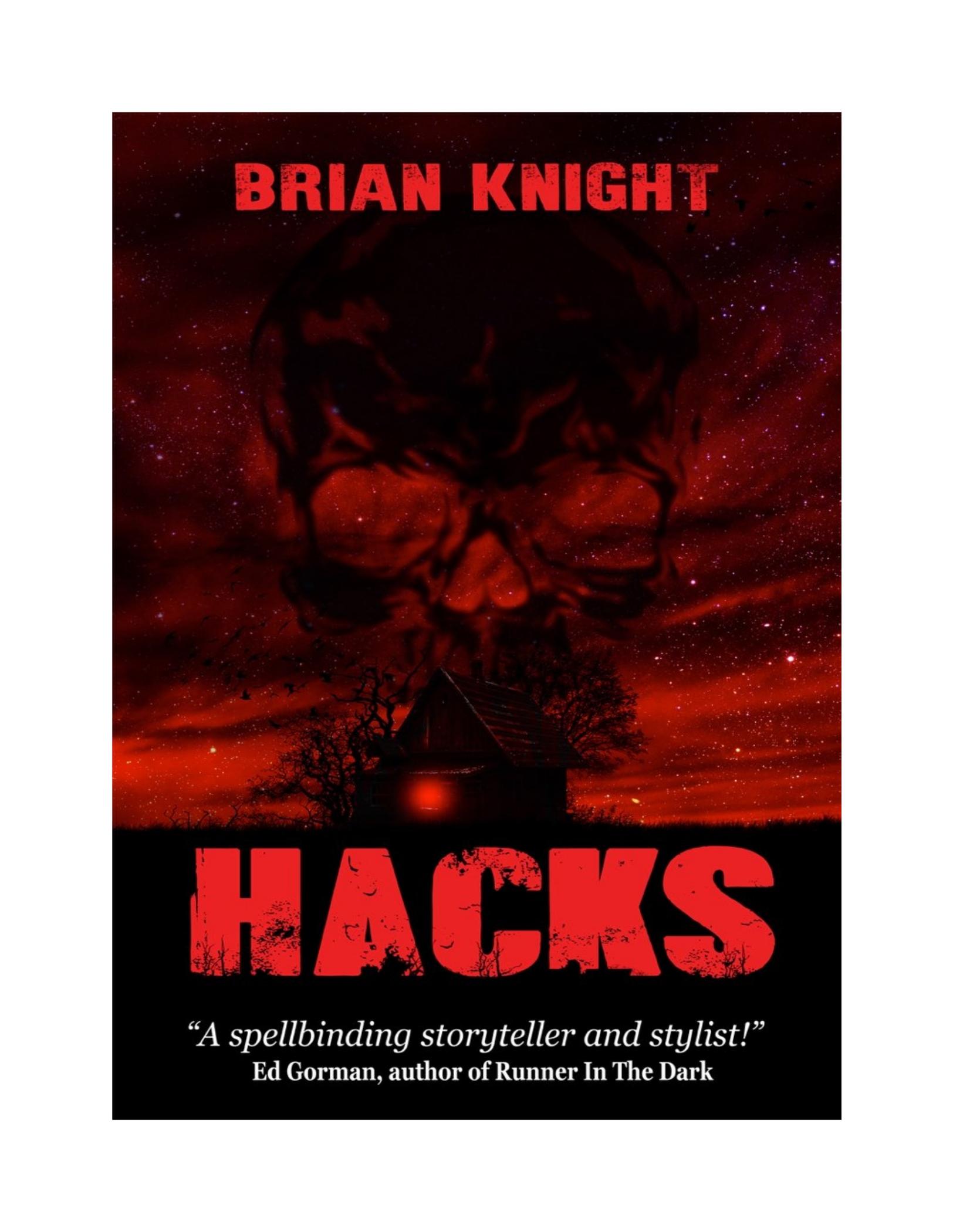
---

Brian Knight lives in Washington State with his wife and the voices in his head. He has published over a dozen novels, novellas, and collections in the horror, fantasy, and crime genres.



*Subscribe to Brian Knight's Knightmares newsletter for news, updates, and free fiction at*  
[www.brian-knight.com](http://www.brian-knight.com)



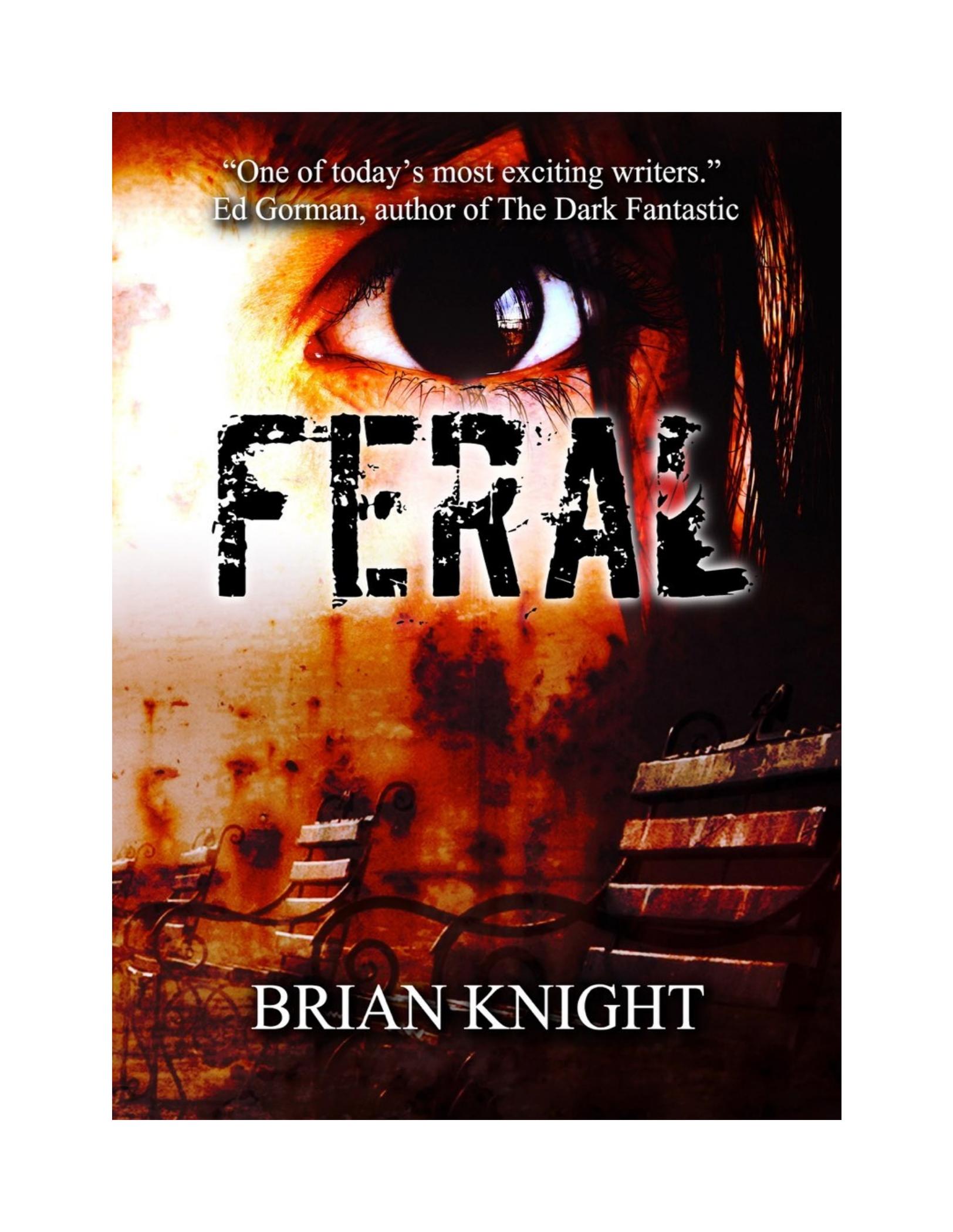


**BRIAN KNIGHT**

# HACKS

*“A spellbinding storyteller and stylist!”*

**Ed Gorman, author of *Runner In The Dark***



“One of today’s most exciting writers.”  
Ed Gorman, author of *The Dark Fantastic*

# FERAL

BRIAN KNIGHT



"Say hello to horror's next big thing."  
Brian Keene, author of *The Rising*

# BROKEN ANGEL

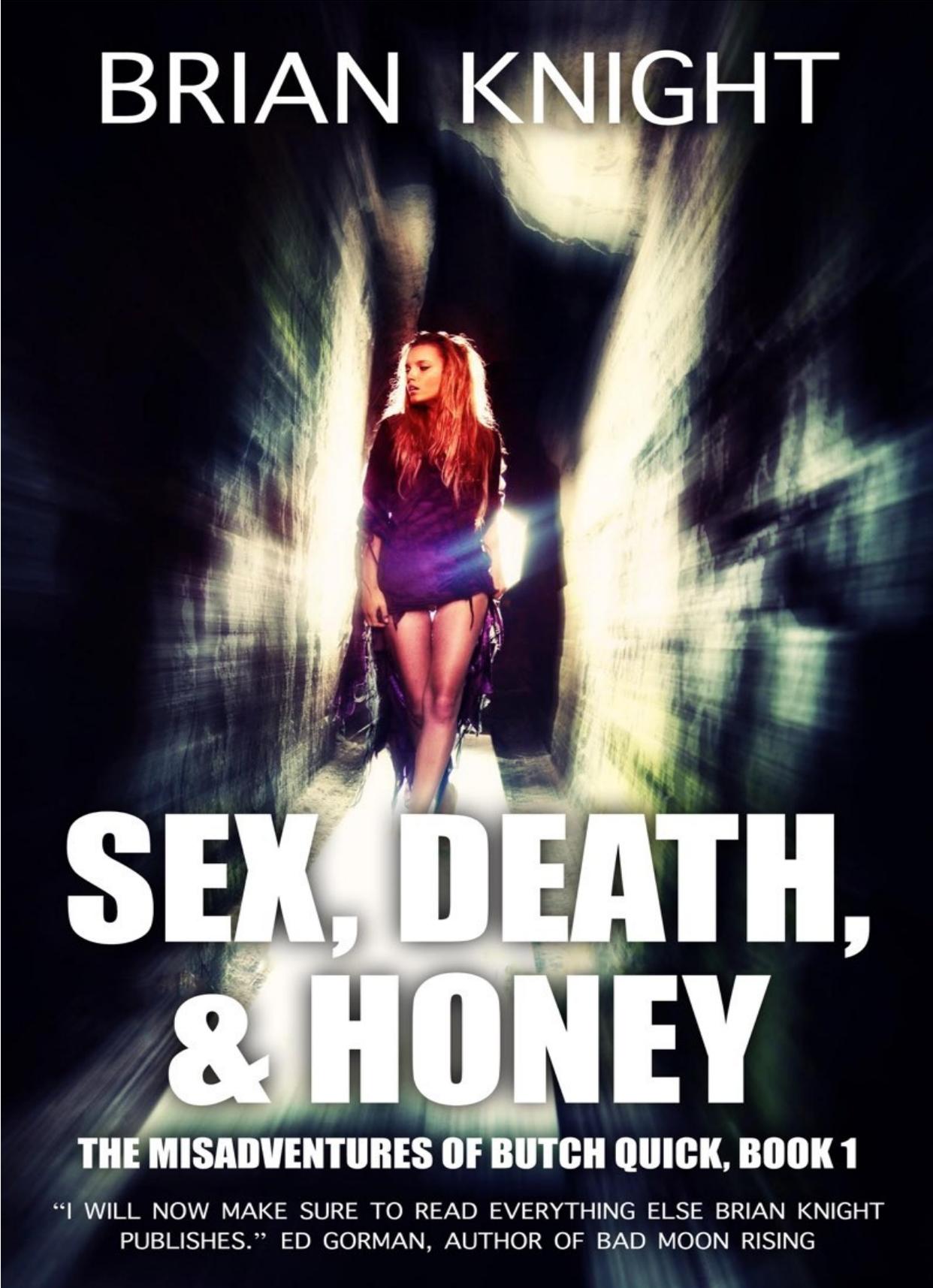
BRIAN KNIGHT

"Dragonfly is a chilling collection of terror."  
Douglas Clegg, author of *The Children's Hour*

# DRAGONFLY



BRIAN KNIGHT

A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a purple dress and high heels, is walking through a dark, tunnel-like space. The lighting is dramatic, with bright beams of light illuminating the scene from above and the sides, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a cave or a narrow passage.

**BRIAN KNIGHT**

**SEX, DEATH,  
& HONEY**

**THE MISADVENTURES OF BUTCH QUICK, BOOK 1**

“I WILL NOW MAKE SURE TO READ EVERYTHING ELSE BRIAN KNIGHT  
PUBLISHES.” ED GORMAN, AUTHOR OF BAD MOON RISING