

Down in Dog Run is a character-driven, psychological, mystery, thriller set in the hills of West Virginia, and filled with strange characters, a bondage killer and enough twists and turns to keep the pages turning. After an attempted suicide, a man tries to reconcile with his estranged brother and ends up in the mountains, where young girls are turning up dead and he's the prime suspect

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DONNIE JOE THOMPSON

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CHAPTER ONE: THE INEVITABLE APPOINTMENT

Duane Tomlin murdered his wife. With the patience and planning of a fine jeweler and the obsessive, dogged, single-mindedness of a profile stalker, he first treed her and then he handed her, her own ass. It was a frosty, crunchy November morning and the Eichelman Shopping Center, where Jenny Tomlin worked, was just beginning to hum with the days' first activity. Duane was sitting in his sister's boyfriend's Honda Civic, as camouflage, and waiting for his Suburban to pull into the parking lot. Like a hawk perched in a mountain tree he watched, as his prey arrived right on time; navigating his old four-doored beast into the sea of white lined blacktop. Around the cement islands, she came directly towards him, her headlights hitting his face like a searchlight before she swung around and pulled into a spot not thirty feet away. She was facing away from him and their two vehicles set alone on the east side of the lot, a half a football field apart from the dozen, or so, empty cars that shared the twilight of a rising sun.

Duane knew her routine. She would gather herself for only a moment before hopping out of the cab and jotting to the door of Maxine's Shoes to begin the long process of opening up. He acted quickly. Staying out of the line of her rear view mirror, he approached the Suburban in a swift, guerrilla-like attack. Stooped below her line of sight, he was at the rear door of her driver's side when she opened up and stepped out. She was wearing one of her attractive, black power suits and as usual, though it was cold, she wore no coat. Her long auburn hair tousled with the breeze and she threw her head, like a high priced fashion model posing for a wind machine, as she threw her matching oversized handbag onto her shoulder. Duane caught her door before she could

close it, clasping his hand over top of hers. She let out a short, startled cry and stumbled away from him, her eyes wild with fear as she searched his face for recognition.

“Jesus Duane, you scared the shit out of me!” She finally said, grasping at her heart. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Maybe it was the fact he didn’t answer. Maybe it was the alien look he had twisted on his face. Whatever it was, Jenny Tomlin saw it immediately and the fear came back into her eyes. She started to take another step away from him, backwards, like someone trying to coyly make distance from a snarling dog.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” She asked in an uncertain voice and Duane let the fire in his eyes get hotter, he let the tension on his face blur into something about to explode and he was certain he must have looked completely insane. She had backed off a couple of steps and Duane quickly realized he must act before she was too far away from the Chevy. He lunged at her, taking a handful of her hair in his left hand and her throat with his right. The handbag fell to the ground, as she tried to turn from his grasp and reach down for the bag in one motion. Duane remembered the can of mace she carried and he brought her back up and nearly off her feet by her throat and a fistful of her hair. The cab door clicked softly shut from a hand she threw out for balance and Duane slammed her forehead against the glass, once, twice, three times. She let out a sound like the shrill, squeal of a whipped puppy but by the third meeting with the window the safety glass cracked and she was silent.

With sweat beading up on his brow, Duane surveyed the scene around him, his heart was pounding and he had his unconscious wife propped against the Suburban. No one seemed the wiser. In fact there was really no one to see at all; Maxine’s Shoes was located near the end of the short arm of the ‘L’ shaped row of shops and no one else had yet to

venture within easy view of his crime. He braced her against him, locking his right arm around her waist and getting a nose full of her very familiar perfume, as he opened the door and shoved her in and across the unbroken front seat of the SUV like a sack of potatoes. A rather hefty sack of potatoes, for Jenny was no longer the svelte young thing he'd married, but a more filled out, one hundred fifty-five pound version of his dream girl. Duane climbed in behind his wife, pushing her feet, with their two inch heels out of his way to sit in the driver's seat and get his breath. The long sleeved shirt, he wore underneath a worn army field jacket, was damp in the pits and a thin trickle of sweat was making its way down his forehead aimed straight for a run between his eyes. Jenny was lying on her right side in a figure 'S', her jacket open and twisted underneath her, her black 'D' cup brazier peeking through the buttons of her white shirt. She suddenly stirred and threw her feet out and into his right thigh. A soft moan came from the depths of her unconsciousness and as Duane watched her, so helpless and vulnerable, he almost crossed that thin line between love and hate as he reached out and brushed the hair away that had fallen across her face. Her eyes fluttered and opened and closed again. Duane had a sudden urge to forgive her. Looking at her sweet face, with the two growing purplish green knots that were raising on her forehead, he wanted to scoop her up in his arms and rock her like a baby. He wished to whisper his apologies for this, ill conceived and rash action, into her ear. And as she came to, he would kiss her warm firm mouth and he would enter it with his tongue and she would take it with a hunger that had been missing for many years. Then her left hand came up slowly to her face and felt, carefully of the bruises there and Duane's love moved back across the line to hate. The inch long nails, polished a deep burgundy on hands that looked half of their thirty-nine years was naked of her wedding ring. He had never seen her without it since the day he'd put it

there twenty-one years before and it caused the rage to rise up new again.

Jenny suddenly came around, like someone bobbing to the surface of the ocean after nearly drowning. She gulped for air and threw her head. She was abruptly on her elbows and looking at him with hysterical eyes.

“God, I feel sick!” She said, and Duane noted her eyes were dilated. “My head, what did you do to... You hit me!” She realized and recoiled from him against the passenger side door. Duane turned in his seat and took her by both her bent knees and slid her back towards him, her slick slacks making the move almost effortless across the vinyl.

“See how this window shattered?” he finally spoke, nodding towards the spider web design in the center of the glass. “I did that with your fucking head, fight me any more and I’ll reach for the lug wrench in the back and I’ll crush your skull.” The manner in which he spoke was so matter of fact his wife was frozen by the viciousness of the words. She was in the clutches of a stranger; she knew what he was capable of no more than she would be in the hands of any sexual predator, any madman.

Jenny Tomlin watched in fascinated horror, the way one might watch surgery performed on them, her heart racing, her eyes fixed wide. Duane had pulled a full roll of silver duct tape from one of the wide, deep pockets of his army jacket and without saying a word, had taken her by her wrists and, clapping her hands together before her in a praying position, wrapped several three inch bands around her white shirt sleeves to firmly bind her hands. She was lying flat on her back and she could feel her left leg bent and tucked uncomfortably under him. Her right leg extended with the foot tangled in with his feet on the driver’s side floor. She might be able to free her right leg, the left was weighted down but with her right she might be able to pull free. She

judged the distance and thought it not out of her ability to contort enough to give her estranged ex a solid spiked heel to the face, if she could pull her knee back far enough. But as if reading her mind, Duane untangled himself from her legs and maneuvering around the steering column, got both his knees on the floor and moved up her torso. Jenny let the flood of helpless tears flow, as he bound her wrists to the passenger's armrest using so many wraps of tape it was as if her hands were in sticky dry cement. For the first time she realized she was about to be forced into a very familiar act with this man and for a moment her fear of the unknown had a recognizable face. Then an eight inch piece of tape was firmly pressed over her mouth.

There was no surprise in what happened next. Jenny felt her slacks being pulled down. The chill of the cab caused goose flesh to rise on her thighs and her husband rubbed it down. She closed her eyes and sighed through her gag. So this was the game, she was to be raped by her husband. She felt a wave of relief start at her heart and run through her veins and loosen the tension in her limbs. Her ex wanted a piece of ass and he was going to take it. Well so be it, she thought and raised her hips so her panties could be more easily removed. There was a pause and she opened her eyes and looked down to where Duane was holding up her Victoria's Secret French cut, black silk panties. He was holding them up like a father who'd found cigarettes in his daughter's pocket.

"Is this what it takes to hold on to a young man?"

The statement and the tone caused an unexpected rush of temper and Jenny mumbled angrily through her gag before realizing the uselessness of it and falling back into silence. Now he moved over her and she could picture the erect prick that was about to force its way into her dryness. She took a deep breath, shut her eyes tight and waited for the ride to

begin. At least, she thought, she wouldn't have to kiss the fucker. And hopefully he'd worked it all up enough in his mind to be premature, as he had on so many of their past shared, romantic interludes. Then he would run off and she could work herself free and the police could have his ass in jail before lunch. Christ, she thought, the knowledge of the justice that would make him so sorry he'd ever even dreamed of this act was turning her on so much she was actually juicing up for the bastard. He had one hand in her hair and the other holding the tape that bound her hands to the armrest. Come to think of it, he had always ended up holding her hands over her head during sex. So this bondage scenario had probably been a sick fantasy of his all along, she thought, as she opened her eyes just in time to catch him wearing his cum face. See how the sick fucking bastard likes the rape fantasies that get acted out in the Lebanon Correctional Institute.

Duane had that Chevy Suburban rocking like it was being driven off-road through the Smoky Mountains. And much to his surprise, Jenny was throwing her head, cooing through her gag and getting as lost in the rhythm as any lusty Saturday night fuck during their courtship. The two welts on her forehead were standing up an ugly purplish green and sweat from the close quarters had turned the hair round her face dark and sticky wet. She was having a little trouble getting enough air through her nose and her nostrils were flaring with every heavy breath. The gag had spit bubbles oozing out above and below and the edges were curling from the moisture. Duane kept the rhythm going as he smoothed out the tape with one hand and reached into one of the oversized pockets of his coat with the other. His own sweat was running off his nose and hitting her knotted forehead like Chinese water torture, as he quickly opened a clear plastic bag and pulled it over Jenny's head. The struggle was

fierce and instantaneous. The bag blew up like a two horned space helmet, as Duane gathered the mouth of the bag at her throat. Her knees came up so violently into his thighs he was knocked into the floor but he held fast to the bag and she got no air. Her left shoe had come off but she kicked out the already shattered driver's side window with her right before Duane could fall atop her again and squelch the battle. A dewy mist inside the bag obscured her face and it almost looked like some wild animal might be in there fighting to escape a trap and devour him, her long hair, soaked by sweat, slapped against the walls of plastic like a hundred angry vipers and the hissing sounds coming through the loosening gag added to the effect. The bag deflated and formed over her face like an icy mask then just as quickly Jenny's last desperate breaths blew it up again like a bladder. The fight in her was ebbing away, like the last exhausted stutter steps from a wind up toy. The bag sucked against her face and lay against her open eyes and the tape gag was half off and folded over, exposing her wide open mouth, then the bag expanded away half an inch and stopped. The fingers on both her hands were frozen in bent claws and her naked legs lay straight and stiff under Duane's weight. A cold breeze was coming through the broken window and turning the huge stains of sweat on Duane's shirt to ice, gratefully releasing the ungodly heat which had built up in the struggle.

"I hope your last breakfast was a good one Jenny, 'cause lunch is being served in Hell." He said, looking into her dead, far away eyes.

"Lunch is being served in Hell." Duane said aloud and chuckled at the absurdity of the line, paraphrased from something some Spartan king had supposedly said before an epic battle hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. "EAT DRINK AND BE MERRY MY SON, FOR TOMORROW

WE DIE!” He shouted over the top of Bob Seger’s ‘Night Moves’ and caused his sleeping backseat passenger to stir.

Duane was heading up U.S. thirty-five going east, behind the wheel of his gold PT Cruiser, with his window cracked and his sun roof open and Cincinnati’s best classic rock station blowing bass into his face with the wind. The early April air was cold but the sun was warm and promising to shine all day. Duane came over a rise and he could see the highway ahead for two miles. The morning sun was glinting off the glass and the chrome of every vehicle in the heavy traffic flow coming and going in both directions and there was a danger of sun blindness from every direction. Duane’s sunglasses had been foolishly left behind and his only defense was his sun visor and his severe squint. Up ahead in the grassy median between the highways, there was movement. Duane’s cruise control was set at seventy and he came down the long sloping hill in the middle lane wondering if he might have to use his brakes. His muscles tightened and he readied his right foot over the horizontal pedal, as he looked over at what he thought might be a stray dog or a cat about to dart out and under his wheels. He soon passed a Canadian gray goose, which was frantically running back and forth across the fifty feet that separated the east and west bound sides. Like a desperate child, trying to cross but lost of all reason, the bird came near the pavement and then turned and ran madly to the far side only to repeat the exercise. It was just after he’d safely passed that Duane saw the reason for the birds’ hysteria, for lying in a heap of feathers on his side of the highway, was the goose’s mate, killed and forsaken on the white line. The surviving bird was running blind with terror and grief and a dark cloud immediately cast over Duane’s sunny day.

“Do you often have these rape and murder fantasies involving your wife?”

“Yes, all the time.”

Duane’s thoughts went suddenly back two weeks before and he was sitting in Dr Cribbs office on the sixth floor of Bethesda South Hospital.

“Do you always kill her in these fantasies?”

“Yes, always.”

“Do you always rape her?”

“No.”

“Tell me how you feel when you come out of these fantasies.”

“I fell better; I feel relieved.”

Duane was sitting on the patient side of an uncluttered, impressive desk in a wheel chair being observed by the doctor’s dark, rather clinically cold eyes. Cribbs scratched the occasional note on a writing pad but otherwise watched him like a zoo monkey from behind thick glasses.

“Do you blame your wife solely for the break-up of your marriage?”

“Yes, of course I do. Why the fuck wouldn’t I? I told you she admitted to having an affair.” Duane’s voice began to rise. He had no control over it. He had no control over the anger that rose just remembering the scene two weeks later and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. “She fucking had an affair with some twenty-six year old kid and when she told me about it, it wasn’t even to ask my forgiveness, it was to tell me she was leaving me for him.” Duane glared at the psychologist with disgust for the man and the subject matter and the smaller framed doctor flinched a little.

“You’re getting angry Mr. Tomlin.” Cribbs reminded him with that smug professionalism he carried with him. “You need to get a handle on that.” Duane had an urge to lunge across the desk and take the balding, thirty-ish looking doctor by the throat and show him what getting a handle could mean. Instead he pulled a half full packet of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his hospital robe, extracted a mini

lighter from the outer cellophane wrapper and started to light up.

“You aren’t allowed to smoke in my office Mr. Tomlin.” Cribbs said with irritation and pointed to an obvious sign, sitting before him in the form of a plaque on the desk.

“Yeah, well, this is how I get a handle on my anger.” He answered with equal disdain and proceeded to light up. The long, ugly Frankenstein stitches poked out of his sleeves, puffy and purple down his wrists and Duane watched Cribbs stare at them with a frown forming on his face. It was a frown practiced so much by that face the doctor’s expression, Duane figured, would soon enough freeze that way in stone.

“If you refuse to cooperate with your therapy Mr. Tomlin, this whole process will only be drawn out. Do you understand?”

“No.”

“Well, let me see if I can clarify it for you. When you were brought in, very near death, your wife wouldn’t take the responsibility of signing you in and your father no longer has the mental capacity so...”

“So you called my sister.” Duane interrupted.

“No, actually your sister was here keeping vigil as they saved your life downstairs. But she did sign you in and gave the responsibility of your recovery to us.”

“So,” Duane said acerbically and blew a cloud of smoke over the doctor’s desk. “I’m signed in, so what?”

“So by law you can only be released when we, I deem you ready.”

Duane let out a short burst of disbelief in the form of laughter.

“You have the right to keep me here? I can’t leave?”

“That’s right, you’re not allowed to leave, at least not until I can determine your future actions can be trusted.” The doctor’s voice remained calm and clear and subtle.

“My wife of twenty odd years had just dumped me for some fucking kid: I was upset. I was confused. I don’t see myself trying it again.”

“What about the other incident? Do you intend to pursue that again?” Duane dropped his head and sighed.

“No.”

“Well, we’ll see” Cribbs said, “We’ll have to see about that.”

Off to Duane’s left there was half a rusted silo, standing like the ruins of a breached castle wall in Chillicothe. The road ran parallel to a never ending barbed wire fence that danced uneven up and down thirty feet from the highway, interrupted only by the occasional post.

“I thought you were going to quit that?” It was Skylar, Duane’s passenger and only friend since his melt down. He was up from his nap and looking on from the back seat. Duane looked down at the cigarette burning in his hand, which he didn’t even remember lighting up.

“Yeah I’m gonna, eventually.”

“Man, if ya’ gotta torch your lungs you at least oughta do it with grass.”

“Nah, I can’t smoke that shit, it makes me paranoid.”

“Ah man, no shit! If you ain’t paranoid now I’d truly hate to see you if you were.”

Duane smirked but Skylar didn’t see it. He looked at the boy in the rear view mirror.

“You sleep well?”

“Off and on, where are we?”

“Chillicothe, didn’t you get any sleep last night?”

“Not a wink.” The boy answered and squeezed between the front seats, his baggy clothes giving like nothing was in them and plopped into the passenger side of the front.

“Why not?”

“I got into a major hassle with my Aunt.”

“Your Aunt?”

“Yeah, I locked my bedroom door but you know, she has a key and I was afraid she was gonna come in and try to cut my pecker off again.” Duane gave the boy a look that he didn’t see because he was already busy rolling a joint. His hands and mind were busy inside a sandwich baggy, his long fingers nimbly working like a surgeon, his bald head bent in deliberation.

“What the fuck are you talking about; don’t you live with your mother?”

“No man, my mom’s dead. I live with my Aunt and Uncle.”

“Well shit,” Duane said in incredulity. “You never told me that.”

“I don’t doubt that. I try not to think about it.”

“So how did your mom die?”

“She drowned five years ago. Is that beautiful or what?” The boy asked, holding up a joint that in Duane’s day would have been called a fatty.

“Yeah, yeah, beautiful, so why would your Aunt try to cut off your dick?” Duane asked, as Skylar wet the end of his masterpiece by rolling it ceremoniously on his extended tongue. Duane thought how much he favored one of those holocaust victims from the old black and white newsreels. He was so thin, so pale, so sickly looking.

“Why?” Skylar asked mockingly. “Why would she blame me for everything but the war in Iraq? Why would she slip into my room and try to jerk me off? Why would she try to make me miss my chemo therapy? Because the bitch is certifiable, that’s why. You sure you don’t want some of this?” Skylar asked and Duane shook his head.

“So why on earth do you live with her if she’s such a witch?”

“Cause man, I’m nineteen and I have Leukemia and the only job I can get is bagging fucking groceries at Kroger or taking tickets at Cinema Duplex.”

Skylar torched up his fatty with a lighter that came on like a flame thrower and Duane tossed his used up butt out the cracked window.

“Did she really try to jerk you off in your sleep?” Duane asked, becoming intrigued by the scenario.

“Damn right she did.” The kid answered self righteously. “I woke up one night and she had my underwear pulled down and one of her fingers half way up my ass. Hey man, can we close the windows? We’re wasting good second hand smoke here.” Duane hit the button on the console that closed the sun roof then the one next to it that closed the window. The rush of air was replaced by a song on the radio too loud and full of static.

“So what does this Aunt of yours look like?” He asked, as he fumbled for another station.

“Oh she’s good looking. She looks a lot like my mom did and my mom was hot.”

“How old is she?”

“I don’t know, about forty-five or forty-six, why? You wanna fuck her?”

“Hell no,” Duane denounced. “She just sounds interesting. I could use a woman who would jerk me off in my sleep about now. But not your Aunt and not someone who would try to cut it off when she was finished!” Skylar laughed and spit smoke, which caused a coughing fit and he nearly strangled before it stopped.

“You okay?” Duane asked, trying to watch him and the road at the same time.

“Yeah, damn man, you about killed me.”

“So how did she try to cut it off? Did she play with it and then whip out a pocket knife and start sawing away, or what?”

“Damn man; get your mind outta Hustler. It was nothing kinky, not that night. She was drunker than a monkey and for some reason we were discussing the fact that I’d never been circumcised.”

“You’re Jewish?”

“No, I’m not anything. Anyway Jews are the ones who get circumcised aren’t they?”

“I don’t know I’m a Baptist.”

“Well anyways she gets stupid when she’s wasted and that night she decided I needed to be circumcised, so she went to do it herself.”

“GET OUTTA TOWN!”

“I’m serious, my Uncle has a bunch of those die cast metal soldiers and he’s all the time using exacta knives to trim them and she got one of those and came after me.” The boy spoke so matter-of-factly that Duane couldn’t tell whether or not his leg was being pulled.

“So did she whittle away on Wee-Willie or what?” The marijuana smoke was getting to him, Duane’s head felt light and he began to giggle at the vision dancing in his head.

“Are you kiddin’? I got the fuck outta there for that night.” Duane came up on an eighteen wheeler fresh off the entrance ramp; blowing black smoke and struggling to meet traffic flow as he ambled over and into the middle lane. The PT Cruiser answered his press on the gas with its passing gear and he took the fast lane around and stayed there to get ahead of a whole slew of meandering travelers.

“So whose side is your Uncle on in all this mess?” He asked, settling back into the center lane and resetting the cruise control to sixty-seven.

“Oh he don’t say too much either way, at least not to me. Aunt Jody wears the pants in that family. I think Uncle Barry’s door might swing both ways if you know what I mean.”

“Oh yeah, I know what you mean.”

Duane put his full attention on the road, which was hurtling beneath his wheels in a hypnotizing rush. The boy rattled on and on in a pot induced gab and Duane’s own foggy thoughts wondered away until Skylar was a distant hum behind the stereo.

“Goddamn man, you really did carve yourself up didn’t you?” It was two days earlier, Sunday and Duane had just walked into his sister’s house and met her newest live-in boyfriend. His name was Dodge or Lodge or something... Duane had already forgotten. He was stretched out on her couch checking out the puffy stitches standing up on both of Duane’s wrists. He was making bubbles in an elaborate water pipe and the house reeked of cannabis, just as Duane’s sedan did as he thought back on it.

“Shit man, you ‘bout croaked yourself over a chick?” He had long feathered orange-red hair and a well trimmed orange-red Prince Albert beard and he shook his head in disappointment.

“Fuck that dude; I ain’t never gonna off myself over no chick. Plenty more fish in the great big sea, know what I’m sayin’?” Oh yeah, Duane knew exactly what he was saying. Connie had insisted he stay with her a few days. She wouldn’t hear of him going back to that house, she didn’t tell him that Jenny was busy getting the place ready to sell. And that her new boyfriend was helping her do it. All Duane knew was that he’d been invited to spend some quality time with his sister and now this red-neck was chastising him for committing some cardinal sin against machismo.

“Want a hit of this?” Connie’s boyfriend asked, holding up the pipe that reminded Duane of a Sorian Brandy bottle from the original Star Trek series.

“No thank you.” He answered meekly and felt the man’s disapproving eyes again.

“Ah come on man, you don’t party either?” He was barefooted and the toes of one foot were caressing the toes of the other. He was wearing well worn jeans and a tank top that was purposely tight to show off his flat stomach and defined muscles. There was a thick batch of freckles on his shoulders.

“Leave him the fuck alone, he’s been through enough.” It was Connie, who’d just reentered the room carrying a pack of cigarettes.

“Man, I ain’t bothering him.” The boyfriend answered sarcastically and added a sly little laugh that he tacked onto the end of most his sentences. “I was just trying to get him high, tryin’ to chill him out a little.”

“I heard what you were saying.” She shot back tersely, “Let him alone, I mean it.” Then as the boyfriend put his hands up in surrender, Connie turned her attention to her little brother.

“Here, all I have is Carlton, is that okay?”

“That’s fine” he said, accepting the unopened pack.

“How long you intend to keep smoking?” She asked in her mother’s voice.

“You know me; I’ll give it up when I get my fill.”

“You believe this asshole?” She asked the man on the couch with exaggerated emphasis. “He goes into the hospital and comes out a smoker. Never smoked a day in his life before, did you Duane?”

“Not to speak of.”

“So how was it at your sister’s place?” Skylar asked over Deep Purple’s ‘Smoke on the water’, as if he’d been watching the same memory.

“It sucked. She’s got a new boyfriend.”

“Oh yeah, I think he answered the phone. Sounds like a real wild eyed southern boy.”

“He’s a fucking idiot. Hell, Connie doesn’t even like him, she told me she only brought him home because he’s so good in bed.”

“I’m good in bed.” Skylar threw in with no hint of either sarcasm or bravado.

“Well that’s nice to know Skylar.” Duane said wryly “That may come in handy down here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

A week and some odd days before, Duane had had his second session with Dr. Cribbs. By that time he'd recovered most of his strength and walked into the office under his own power; he'd even left his cigarettes back on the ward.

"How are you feeling today Mr. Tomlin?"

"Better, I guess."

"You look much better. You have some color back in your cheeks."

Duane sat down in one of the two leather bound chairs that faced the desk. He propped a house slipper covered foot on a knee, shoved both hands into his terry cloth housecoat and sunk down into the chair.

"I'm still having a lot of dreams and fantasies involving my wife." He stated with trepidation

"Is it more bondage stuff? Are you raping and murdering her like before?"

"Yes. Am I gonna hunt her down, you think, when I get out of here?"

"Highly unlikely," the doctor answered in his usual droll tone. "It's very common to have such fantasies after a major traumatic episode. It's your ego's way of coping with the loss. You don't know how to let your wife go yet so in your heart you are killing her. The bondage is control, the control you lost."

"So what's the difference between the guy who fantasizes about it and the guy who acts on it?"

"Twenty years to life, unless you have a good lawyer" Cribbs stated flatly and his mouth turned up at the corners in a soft mischievous grin. He'd cracked a joke. Just barely but there it was. He jumped into the silence left in its wake before it got awkward. "Honestly Mr. Tomlin, I believe if you intended to harm your wife you would have done it before you attempted suicide."

"Really, you think?"

“That’s the way they taught it in school.” Cribbs said and removed his glasses to rub his eyes. “Tell me about your family. When did you lose your mother?”

“Nineteen ninety-eight, she had cancer.”

“I see, and your father is in a nursing home, correct?”

“Yeah, Morning Glory up in Beavercreek.”

“I interviewed your sister...” Duane knew what was coming. “She mentioned a brother...” FUCK! “That you didn’t mention in the information profile I had you fill out.”

“Yeah that’s right. His name is Jon.”

“Why did you...”

“I didn’t mention him because he’s not much of a brother. He got the hell out of the house when he was eighteen and I only see him on the occasional holiday.”

“I see.” The doctor said and that frown came back to his face.

“Did you hear? They’ve discontinued Germany.”

Suddenly Duane’s mind and memory had left Dr. Cribbs and had shifted gears and focus. Now he was standing at his father’s bedside at the Morning Glory Nursing Home.

“What do you mean they’ve discontinued it?”

“Hell, I don’t know, that’s what they said a little while ago on there.” The senior Tomlin pointed to the sixteen inch Magnavox that sat playing ‘The Dukes of Hazard’ on a stand a few feet past the foot of his bed. Duane looked over at his father’s roommate; who sat on top of his covers on a made up bed with his arms folded. He was dressed rather nattily and except for not having his teeth in and having skin like loose, tanned leather he looked ready and able to go out on the town.

“Wonder what they’ll do with all those people?” Harry Tomlin asked, and Duane watched as the roommate rolled his eyes and continued to stare at his old man’s TV.

“I’m sure you heard it wrong dad. They’re not going to discontinue a country.”

“Well by god they said it right on there.” The old man’s natural stubbornness hadn’t mixed well with his Dementia and Harry Tomlin had become a tough customer to converse with in his old age. He would argue interminably over the most ridiculous things on earth. During one visit to the home Duane had been told by Harry that John Wayne had just gotten married.

“The John Wayne? The Duke?” Duane had asked.

“Yeah, that’s what they said.”

“Dad, John Wayne has been dead since nineteen-seventy-nine.”

“Well I don’t care they said on there he just got married.”

“Then I sure hope she’s dead too, otherwise it’ll never work “

The roommate had that look pasted on his face that said he had to listen to this insane shit all day and all night long. Duane had an urge to walk over the eight or so feet between the beds and give the old fart a bitch slap upside the head. It was two days before his attempted suicide, a suicide he knew was coming and he wanted to say something important to his father, though he had no idea what that something might be. He hoped that the old fart next door was decked out for a visit from someone and might leave the room for a while but no one ever showed that day and he never gave them any privacy.

“They was a little girl come in here last night.” Harry said, as they both stared at Daisy Duke. “I don’t know who she was, she come in here and just stood at the foot of my bed for the longest time yesterdee.” Duane sighed. Harry had been seeing strange little girls for months and in fact it had been such a visit which had caused him to be put in this place. He had been living alone and doing well until that night in early December, when the little girl had been seen peeking into his bedroom at him and he’d gotten up to

investigate. Of course this was all part of his dementia and there was no little girl at all but Harry had stepped out in his socks, onto the porch of his house on Bartley Street looking for her and had fallen on an icy step. Had it not been for the newspaper delivery girl, who came round at four-thirty every morning, Harry would have been claimed by the cold for sure; as it was he was hospitalized for exposure and the story made that same local paper the girl delivered. It was recommended Harry be put where he could be cared for on a full time basis and he'd spent Christmas in a room with the old fart.

"I shit all over myself last night." He admitted casually and loud enough for the old fart to hear and nod in disgusted agreement. "They was three of them women in here cleanin' me up."

"Well," Duane replied "that's what we pay them for."

"They found him in bed with Mrs. Langston down the hall too." The old fart added; his arms still folded across his chest. Harry ignored him and Duane let out a heavy sigh. It was believable enough, for even at the ripe old age of eighty-five, with his hair silvery white and wearing adult diapers that were too often full to overflow, Duane's old man still considered himself quite the lady's man.

"Gettin' ya some are ya dad?" He simply stated and glared at the old fart, but he didn't seem to notice the intended insult to his Puritanism.

"Your father has quite a pick-up line." The old fart continued, "He says 'can I touch you down there?' And he says it to anything that walks in here on two legs, don't you Harry?" The two old men began to laugh and it suddenly occurred to Duane for the first time that maybe his father and the old fart got along okay after all. The saltiness and the smugness the roommate exhibited, which so irritated Duane didn't seem to bother his old man in the least. So this uppity, skinny little ninety-something bastard had, in some strange way bonded with his berserker father, even made him laugh.

Duane smiled into the old fart's eyes and an appreciation for him unexpectedly entered his heart. He could leave this world and his father would have someone to bullshit with... that was something.

“How old were you when your parents divorced?”

Duane's mind was back in Dr. Cribbs leather chair and as he kept between the white lines on the freeway he wondered if maybe he should crack his window and let some of this marijuana smoke clear out. His thoughts were dancing and darting from one current event to another at an alarming, yet crystal clear rate.

“I was fifteen.”

“Was it very traumatic?”

“Are you kidding? Being fifteen is traumatic all by itself; it was devastating.”

“Who do you blame for that divorce Duane?”

It was the first time the good doctor had used his first name. Duane had picked up on it at the time and he remembered it again with The Doobie Brothers ringing in his ears. He also deduced then and again behind the wheel that his sister Connie's interview with Cribbs had decided this line of questions.

“That's easy, I blame Jon.”

“You blame your brother?”

“Yes I do. He came out of the closet that year.”

“And you believe...”

“No I don't believe, I know. When that fucking idiot decided to be a faggot it blew their whole marriage apart. My mother blamed herself. My dad blamed my mother.” Duane leaned forward in the chair and rubbed fretfully at his eight days growth of beard. “You gotta understand my old man was a paratrooper in World War II, a pathfinder with the eighty-second airborne. You ever seen the movie ‘The Longest Day’? Well all that shit where those guys came

down in that town and got shot to shit, that was my dad's outfit, only he had to parachute in first and place the landing lights."

"Yes," Cribbs said distractedly, as he scribbled in his notebook. "That's very impressive. You're talking about Normandy, D-Day right?"

"That's right. Now how do you tell a square jawed vet like my old man, a guy that John Wayne could have played in a movie, how do you tell that kinda guy that his son is gay?"

"So how do you think your brother should have handled it?"

"I think he should have kept it to himself. If he wants to be that way that's his own goddamn problem, why bring down his whole family with it?"

"Don't you think that maybe he was having some major trauma over the whole issue too?"

"Let me tell you something doctor, when my mother's health problems came along she didn't have my old man's insurance anymore. In fact she didn't have health care that amounted to shit. Had she still been under my dad's insurance I'm sure she would have gone to see someone long before she did; long before it was too late to save her life. So yes, I blame Jon for my parents' divorce and I have to look in his direction every time I realize I don't have my mother around anymore. So my poor little brother can take his issues and his trauma and shove them straight up his ass."

Duane's hands were straining on the steering wheel again and his teeth were locked so tight his jaw was aching. He let the anger go, let go his grip and then pushed the button that released the sliding sunroof. The incoming rush of air caused the marijuana smoke to swirl and blow away and Skylar grinned at the phenomenon from behind glazed over eyes. One of his favorite CDs was blasting through the speakers and Skylar was singing along in a decidedly out of tune voice. Duane turned the volume down before he spoke.

“You like this stuff?”

“What?”

“You like The Beach Boys?”

“I like this song.”

Duane understood what the boy meant when the tune ended and he punched the button that made it play again. It was the ‘Pet Sounds’ album and Skylar had been repeating the first tune, ‘wouldn’t it be nice’ over and over while his thoughts floated away.

“What are you doing? Let the whole thing play, it’s a great album.”

“Man, I asked you if you minded if I listened to this song a few times and you shook your head no.” Skylar answered and then started singing along again. Duane had one eye on him and the other on the road. The boys’ eyes were closed and his head was bobbing and weaving with the beat like a blind man’s. A goofy spaced out grin lay placidly over his face and he looked ethereal, futuristic Sci-Fi, homeless and delicate. Duane put his full attention back on the freeway and remembered his bizarre meeting of the boy more than two weeks before. After the emergency room but before his first interview with Dr. Cribbs, even before he’d opened his eyes and discovered he hadn’t died he’d met Skylar; he just didn’t discover it for a while.

He could still vividly recall the dream he was having when he heard the voice. He was trying to swim in an Olympic sized pool. Never a great swimmer and for reasons the dream didn’t indicate, he was in the deep end treading water for his life. He was aware of a very real weakness in his limbs and he felt thick and feverish. The water was sickeningly cold and his teeth were chattering and his fingertips were throbbing with exposure numbness. For some reason he couldn’t negotiate the water; he couldn’t get his legs to rise behind him and move him through the water. He

was standing straight up like a human buoy and all his energy was being spent trying to keep his nose above the water line. Someone was standing at the pool's edge, near the silver ladder and the mosaic tile that read twelve feet. He opened his mouth to call for help but he swallowed something repulsively thick and sticky and he felt the need to vomit. Now the liquid was too thick to tread, like swimming in cold pudding and he looked about him to find that he was in a sea of blood. He was going under and his heart was pounding out of his chest. Jenny was knelling at the ladder in her one piece bathing suit. She was holding a beach towel and he raised an arm to call attention to himself, but she seemed oblivious to his plight. Someone came out of the blood at her feet, clutched the ladder with hands that looked as if he'd just slaughtered a pig and came out of the mess and stood dripping on the cement poolside like a fatal accident, as she rubbed him down with the towel. It was her new lover, the boy with the nubile body. His wife was drying him off lovingly, gently, and he recognized the scene from some far away time in his own past. Duane's last picture before he went under was of Jenny planting a kiss on his mouth and rubbing his bloody head with a towel that looked like a giant used up tampon.

"There was this big scam going on at the Waiver Saver. I used to work the graveyard shift at the one on Stroop road. According to the first shift supervisor the whole fucking third shift was in on it, but I sure didn't know anything about it. There were four cashiers and they were giving away free groceries all over the fucking place. I'm talking thousands of dollars worth that they were passing around the scanners for family, husbands, friends and each other. The stock boys were in on it and they kept their mouths shut because the girls were giving them blow jobs."

The story filtered in through Duane's black unconsciousness. A disembodied voice, muffled but very near swimming round and round him at the bottom of the pool of inky blood, where he had sunk and settled on the bottom in complete, cool darkness.

"So I got called in on my day off and the manager canned me right along with the rest of them just because I was on the same shift. The fucking bitch told me I was lucky I wasn't being prosecuted because three of the girls were. I guess she thought I should feel like I was getting some sort of break but what the fuck? I was totally not involved, didn't know or care what those assholes were doing but my innocent ass went right out the door with the rest of them."

Consciousness came back slowly. First he was aware that he was strapped down. Then he realized that the sensations from the dream had come from his real physical maladies. He was nauseas and cold and so weak he seemed to have trouble opening his eyes.

"There you are, welcome back."

Duane rolled his head to the left where the voice was coming from and the bright lights overhead spun around in a furious clockwise motion that caused him to instinctively try to hold on but there was nothing for his hands to clutch. When the room stopped moving he saw Spider-man leaning over the raised silver rail on his bed. The jaw inside the red mask moved up and down and Duane watched the big head with the opened mouthed awe of a baby watching jangling keys.

"Are you among the living?" Spider-man asked in the muffled tone that Duane placed as the voice at the bottom of the pool. He tried to answer but the only thing that came out was a soft groan.

“No, don’t try to say anything yet. From what I hear you’re pretty lucky to be alive. They say you lost like, five gallons of blood before anyone found you.”

U.S. thirty-five east, if you get on in Kettering and head towards West Virginia is a long haul. Over one hundred and sixty miles, according to Map quest and that is just to get out of Ohio. Duane had let his mind wander as he drove for even though he knew nothing of this part of the state, he was certain he was going true as long as the road signs kept pointing east. It wouldn’t be until he hit the West Virginia state line and he took another jaunt of eighty or so miles on I64 that things would get hairy. The problem was he couldn’t find any place called Dog Run on the internet, at least not Dog Run West Virginia. There were plenty of Deer Runs and there was a Dog Run in Georgia. There was a Dog Run race track in Scranton and there was a Dog Run lodge in Hillsboro Kentucky. There was even three or four Dog Licks scattered around the deep south but three hours of redefining his search had left him with nothing and no way to find his destination. Connie had dug out one of Jon’s letters and found a postmark for a Henschford West Virginia and that had showed up on her daughter’s Dell in the southern corner of the state, deep in the Allegheny Mountains and by default became the circled spot on the map. The next exit sign said Waverly and Duane’s hand got moist with nervous perspiration at the prospect of getting hopelessly lost before he’d even left his home state.

“Well why don’t you just call the mother-fucker and ask for his address?”

Connie’s new boyfriend had stepped into the darkened back bedroom and asked the obvious. It was just the night before, a mere eighteen hours prior to the road trip and the lackadaisical redhead came into the smoke filled room, that

was papered with pictures of Johnny Depp, with a cigarette in one hand and a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer can in the other.

“We can’t do that,” Connie had replied. “That would ruin the surprise.”

“Maybe we should call him.” Duane interjected sheepishly, his face aglow in the light of the monitor’s screen. “I don’t want to get way the hell out in bum-fuck Egypt and get lost. Anyway if we call I can feel him out as to whether I would be welcome or not.”

“No, absolutely not.” Connie commanded with her usual amount of authority. “If we call it’ll get all fucked up. He’ll say something or he won’t say something you’ll think he should have and you’ll blow it all out of proportion and then have an excuse not to go down.” Duane remembered feeling beaten and resigned to his fate as his older sister continued her case. “Hell Duane, this Henchford has got to be some little hole in the wall town where everyone knows everyone else. All ya’ gotta do is find it and ask around; and we all know how Jon is, he makes quite an impression, someone will know where you can find him.”

“Fuck,” the boyfriend added. “If you can’t find Dog Run on any map it must be so goddamn small there must only be a handful of hillbillies living there. Just find that and you’ll be at your brother’s fuckin’ front door.”

“My god!” Connie exclaimed, “Look at this room. Michelle is gonna kick all our asses when she gets home and her room smells like an ashtray.” Duane looked up from the screen and sure enough, there was a white haze hanging in the monitors glow like the smoke left behind after a cannon’s fire. Counting the boyfriend, who’d just entered the room there were three cigarettes burning and Connie began to wave the fog towards the ceiling. “I’m gonna let her kick your ass Duane, you’re the one shouldn’t be smoking anyway.” Duane looked down at the Carlton burning in his hand, took one last hit and rubbed the dog end into a square glass ashtray. “I was only kiddin’ you asshole, you didn’t

have to put it out.” She said hurtfully and Duane could feel the kid gloves being put on by his concerned sister. The scars on his wrists would someday heal but the act would linger like a sad ghost long after and doubt for his sanity ever after that.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“What did you just say?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh. Dr. Cribbs says that I have the capability of finding things to hate in people I like but not finding things to like in people I hate. Did he tell you that?”

“No, he told me the story about the little tree to hold on to.”

“The little tree?”

“Yes.”

“Well he never told me about any little tree and I’ve been in this place a lot more than you have.”

“That’s true.”

“Why do you suppose that is?”

“What? Why you’ve been in here more than I have?”

“No, why do you think they never told me about the little tree?” The little ancient woman looked worried.

“I suppose we have different ailments and so we are being approached differently.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Well then I have no idea.”

Duane was sitting on the couch in the smoking lounge with Agnes, the woman who had turned him onto cigarettes. It was four days after meeting Skylar dressed as Spider-man and three days into his therapy with the psychiatrist. The room was painted hospital white and tobacco stained and there were five uncomfortable chairs and one comfortable puke green couch. There were two small windows on

opposing walls, plenty of ashtrays, lots of magazines and no television.

“Did they tell you why I’m in here?” Agnes whispered, though they were the only two in the room.

“No.” Duane lied.

“Well it’s not true, why I’m in here. It’s not true. My husband was never in one of these places and he used to try to make grilled cheese sandwiches on the back of the television set. Now that’s not right is it?”

“No it’s certainly not. Where is your husband now?”

“Oh he’s dead. He’s been dead for many years.” She looked down at her liver spotted, wrinkled hands and Duane thought she might be praying but her head soon popped back up. “Didn’t no one tell you why I’m in here this time really?”

“No sweetheart, no one said a word.”

“Well I don’t mind telling you because it’s not true. I don’t care a bit to say because my daughter-in-law is just lying on me is all it is.” And with this she threw another cigarette from the pack, made another one fall out and handed the extra to Duane before lighting up her own. “See when I was a young girl we was Catholic. My family was and my daddy would have beat me to death, me or my sister if we’d have come home pregnant. That’s why a lot of young girls in them days had abortions, wasn’t that we was no good or tramps or the like; we just couldn’t go home pregnant and we couldn’t use no birth control neither, not and us Catholic.” Duane was shaking his head with understanding and flipping an ash from the cigarette he already had burning into a white tray. “So it wasn’t I was a tramp, I wasn’t no tramp but I had to do what I had to do.” Her voice trailed off and she looked at the glass windowed door in the distance as if her daddy might come through it any minute. “My daddy would have beat me to death.” She said, speaking more or less to herself and Duane saw the fear vanish from her eyes as her mind seemed to suddenly go elsewhere and she took a healthy pull off her cigarette and the story ended half

finished. Duane's eyes met hers and she smiled a sweet grandmotherly smile in return and crossed one of her tiny robe clad legs over the other in a polite lady's way and exhaled a gray cloud into the air and they sat together in silence.

Duane knew why Agnes was on the mental ward of Bethesda. A busy-body named Bill, who'd had a recent nervous breakdown had explained hers and everybody else's condition and told their sorted details. It seems Agnes had had more than a few abortions over the course of her life and in old age it had come back to haunt her and she had taken one of her cat's new born kittens and shoved it up inside her in order to give birth in way of repentance and to wash away some of her sins. The poor animal had died of course and Agnes, in her determination to carry to full term, had left it there until her son had discovered the gruesome truth behind the ungodly smell.

"Do you remember busy-body Bill?" Duane asked Skylar, after turning down the radio.

"No."

"You know that bald guy at Bethesda, the one that gossiped about everybody all the time."

"Oh yeah" Skylar recalled, "I couldn't stand that fucker."

"He's the one that told me about Agnes."

"Of course he did. What did he tell you about me?"

"He told me you lived with your mother and he said she'd had a lot of trouble with you."

"That stupid bastard." the boy said with disgust. "Goes to show you what he knows about anything. He's the owner of a big restaurant in Dayton ya' know."

"No I didn't know that."

"Mr. Big Bucks supposedly, but his wife found him in his office one day shitting in the fish tank and wiping his ass with the cat." Duane laughed out loud at the picture and Skylar joined him. "Serves him right anyway the nosy mother-fucker." Skylar pointed out the rest stop sign that

grew in the coming distance on a big blue background and Duane, as promised, followed the graceful curve of the highway off and into a well groomed parking lot and a glassed in building so Skylar could replenish his Mountain Dew supply and relieve himself of what he'd consumed.

After finishing his short urinal business, Duane was waiting for Skylar in the high ceiling lobby of the hospital clean tourist pit-stop. He stood amongst map racks, snack machines and a giant, abstract metal sculpture that looked to him like a fourth grader had tried to make a Christmas tree and his thoughts went back to the day when Jenny had come to see him on the mental ward. You don't get your own room on the sixth floor of Bethesda South; in fact there are no rooms at all where the patients rest and sleep. It's just a long hallway with beds situated a few feet apart and in two parallel rows that lead to a nurse's station in one direction and a blank wall in the other. Duane had just returned from the smoking lounge and had sat on the end of his assigned bed when he heard his wife's familiar footsteps. Until that moment Duane had had no idea he could or ever had recognized Jenny's walk but that afternoon he did. Her heels were clicking and echoing out of sight along the relatively quiet vestibule that leads from the elevator to the nurse's station and he could not only tell it was her, he could tell she was angry. He watched her approach the nurse that sat behind the 'U' shaped desk and from his obscurity and distance he heard his name being spoken. She was wearing dress jeans with heels and her breasts were trying to bust out of an untucked flannel shirt. Her long auburn hair had that blow away, freshly washed sheen look to it, as she scanned the room and found him with her eyes. Duane felt as if he were made of mud. He felt like a bucket of cold water could break him apart like dried dog shit and his remains would wash down one of the pee drains. As his wife walked

towards him a strange optical effect took hold of the scene. All of a sudden Jenny was headed for him but growing farther away with every step. He was moving, orbiting, as all the while he sat facing her on bed number twenty-three; there were only two other patients on the ward and they were asleep. She passed the first and he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. He was moving upwards and backwards, as if he was on a rollercoaster and his stomach was reacting to the sickening drops at high speed. He swallowed the urge to run her down, to run over her and find somewhere dark to hide to not hear her say anymore of the things that had driven him into this place. He tried to appear sane but his head was swimming and he was nauseas and the movement that separated them was still intense, even as she neared.

When Jenny finally reached Duane's bedside, he was on the ceiling looking down on him and her. She spoke first and her voice sounded like it was coming out of a telephone hanging off the receiver, somewhere down the hall.

"Hello Duane."

He would find out later that his symptoms were physical manifestations of an anxiety attack but at the time his condition was too alien to function, barely even as a spectator to her one-sided conversation.

"Jesus, you look like shit." She stated flatly and he looked up into her eyes for a second before staring back at the floor.

"Let me see your arms." It was a command. It came up through a metal tube and reached him on the ceiling. He pulled up on his pajama sleeves and showed her the ugly stitches. She sighed and there was real pain in the sound.

"You really did a number on yourself didn't you?" Duane didn't answer, he didn't know if he was supposed to. He wanted to cry. He wanted to fall to the floor and grab hold of her legs and hold on. He began to tremble and he felt his eyes tearing up. Jenny had seen him cry twice in all the

time they'd known each other. Once after his mother had died and once when she told him she was leaving him. He didn't look up. He held himself together and waited for whatever was to come.

"Listen to me Duane," she started. "I only have a minute. I have to get home and get ready for work." He made no acknowledgement and she went on. "I called Annie and told her what happened; I figured she had a right to know." Duane had considered writing a letter to his step-daughter and telling her in his own way but this was probably better. Though he'd never voiced it out loud, Duane had always feared the only sunshine he got from Annie was from his standing so close to the light of her love for her mother. Now she was in college and the feeling of distance between them had grown noticeably greater.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes," he managed to get out. "You told Annie." He continued to stare at the floor and watch from the ceiling.

"Well, she's very worried about you and this has upset her very much."

"You shouldn't have interrupted her at school." He muttered and had to repeat it.

"Well you did raise her Duane. So I think she has a right to know if you attempt suicide, don't you?" She had raised her voice and the second patient in the room, a disoriented looking man with long, wild hair rose up from his bed and looked for the fire. The nurse behind the station frowned at her. "I'm sorry." She whispered in the nurse's direction, and then repeated it earnestly to the man, who was already turning away and going back to sleep.

"I better get out of here before they throw me out." She said in a hushed tone. "But you listen up, because I have to tell you something before I go." She went down on one knee to get closer to his ear and Duane could smell the watermelon body lotion that used to envelope the whole house after her showers.

“I am going to put the house up for sale and I’m going to see a lawyer tomorrow.”

“Sell the house?” He asked the floor and caused his wife to sigh with impatience.

“Yes goddamn it, we are going to sell the house and you are not going to stand in the way, wanna know why?” Duane didn’t want to know why. He didn’t know or remember anything except that smell of sweet watermelon. He could just picture Jenny coming out of the bathroom; a fog of steam rolling out behind her and her attractive legs, still glistening wet and running smooth up and into the towel wrapped around her torso.

“If you try to make trouble over it I’m going to let Jaime press charges against you.” She was right against his head and he closed his eyes to concentrate on the smell of watermelon and the feel of her breath in his ear. Then she mentioned the boy’s name and the spell was broken.

“He can’t press charges any old time he wants.” He heard himself say. “What will the police say if he goes in and tells them that a month ago I scared the shit out of him?”

“You smart-ass son of a bitch!” she snarled in his ear. “Let me fucking finish. I’m going to let Jaime press charges if you don’t sign papers today giving me permission to act in both our behalves on the selling of the fucking house. He is going to press charges today Duane! So you sign this paper or as soon as your ass gets out of this nuthouse, you can go straight to jail.”

He was looking into his wife’s face and never had he seen such anger. Her hazel eyes had turned into purple fire and pure bitterness had turned down the corners of her mouth. How could love ever turn into such blatant disgust?

“Did you see that guy’s tattoo?”

Duane’s spell was broken and he found himself standing, hands in pockets, rocking heel and toe before the huge glass

walls of the rest area's lobby. He had been staring at the speeding trail of traffic out on US 35; out beyond his still and patiently waiting PT Cruiser's rear end two hundred yards away in the bustling parking area and his spirit had sunken as low as it had been on the mental ward after his wife's visit there.

"Hey man, are you alright?" Duane turned from the glass and looked into Skylar's opaque eyes.

"Yeah I'm okay are you ready to ride?"

"All set." Skylar replied, holding up two perspiring cans of Code Red Mountain Dew. "Hey, did you see that dude's tattoo that just went through here?" He asked for a second time as they hit the exit.

"No."

"Ah man it was awesome. It was a Special Forces dagger, just like the one Mel Gibson had in Lethal Weapon. I gotta get one of those."

"You can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't get a Special Forces tattoo unless you've served in the Special Forces; didn't you know that?"

"There's nothing says I can't. I can get whatever tattoo I want."

"Okay you just go to a tattoo parlor and ask for one and see if the guy doesn't laugh in your face. Those artists have a code they live by. They ain't gonna put a Special Forces tattoo on some skinny kid." As Duane pulled open the door on his PT Cruiser he saw a dejected look coming over his young passenger's face and he was afraid he may have overstepped the bounds of their polite, new relationship. "Why don't you get a Spider-man tattoo? That's right up your alley and it would look cool as hell."

They were both in their seats and the doors were shut. Duane fired up the engine and Skylar did his ritual tap on one of his pop cans before opening it.

“I was gonna get a Spider-man tattoo actually but I ran into the same shit you’re laying on me.”

“What? Spider-man doesn’t mean anything. Anybody can have one of those.”

“Nah-uh” Skylar corrected. “I had a really cool one all picked out and the guy told me it meant I’d killed a minority.” Skylar’s can snapped open as Duane moved his sedan down the entrance ramp and into the traffic flow. “It was a tattoo of Spidey looking out from his web and the tattoo guy said that a web means you’ve killed a minority person in prison.”

“I didn’t know that.” Duane admitted and began to light up his fifth cigarette of the trip.

“Fuck me” Skylar sighed. “I see tattoos on people all over the fucking place and yet every one I pick out has some fucked up special meaning and I can’t have it.”

Duane chuckled at the dilemma as he drew his smoke into his lungs.

“So just get a Spider-man tattoo and forget the web; or just say fuck it and get the web and if you ever get sent to prison maybe the affiliation will keep you from getting bent over in the shower.”

“Maybe I’ll wait until I come up with something nobody else has thought of.” Skylar mused and then turned up his can. Duane signaled for the left lane with the sickening realization that I64 was looming up there ahead with the West Virginia State line soon to come and miles and miles in front of that to get lost in.

“Don’t forget now,” Duane reminded, “you’re my navigator and we’re getting close to where I’m gonna need you.”

“We’re not even on I64 yet.” Skylar jibed and then took another slurp. “We’ll find your brother alright, don’t worry about it.” Duane shook his head in bemusement and searched for a decent radio station as he got back up to sixty miles per hour and found his space amongst the traffic’s flow. He was

glad he'd decided to bring the boy along. He'd been good company and his confidence and optimism had helped offset some of Duane's deep rooted doubts. In fact he was almost certain he would have turned back before now had he made this trip alone.

"There ya' go." Skylar announced.

"What?"

"Right there" the boy pointed. "I64 to West Virginia, you need to get over."

"Wow" Duane said, hitting his turn signal. "That was quick."

"Good thing I came along." Skylar said. "You were daydreaming again. You would have driven right past the exit and been lost for sure."

Duane let out a sigh of exasperation and moved over a lane, as he looked for room to move over again before his exit got away from him. Trying to decide whether to risk pulling in front of or letting a gray haired, thickly bespectacled old man go past in his El Dorado, caused his heart to race and his head to momentarily spin with anxiety.

"Go, go-go!" Skylar commanded and Duane turned the wheel sharply and careened into the lane doing seventy with little more than two car lengths to spare. Two hundred feet more and he was exiting onto I64 and the old man in the El Dorado kept on down US 35 and disappeared with his traffic stream seemingly oblivious to his near miss.

"Whew! That'll get the ole blood pumping." Duane exclaimed, attempting to make light of his suspect driving skills.

"You'd have missed the exit for sure if you would have waited for that old man." Skylar pointed out. "I could have driven a bus into all the space we had."

"Well my wife never let me drive on long trips," Duane admitted as he tucked in his jangled nerves. "I tend to daydream a bit and I don't judge distance very well."

“Now you tell me.” His passenger moaned before taking a long slurp from his pop can.

Five miles down the road the sedan was still of voices other than the ones coming out of the door speakers in the form of Bruce Springsteen’s raspy verse. A friendly argument over who were the great, the near great and the god awful thespians of modern cinema had died away in a draw, with Duane conceding that Tom Cruise had indeed made a couple of decent films and Skylar promising to check out the subtleties of Peter O’Toole. The boy’s mind seemed to be elsewhere, as he stared blankly out his side window at the passing nothingness. Duane could see the reflection of his face in the glass, placid and still; just like the second time he’d met him and the first time he’d seen his features.

“Hello, I’m Duane” he had said to the frail looking boy curled up in a big vinyl chair in the dayroom of the hospital on the day Duane was strong enough to visit for the first time.

“We’ve already met” was the reply but the boy didn’t look up; he was staring at the twenty-four inch television that was playing Jerry Springer; his white hospital pajamas looked three or four sizes too big and his pale, bald head looked unnatural and obscene in the florescent lights.

“Oh?”

“I was Spider-man.”

“Oh ok” Duane said with surprise “I had convinced myself that was an hallucination”

“I can arrange that” the boy said indifferently.

“What’s that?”

“Hallucinations... I can arrange for you to have some if you want.”

“No thank you” Duane answered politely “I think I’m fucked up enough right now.”

“No one’s fucked up enough” the boy said and lost himself in the chaos erupting on the screen in the form of a shouting match between members of a dysfunctional family.

“You think that’s a fitting program for this place?” Duane asked, looking from the heated argument happening on the screen to the disturbed faces of the few scattered inmates tuning-in to varying degrees around the room. The boy looked up and around and into those same faces with apathy.

“Its reality... revolution... hate is power...these guys understand.”

He sounded like a sedated sixties radical spouting outdated slogans and Duane made the assumption that this kid had probably been a fixture on the ward for quite some time.

“How long you been here?” he dared to ask to check his theory and the boy made eye contact for the first time.

“This isn’t the nuthouse” he said seriously “no one stays here... this is a crisis center... they either sort you out and send you home or put you away downtown.”

“I see.”

“I’m not even on this ward” he continued looking back at the screen “I just come down to visit when I’m here for my therapy... I have Leukemia” He had produced the TV’s remote from somewhere and was flipping channels stopping on an episode of ‘leave it to Beaver’ “there... is that better?”

“Suits my nerves... thank you.”

“So where exactly do you work, or do you work?” Skylar asked over the top of the moody sliding bass of Lou Reed’s ‘walk on the wild side’.

“Yeah sure I work. I’m a software technician for Unger Industries; or at least I was; ever heard of them?”

“No.”

“Well if you were in the software business you would. We subcontract to all the big companies in the tri-state.

“That’s weird.” Skylar said without conviction.

“What? What’s weird, that I have a job?”

“No, that this is the first time I’ve heard anything about it. Most old guys always talk about their job. Remember when that guy came to see you at the hospital? I figured that was your boss but you ran me off like you were ashamed of me or something. And you never said another word about it.” Duane had to pause. He recalled the day and the incident and he had indeed run Skylar out of the smoking lounge when Bill Wallace appeared through the door but he hadn’t thought about it since. How odd, he hadn’t thought about it since. How do you forget an eighty thousand dollar a year job? How do you completely block out something that was as much, no more prevalent in your life than your marriage? Dr. Cribbs hadn’t gone down the road with it; he had asked the typical cliché questions about his work but nothing more than a casual interest. Some shrink, the bastard hadn’t even put together that he had blanked his whole career out of his mind.

“Did I just piss you off?” Skylar asked and Duane looked over at him.

“No not at all, I was just wondering the same thing you were. I haven’t had a thought about my job since I killed myself and that seems weird to me to.”

“Since you killed yourself?” Skylar laughed.

“What?”

“You just said since you killed yourself.”

“Did I? Damn, what do they call that?”

“Mental illness?”

“Well yeah I think that goes without... Freudian slip, that’s what it is; when you accidentally say something that reveals yourself it’s called a Freudian slip.”

“So why did you say you used to work at this software jazz” Skylar asked, not impressed with Duane’s knowledge

of psycho chatter “was that a Freudian slip too or did your boss fire you that day in the smoking lounge?”

“No... not at all” Duane answered Bill Wallace on the day in question eight or so days before. He had been asked if his boss’s visit was upsetting to him and should he leave “why should it upset me Bill? I thought we always got along” he had said; puffing incessantly on his cigarette because the visit was very upsetting to him and he wished Bill would leave.

“Christ Duane” the older balding man had said, when the Frankenstein scars had poked their ugly stitches out of his robe sleeves “I would have never guessed you would do something like this” Duane thought it an odd thing to say and it reminded of the time he’d been caught shoplifting as a boy and his father had said something similar.

“Well Bill, it came as a bit of a surprise to me as well” he said offhandedly.

“Really... You didn’t plan it?”

“Oh sure I planned it” Duane corrected “but not until I realized I was pretty much painted in a corner... if you know what I mean.”

Bill didn’t know what he meant and he shook his head in disbelief; they were speaking too casually about something much too dark.

“So what happens now?”

“Now? Well, I’m pretty much a prisoner until the head honcho around here thinks it’s safe to turn me loose.”

“Ahhhh... and of course I see your smoking... which is new for you also.”

“Yeah” Duane acknowledged, holding up the fag for consideration “a little woman in here turned me on to this guilty pleasure.” He said, and then he smiled into his boss’s eyes and got that same kid glove vibe he got from his sister.

“So tell me about the occurrence you instigated on the night you attempted suicide.” It was Thursday afternoon of the week past and Dr. Cribbs had his game face on in spades. “I’ve heard the story from your ex-wife and it’s been discussed with your sister but I’d like to hear your version.”

“Read the police report.” Duane said innocuously from the hot-seat across the desk. “I think they probably did a thorough job recounting it.”

“The police have never been involved you know that.”

“Oh yeah that’s right, I was blackmailed I keep forgetting.”

“I know you are very bitter towards your ex Mr. Tomlin and believe me I don’t blame you one bit.”

“I was... I’m not now.”

Cribbs put both elbows on his desk, pulled off his glasses with one hand and rubbed his tired eyes with the other as he spoke in a worn out voice. “You may as well know Duane; you’re not going to get out of this hospital until we talk about the incident.”

“I’m ready.”

“Good, let’s start with why you went to see Mr. Bookwalther when you did...”

“Who is Mr. Bookwalther?”

“That’s your ex wife’s... gentleman friend.”

“Is that right...? I did not know that.”

“Why did you go to his apartment when you did? Did you know your wife would not be there, or did you expect to find them together?”

“I knew she wouldn’t be there. I still know my wife’s work schedule.”

“Did you go there with the intent to kill him, or just scare him?”

“I thought about killing him but the gun wasn’t loaded.”

“I see...so when he answered the door you kicked it open on him.”

“He opened it with the chain on and I kicked it open.”

“So you hit him with the door the way he said.”

“Yeah, the door hit him in the head pretty good.”

“Did you really put the barrel of the gun in his mouth?”

“Yes I did... I stuck the gun in his mouth and I made him beg for his life and I pulled the trigger a couple of times.”

“And this was after your decision to commit suicide?”

“Definitely, I had nothing to lose at that point.”

“How did you feel afterwards?”

“Like Clint Eastwood... just like Clint Eastwood in one of those westerns.”

“No regrets?”

“No... he’s okay... and Jenny blackmailed me over it for the house; so everyone came out alright I think.”

“Yes” Cribbs related “I hear she told you Bookwalther would file a report with the police if you didn’t cooperate on selling your house.”

“Who told you that?”

“Your sister told me and your wife told her.”

Duane drove past an exit sign to Racina and craned his neck to read it one more time before his PT Cruiser left it standing idle with its blank side showing in the rear view mirror. Skylar was lost in a head banger song coming over the speakers like an angry unintelligible voice from beyond the grave; he had changed the station. Duane looked back on his last interview with Dr Cribbs and realized he had lied; he had lied and they say you should never lie to a shrink. It’s like cheating at solitaire. He had told him the gun he had put in his wife’s lover’s mouth was not loaded but it had been...sort of. Actually, and no one knew this or ever would; but there had been a little game of Russian roulette going on in that boy’s mouth. One thirty-eight round had been shoved into the chamber and the chamber spun before he had busted open the apartment door. He had forced the gun in the little bastard’s mouth and pulled the trigger at

least two times and maybe more. Hell he hadn't even kept count of how many times he'd pulled the trigger but at least it hadn't been that fateful sixth time. So Mr. Jaime Bookwalther had been facing at least a one in four chance of having his head blown off or even one in three... for all Duane knew it had come down to a fifty-fifty proposition and Jenny's new lover was still breathing due to the luck of that bullet being in the very last chamber. The realization that he was capable of such a thing would have made him feel out of control; made him feel dangerous to himself and everyone else; except for that was then and this was now. Except that that guy had bled to death in a bathtub and that life had come to a violent end and this was another life begun anew. And if not clean and brand new, then at least numb and brand new.

Dr. Cribbs had told him a story during those first uncertain days of therapy. Skylar had heard the same spiel and called it the doctor's 'little tree to hold onto' speech. For all the cruel jabs Duane had help partake against the doctor's character and cold treatment methods, he had to admit that 'the little tree to hold onto' had been and still was a story that rang true and might even be called down right inspiring; at least it was inspiring that Dr. Cribbs, with his woeful lack of bedside manner had either been clever enough to invent it, or as he claimed the story was true, had been touched enough by it to retell it. Either or, Duane was certain he would remember it always. As Duane watched the exits of Colcord and Finally Eccles go past, telling him his exit into the far reaches of the unknown was fast approaching he recalled the story and the morning Cribbs had enlightened him with it.

He was still confined to a wheelchair at the time and trying to stand had caused his head to swim and nausea to live ever present in his belly and his throat. Dr. Cribbs had only been one of many faces who bent down on one knee to

look him in the eye and that morning was the first session in his office. It had been that opening session where Duane had gotten off on the wrong foot by lighting a cigarette in defiance of the rules and blowing the illegal smoke into the psychologist's face. Trying to soften his hard-ass persona, Duane assumed, Cribbs had sat down on the corner of his desk after laying down his laws and expectations and had folded his hands in a praying gesture and with his left leg on the floor and his right leg swinging past his bent knee, he had changed gears.

“I want to tell you something that happened to a friend of mine. I think it might help you understand what we intend to move towards during your stay here.” Duane’s cigarette had been bullied away from him by then but he remembered feeling a strong desire to light another one; so strong in fact he pulled one from his breast pocket as he drove and fired it up, much to the chagrin of his passenger.

“This friend of mine”, the doctor had said “used to live in Oklahoma in that part of the country they always call tornado alley. He had about a forty-five minute commute to and from work and one Spring afternoon he was driving across one of those flat prairies towards home in a thunderstorm when a twister came out of nowhere right towards him. He said this thing was as broad as a good sized barn, moving thirty-five, maybe forty miles an hour and it was plowing up earth like a bulldozer as it worked its way towards the highway. Now everything he’d ever been taught told him to never try and outrun one of these things so he instinctively cut off his engine and got out of his car and started looking for a ravine to dive into. Only problem was, where he had chosen to stop was as flat as a pancake with nothing close to a ditch in sight and the rain was coming down in sheets and that tornado took out the power lines a quarter of a mile from the road and was bearing down on him with the sound of a hundred freight trains. He took a quick look around him and the only thing within distance

was this little tree; this little sapling, Charley Brown baby of a tree that was growing alongside the highway like somebody had pitched seeds from a passing car window and they had taken root. So, with literally seconds before this monster blew him away he threw himself to the ground and wrapped himself around this tree that was barely four feet tall.

He said that tornado passed by him not two hundred feet away and he saw his car get blown over and roll like a Tonka toy as his body kept slamming the ground and he prayed out loud over the roar of that behemoth and its hundred and sixty mile an hour winds but the little tree never gave way. He said every muscle in his body was on fire and he was still holding that little twig for dear life long after the sound of the twister had faded and gone. When he finally stood up the rain had slackened and the only evidence the sky had tried to kill him was his totaled Mazda and the channel dug a foot deep towards the highway, wide as a bicycle path.”

“Man,” Duane had said at the time “that was one lucky mother-fucker.”

“Yes indeed” Cribbs had agreed, “And he had a tree nursery go out and dig up that tree and he planted it in his front yard. Still there as far as he knows, he couldn’t bring it with him when he moved out here, but he wanted to.”

“I would’ve” Duane had declared. “I would have hired an expert to dig it up and I would have brought it with me.”

“Well, the point of the story is”, and here, as Duane recalled, Cribbs put his very unattractive professional face back on. “I want you to find a tree to hold onto. I think you need to reevaluate the relationships in your life; some you need to let go and still others maybe you need to pull closer. This crisis you’ve just experienced is your twister, so to speak, and you better look around you and find something to hold onto or it’s going to blow you away.”

“That all sounds rather desperate.” Duane had responded morosely.

“A bit dramatic” Cribbs agreed, “But it’s my job to point you in a positive direction.”

So maybe that’s where he was, Duane considered, as he neared and then went under the giant banner that welcomed him into the state that claims MOUNTAINEERS ARE ALWAYS FREE. If there was any hope of living with what he had done in his recent past he had to put it behind him and close the door on it. Something Skylar had told him came flooding back; something the boy had divulged during their shared hospital stay. He was a regular at Bethesda South, like Agnes and a few of the others that tended to either fall off some chemical abuse wagon or else forgot to take or ran out of their medication and returned to patterns that led to breakdowns and lock-up. Skylar Parsons roamed the halls of the place in the casual way constant guests do and he snooped and he overheard and he spied. On one of the last days of Duane’s stay the boy had joined him in the T.V. room and along with informing him they were being released within a day of each other he had told him that he’d snuck a peek at Dr. Cribbs notepad. The doctor had been called away to an emergency with Skylar in mid-session and he had taken the opportunity to leaf through some of the notes Cribbs had taken during his sessions.

“Wanna hear what he thinks of you?” The boy had asked with a mischievous grin.

“Not really” Duane had answered, with an instant, insatiable curiosity being born “Anyway I know what he thinks of me, ever since the cigarette incident he thinks I’m an asshole.”

“He thinks we’re all assholes.” Skylar had snickered “he kinda got fancy with you though... Sure you don’t wanna hear?”

“Go ahead.” Duane had sighed “you’re gonna tell it anyway.”

“He said life appears to have passed you by and you seem to be sitting in the waiting room of existence waiting for the inevitable appointment. I memorized it; what does that mean, inevitable appointment?”

“It means I’m just waiting to die.”

“That’s what I thought it meant; kinda sucks doesn’t it?”

“Yes it does.” He had answered, and as he entered the state of West Virginia the same feeling overwhelmed him that had taken hold the moment Skylar had disclosed the doctor’s notes. He had to get out of that waiting room. He had to make changes in his life before he slipped back into the Hyde character that had slit his wrists and recklessly nearly taken another man’s life.

“Heads up little man it’s time to play navigator.”

“What?” Skylar asked and rose up from his slumped position in the passenger seat.

“We just entered West Virginia. It’s gonna start getting tricky from here on in.”

CHAPTER FIVE: MANHUNT

Though Saturday morning dawned gloomy and overcast, Sheriff Jim Case answered his first call of the day wearing aviator sunglasses with lenses so dark the man who had made the 911 call, a senior citizen named Henry Horning, was unable to see his bloodshot eyes and Case's hangover wasn't unnecessarily tortured by the sharp white light of day. They were standing at the edge of Horning's property, out where Burton road took a sharp eastern turn to avoid a grade with too much decline to support road and there, someone had missed the curve and plowed through the yard; cutting parallel four foot ruts three inches deep and taking out a good sized rose bush.

"I can tell ya' with relative certainty who probably done this" the silver haired man said, standing in a burgundy Cardigan sweater and hugging himself against the morning's chill.

"One of the pizza delivery guys" Case answered, as he fished his Zippo from his pants pocket and lit a cigarette.

"That's what I figure."

"You didn't see anything?"

"I didn't even hear anything; house is too far from the road. Anyhow the wife plays one of those soothing sound machine things; I believe we slept with the ocean playing last night. Somebody could probably walk right in and scalp us both any night of the week."

"You oughta get a dog."

"We gotta dog. Got one of them Rottweilers but he ain't nothin' but a big baby and he sleeps with the noise machine too."

"Well I'll go and have a look at the cars that did delivery for the two pizza joints last night" Case said, still looking at

the tracks “I’d bet your rose bush left a little evidence on a paint job even if the muddy tires have been cleaned up.”

“I sure hope so” Horning admitted “I hope the stupid kid threw the alignment all to hell.”

“Okay Mr. Horning I’ll be getting’ back to ya’ when I find out something” Case said as they both headed back towards the house.

“Anything yet on the Ashley Peachtree deal?” the old man asked as they walked.

“No, not yet.”

“When you gonna know the particulars?” He asked and Case knew just what he meant.

“County Coroner expects to have the report Monday.”

“One heck of a mess.”

“Yes it is” Case shrugged.

“I’d bet that Nee-gra fella had his hand in it... ya’ think?”

“Can’t say.”

“Well, I just mean I don’t believe the folks from these mountains are capable of such a thing... do you?”

“I wouldn’t think so” Case said honestly as they reached his Cherokee “but in my business you can’t rule anything out” Henry Horning didn’t respond but shut the door on the Jeep when Case was inside and patted the glass in way of a goodbye and the sheriff pulled out.

Case had no more than taken that same curve that the yard vandal had missed than his dispatcher was calling him on the two way radio.

“What ya’ got Virginia?”

“911 from Brisco Hollow” she answered animatedly “got a report of a suspect about to flee at Tomlin’s place.”

“Suspect about to flee?”

“That’s what he said; Jon’s brother says that black man is packin’ up the car as we speak and about to run for the hills.”

Case didn’t answer but threw the switch on his siren, then thought better of it and turned it back off. “Keep your

head Jim” he said out loud “he’ll hear you comin’ from two miles away”. He now had a crucial choice to make. He could go on down the mountain via switchback and hit Route 38, go way the hell out of his way then back up another peak and down or he could cut across, go down the other side and into Edmund’s Hollow, go up and around Thygerson Lake and on into Brisco Hollow the back way. Route 38 was the long way but it was a flatter run, where as Edmund’s Hollow was shorter but the twists and turns were murder. Case gave the wheel a hard right and took his chances with Edmund’s Hollow and all those nasty curves, trusting his life long experience in the mountains to keep him out of any ditches or off any two thousand foot ravines. At least there was no glaring sunlight coming through the new buds on the trees and in his sunglasses and with his hands clinched on the wheel at ten and twelve o’clock Case was a study in focused determination as he reached speeds even the boys from Cadetti’s or The Pizza Palace would have envied. Fishtailing around eighty degree curves with his right foot on the gas and his left playing the brake he kept near the center of the road and prayed no one would meet him coming the other way. He was just thanking his good fortune that it was Saturday morning and not much traffic usually about this early, when a big Ford chip truck came around the bend and ran him off the soft shoulder of Garret’s switchback and nearly down an embankment that would have spelt disaster.

“Goddamn Sheriff, you alright?”

“What?”

“I said are you alright?” He was a large burly man that Case knew by face but not by name. He had jumped down from his rig and was walking back in his shirt sleeves. The Cherokee Chief was sitting sideways off the road on a gentle incline that turned sheer not forty feet on down. But helping his brakes had been two sapling oaks that had met his sliding vehicle at either wheel and probably kept him from skidding on off and rolling like a Tonka toy into oblivion. He had

opened his door and was sitting turned around with his feet on the step-up.

“You’re gonna get yourself killed driving down the middle of the road that-a-way Sheriff. I don’t even see how we kept from colliding” The tall hairy man had his hands on his hips and was looking at Case like he was wondering if he was drunk. Case took another couple seconds to absorb the shock and then looked around at where he’d ended up.

“Am I stuck you think?”

“Stuck? Nah, you oughta be able to pull it outta there alright... say are you on an urgent call or something?”

“I sure as hell am” Case said and suddenly swung his legs back inside the Cherokee, pulled the door shut and went to start the engine but it was still idling and gave him a blast of starter screech and the burly man was giving him that look again as he pulled out of the gentle incline, rolled back onto blacktop and continued the same dangerous ride leaving the truck driver still wondering about him in his rear view mirror.

His entrance into Brisco Hollow twelve minutes later and his subsequent arrival at Tomlin’s place a few minutes after that was not only anti-climactic but downright surreal in it’s strange tranquility. Pulling up through the crunching gravel Case stopped directly behind Jon’s blue Sunbird which had its trunk lid open and Timothy Wheatley was in the act of placing another box load there; giving the sheriff only a cursory glance and with a pleasant smile at that.

“What’s going on?” Case asked, as he stepped from his vehicle, his knees still trembling from his ordeal.

“What ya’ say Sheriff” Wheatley answered, as if this were any other visit of late.

“Well it looks like you’re planning a trip.”

“Yeah, I’m headin’ out” he said casually as he lowered the box into the trunk.

“Well you can’t” Case said flatly and Tim stopped, stood up straight, swiveled about and tried to see the eyes behind the dark glasses

“I can’t? Why can’t I?”

“Well for one thing you’re a suspect in a murder investigation and for another this car doesn’t belong to you and may still be needed as evidence.”

“A suspect? You never even implied I was any such thing.”

“Yeah, well I was keepin’ that fact to myself for the time being, but I’m afraid the thing is you can’t leave town.”

“Listen; don’t worry about the car” Tim said diplomatically “I’m only taking it as far as Beckley. That’s where my Subaru is in the shop but I called this morning and it’s ready; so I’m gonna drop Jon’s car off there.”

“Well” Case started, as he removed his shades “that sounds like a plan alright and it kinda solves the car dilemma but what about you?”

“That’s not a problem either.”

“It’s not?”

“Of course not; I left my number with Duane and if you have any more questions you can easily get a hold of me in L.A.” Then the tall black man added “course you gotta give me a few days to get out there” Case shook his head and gave a chuckle that came out his nose in three short sniffs.

“Mr. Wheatley you don’t seem to understand the trouble you’re in. You are my number one suspect in a murder case. I can’t let you leave for the other side of the damned country. This town would have my badge before nightfall.”

“Number one suspect; what the fuck are you talking about?” For the first time the words of the tall man had rancor. He stepped forward and his size became intimidating. He was wearing tight dress jeans, pressed with a crease; a double riveted belt with gold studs and an open two toned jacket that had patchwork on the shoulders and elbows and looked to Case like a toned down version of something

Michael Jackson might have worn in the mid eighties but it didn't look out of place or time on Wheatley because he had the Grace Jones hair thing happening. "Jon Tomlin, if something has happened to him for real, is my best friend and that girl I never laid eyes on until night before last...is this some kind of a fucking racial thing?"

"Racial?" Case repeated "not at all. You're my top suspect because you had the opportunity and probably, once we've looked deeper into it, some motive as well."

"That's bullshit and you know it sheriff. He was with a client in an open garage in the middle of the fucking night. Any one of your hill-Jacks could have slipped in there and done it. Christ his own brother may have done it have you thought of that?"

"Of course I have" Case answered evenly "but I spoke to his shrink up north yesterday and he's pretty much ruled him out."

"Lovely" Wheatley said in exasperation and put his hands on his hips thus opening up further his already unsnapped jacket and revealing just a bit of leather and what Case instantly recognized as a shoulder holster. Casually the sheriff let his right hand ease down towards his gun until he was about two inches from the loop lock. Just then he very nearly made a jerk for the pistol as his already super alert senses were bombarded with sound and he visibly flinched as he spun around. The silver Crown Victoria was coming right at him; red and blue light bar flashing and gravel and dust spitting up from the drive. Case's eyes widened with the instinctual knowledge that on this surface there was no way it could stop before taking him out and he took a giant side step, came down on the slope of the gravel, slid on the Cuban heel of his boot, turned his ankle and went down in the cold dewy grass on his ass and lost his hat and his sunglasses. Tim Wheatley immediately had his hands under Case's armpits and was lifting him back onto his feet as the

sheriff watched the squad car screech to a halt right about where he had been standing.

“Goddamn it Fred, what are you thinkin’?” Case shouted and his deputy stepped out of the car to see what had caused his boss to lose his footing.

“I heard the fleeing suspect call and came to back you up boss”

“Well Jesus Christ you could have...”

“He’s takin’ off “

Case turned his head just in time to see Tim Wheatley bolting through the flat backyard like a gazelle

“GO, GO, GO” he sputtered, leaving his hat and sunglasses on the ground and was passed by his longer legged deputy who already had his pistol out, pointed towards the sky as he ran, with Case behind with his pant legs stuck in the tops of his boots like an old prospector’s, as Wheatley was already disappearing over the rim of the steep hill.

“HE’S ARMED FRED” Case warned as Dollop neared the plateau’s edge where Tim had just gone over.

Wheatley fell head over heels down the steep slope of field grass, still slick with dew, somersaulting off the last thirty feet and miraculously coming out of the tumble on his feet and at a dead run without missing a beat. Fred Dollop, coming along after he was up and running, wasn’t so lucky. Attempting to skate down in his Stacy Adams Oxfords, Fred immediately lost his footing and did a tumble slide all the way down leaving him soaking wet and without his gun at the bottom. When Case reached the top of the hill Wheatley was already a hundred and fifty yards away and still moving like a freight train towards The Quickie Stop and Dollop was back on the chase with gun in hand.

“SHOOT HIM GODDAMN IT!” Case hollered desperately from on top of the hill but Fred couldn’t hear anything over his own pounding heart and the idea of stopping and pointing his gun at a running man’s back would

have been unthinkable to the deputy anyway. Case, feeling out of the immediate hunt, eased his way down the seventy foot decline crab style and only got the pointed toes of his boots and his hands wet without adding to the grass stains on his knees that may or may not have been terminal for the expensive dress pants. Tim Wheatley had passed the rear side of the grocery and was out of sight over another slight hill that lay between the store and another sheer climb up the side of the mountain. 'Surely he would run out of steam when and if he started up that bitch of a climb' Case thought, as the black man came into view again and looking about the size of an ant from the distance, sure enough started up the sharp mount with great difficulty, using the ground and the baby trees to pull himself up and soon, long before Fred Dollop had even rounded the store he was gone, up and into the trees and probably scrabbling his way onto Courtier Road. Fred had stopped, bare headed, having lost his hat in the chase and was standing bent over in the gravel of The Quickie Stop's rear lot holding his side.

Case, seeing his deputy had lost the race scrambled back up the hill, this time clawing with elbows and knees and ruining his pants in the bargain but sprinting back to his Jeep he threw it in gear and ran in reverse, narrowly missing Fred's cruiser and did a U turn in Tomlin's front yard.

"Virginia?" He yelled into his radio and didn't wait for an answer "get Gary on the horn and tell him to get the hell out to Courtier Road in Brisco Hollow pronto. Tell his wife it's an emergency and I'm in pursuit of a suspect who is on foot... got that?"

"I got it sheriff... want me to call Brian as well?"

"Yes Goddamn it yes."

Anyone in Henschford who owned a CB radio or a police scanner had tuned in after word of Ashley Peachtree's murder and left it on ever since. So this new development,

barely twenty four hours later, hit the mountains like the verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial or maybe even 911. Within an hour of Virginia's first 'fleeing suspect' call word had spread like wildfire and that Saturday morning Case and his hot pursuit were bigger than the Super Bowl and a presidential election rolled into one. Before long Marty Dutch had closed The Quickie Stop, rounded up three of his fishing buddies and they were beating the bushes above Brisco Hollow with their hunting rifles slung over their shoulders. And possibly even more dangerous, a group of armed, thrill seeking, Henchford High kids had packed into six four wheel drive vehicles and were touring up and down the switchbacks above both, Brisco and Edmund's hollow keeping tabs on each other with cell phones and more officially and infinitely more helpful, six highway patrolmen had offered their services and were making rounds as well.

"Fucker's vanished like a fart in the wind" Case said over his radio, abandoning any attempt to adhere to FCC rules for on air profanity "Brian, you still got your ears on?"

"I'm here sheriff" Blakely replied, from his dejected, out of the loop position back at Tomlin's place.

"Go ahead and have that Sunbird impounded."

"Yes sir... then can I join you guys in the hunt?"

"No, you stay right there; I got Bob Pulley on the way to see you. Anyway Wheatley may decide to double back for the car" then there was a slight pause over the air before Case continued "I'm gonna give it another half hour or so then I intend to disperse this posse that's rampaging around up here before somebody gets trigger happy" Brian knew he was speaking directly to the teenage road warriors, who were no doubt tuned in to his broadcasts, in hopes of discouraging their efforts.

"Give me the word boss and I'll help you round 'em up" he said, as he grinned to himself at the grief they were causing the teenagers in their 'daddy bought' four wheel drive SUV's.

“We’ll run all their asses in if they haven’t gone home in the next thirty minutes”

Brian hung up his mic hoping the kids wouldn’t obey and he’d get a chance at handcuffing a couple of the smart ass boys who had teased him in the past over his affliction. Just the thought of it caused another wave of forced hiccups and he began blinking his eyes so furiously he wouldn’t have seen Timothy Wheatley if he’d walked right up and blown his brains out. Then he paused and took a moment to wonder why Bob Pulley would be paying him a visit.

As Fred Dollop rounded a sharp curve on Meehan road he found the sheriff’s Jeep parked off the side on a patch of dirt and his boss sitting on the hood with a cigarette in his mouth and a shotgun lying across his lap. Dollop knew what he was doing because he had just been sitting further up the mountain doing the same thing; listening and watching for Wheatley. In the mountains sounds can carry on the breeze for miles. A man fighting his way through the undergrowth, as Wheatley was most certainly having to do if he was on the move, could be detected from the road two miles away and even if the wind wasn’t carrying the right direction, the deer being disturbed or the dogs barking gave the same clues. Case was sitting with his ears cocked listening for a disruption in the natural flow of the Alleghenies, as Fred rolled up alongside with his elbow out the window and got a cursory glance.

“Anything?”

“Nope.”

“Sorry about letting him get away” the deputy said with just a touch of his usual irony “you pissed off at me?” To which Case turned and looked Fred full in the face. Dollop was badly in need of a shave and his tortoise shell glasses had lenses thick enough to magnify his red rimmed eyes; he looked like death on a soda cracker.

“No” he stated honestly “I’m not pissed off at you. But I don’t understand why you had to barrel up that drive-way like a bat outta hell.”

“Yeah” Fred admitted shyly “I was just about in the bed when I heard Virginia’s fleeing suspect call and I was racing to help you out.”

“Well” Case started, unable to fault such devotion “he’s played his hand; now all we gotta do is catch him.”

“Fucker can run like a deer. Hell, he could be in Tennessee by now.”

“Nah” Case corrected “he’s right here someplace. Let’s don’t forget this is just a faggot L.A. nigger this isn’t Rambo.”

“Think he’s probably laying low waiting for nightfall?”

“That’s my guess; that’s why I have Bob Pulley on the way up here.”

“Ah, good call” Fred grinned with approval as he rubbed his hot burning eyes before letting out a loud yawn “if Wheatley’s gone to ground one of those beagles will smell him out.”

“He should be at Tomlin’s place any minute to get Wheatley’s scent.”

“Oh ok” Fred said with realization “I heard you tell Brian he was on the way but I didn’t make the connection.”

Fred turned off the engine of his car and the two men sat in the silence of the mountain for a long while. The wind was whispering in the upper trees and a distant woodpecker was hard at work. There was the flutter of a bird leaving a nearby roost and the temperature had reached a balmy forty-eight degrees and Fred’s eyes were growing heavier by the moment and he had to shake himself awake and get on with the whole reason he had stopped in the first place.

“I saw something when I was chasing Wheatley” he suddenly said “something behind The Quickie Stop.”

“What?”

“Remember where I ran out of steam in the lot? You were down the hill by then.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re gonna make me take a drug test when I tell you this one.”

“What the fuck did you see?”

“Spider-man.”

“Spider-man? You mean the guy in the funny book?”

“I mean the web slinger. The comic book and the movie hero. The masked man in red and blue. He was perched on one of those old brick columns in that overgrown field back there... you know what I’m talking about?”

Case knew exactly what he was talking about. There were two entrance columns back behind The Quickie Stop that set nowhere and led to nothing. Two brick spires four feet tall and about five feet apart; used to be white but had turned a peeling, crumbling gray through neglect with square cement lids once the color black. They set back in the deserted field behind the store in obscurity, all but hidden by the wild grass where they had set forgotten for many years. But when Case was growing up in these mountains, in the early sixties, before the grocery was there, the columns had stood on either side of a dirt lane that led to a rickety old abandoned house. Only someone much older than himself would remember the occupants who had once lived there. But now the house itself was long gone and the columns stood like tombstones to someone’s forgotten past.

“So what did he do?”

“He was just crouched on the lid of the column on the left. Then when he saw that I saw him he jumped down and took off.”

“You were seeing things” Case said flatly “probably all that running shortened the oxygen supply to your brain.”

“No” Fred insisted “I know what I saw. He was down on his haunches just like the real thing; lookin’ right at me.”

“A grown man or a kid?”

“From that distance I couldn’t tell.”

“Well there you go... one of those weirdoes from Minion’s Hollow came up here for the show.”

“Could be” Fred agreed but not convinced “I guess one of those kids could be messing around.”

“Well what other scenario is there Fred?” Case snapped impatiently “That Spider-man has come down from Gotham City to help us catch our killer?”

“Spider-man’s not from Gotham City Chief; you’re thinking of Batman.”

“Whatever... look, I know you’re running on empty by now. Why don’t you go on home and get some shuteye. There’s so many folks up here on the hunt somebody’s probably gonna fall over Wheatley before the dogs even get up here.”

“Nah” Dollop demurred “I’m too wound up; I’d like to see it through now, if you don’t mind”

“No I don’t mind; but if you see Spider-man again for God’s sakes don’t shoot at him. We don’t need a lawsuit on us for killing somebody’s twelve year old kid. I’m already on the verge of getting bounced out of office on my ass.”

“You got it Chief” Fred replied, happy to have gotten the sighting off his chest “I’ll keep my piece holstered unless Spider-man is a big black nigger” and he drove off and soon disappeared around the next bend.

Duane Tomlin murdered his wife. With the patience and planning of a fine jeweler and the obsessive, dogged, single-mindedness of a profile stalker, he first treed her and then he handed her, her own ass. It was a crisp early April morn but the half naked trees were full of new birds singing to the promise of Spring; as he waited in a rented Chevy for his old Suburban to come navigating through the cement parking dividers of The Eichelman Shopping Center. Jenny was right on time, as usual and pulled in not thirty feet away from

where he sat, perched like a hawk in a mountain tree. She was still unaware of him as he came up behind her and when his shadow fell across the window in the open door she froze for a moment before recognition set in.

“Jesus Duane you scared the shit out of me!” and then after she caught her breath and stopped clutching at her heart “When did you get back?”

“The other day.”

“Well I’m sorry to hear about Jon... what an awful thing ...do they have any idea yet who...”

Her words were cut short by the chloroform rag that Duane suddenly reached out and shoved over her nose and mouth. She struggled wildly, her long nails clawing for his face but falling short to whip down the front of his cotton/polyester jacket, as he quickly moved around her to get a better grip and with one arm wrapped tightly around her waist, he kept applying constant pressure on the rag with the other. As he surveyed the deserted lot to see if anyone was witnessing the attack, he felt the fight leaving her and soon she was slumped against him like a passed out drunk. Into the sofa-like front seat of the Suburban he lugged her dead weight and he threw the chloroform soaked rag into the back and pulled the roll of duct tape from one of the huge field jacket’s pockets and went to work securing her wrists to the armrest of the passenger side door. Her beautiful face, so elegant in its quiet repose, half hidden behind the long auburn hair that fell across it, had her looking like some top shelf model and he lovingly brushed it aside.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Jenny said, after Duane had waited a few minutes for her to wake up

“Anything I please” he answered, as he slid up and sat on the edge of the seat just past her bent knees.

“I’ll see you do time over this Duane” She threatened but the dead cold look in his eyes caused fear to creep into hers “let me go... you don’t have to do it like this.”

“Do what?”

“Well, you’re about to rape me aren’t you?” she asked nervously, as she tested the strength of her bonds.

“No sweetheart, I’m going to do no such thing” he said coolly, as he removed a crumpled plastic bag from a pocket of his coat.

“Oh God, what’s that for?”

But instead of answering he pulled off another strip of tape; this one about ten inches long and he pressed it over her mouth and smoothed it out. Now her eyes were wide with horror as he flipped open the clear bag and in one smooth motion slid it over her head. In her younger days she would have been able to throw a leg high enough to catch him around the neck but Jenny was no Spring chicken anymore and her attempts came up short; so as her knees bumped against his back he watched her face agonize the loss of oxygen that was killing her brain.

KNOCK

KNOCK

Duane heard it only faintly, a tapping on aquarium glass, but he was snake fascinated with his wife’s throws of death, as he twisted the bag into her throat and it filled up like a balloon .

KNOCK

KNOCK

Now it was louder and he looked about himself; fearful he had been caught in the act.

KNOCK

KNOCK

There on Jenny’s side of the car, looking through the window at him was Jon. He was dead. Blue skinned with black rings around his hollow eyes... Hollywood dead.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to you Jon... what an awful thing” but Jon was looking down at Jenny; looking like he didn’t approve.

“Where are you Duane?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, where are you? Did you go home or are you still down in Dog Run?”

“Still here Jon... I think.”

“Good... now answer the door.”

KNOCK

KNOCK

Duane opened his eyes and found himself in the guest bedroom of Jon’s place amongst Tim Wheatley’s photographic equipment and the knocking hadn’t stopped.

He padded down the hall in his stocking feet and pulled open the front door, which still said NIGGER LOVING FAGGOT in big black letters, and was confronted with the third deputy of Sheriff Case’s department and the one he had yet to meet.

“Duane Tomlin?” The blond, almost white headed, cherub faced, young man asked and Duane was immediately uncomfortable looking into the nervous blue eyes of Brian Blakely.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry... did I wake you?”

“Just taking a little nap; what can I do for you?”

“We need an article of Tim Wheatley’s clothing” he said earnestly but the dumbfounded look he got in return told him Duane wasn’t on the same page “For the dogs” he added, hoping it would help but it didn’t.

“Dogs?”

“Yeah, beagles... they’re trackers... that guy has them in his truck” Brian answered and threw a waving hand behind him, where the engine was noisily running on a panel truck down the drive.

“Wait a minute is Tim missing now too?”

“Well yeah, he sorta got away earlier” and then seeing he still wasn’t getting through “you know, after you made the fleeing suspect call... you did make a fleeing suspect call this morning... right?”

“No, no I only got up a little bit ago and I went back to sleep on the couch.”

Duane’s eyes were puffy, his short hair in disarray and he was about five days in need of a shave. Brian figured he had either just awoken as he said or he was drunk

“Well that’s odd. The report I got was that you made the call to the station.”

Duane’s mind began to race. ‘Timmy had tried to make a run for it; my God! And Skylar had called 911 but to remain anonymous he had used Duane’s name. Fuck, what did that mean? Could Timmy have really done something to Jon?’ And now Duane was on the verge of blowing the little man’s cover. How could he explain Skylar’s sudden appearance now? But it was too late to retract it.’

“No it wasn’t me... must have been someone else that didn’t want their name in the middle of this mess” he said lamely and the deputy even seemed to be looking through his bullshit, but if so he didn’t let the cat out of the bag.

“Must have been” he agreed “so you think we could have something with Wheatley’s scent on it?”

“Oh yeah sure... come on in.”

Every other Saturday was Gary Hollenkamp’s day off and this should have been his day. But of course circumstances being what they were, he was not only expecting to be called out, but when Case put out the call for his services he was watching TV with three of his girls wearing his uniform. Just over two hours later he was slowly rolling his cruiser up a half mile dirt trail that served as the drive to an empty, remote chalet on the Edmund’s Hollow side of Thygerson Lake. He had seen three deer scared from the lane there and now, with his heart pounding in his chest, he was easing his way up to see if the fleet footed Wheatley could have actually made it up this far; if he could, this would be a perfect place to hide. With his right hand on the

butt of his pistol and the left steering his car, he eased through the overgrown weeds and edged up to the slim two and a half story house and stopped before the white two car garage door. It was times like these, and there hadn't been many in his career, that his wife's fateful warnings always rang loudest in his ears 'what am I going to do with six kids if somebody shoots you dead?' He heard it whispered every time he pulled over an out of state tag for speeding or answered a family disturbance call and he was hearing it shouted as he climbed the creaky steps to the second floor with his .32 caliber in hand.

The property was another piece of Peachtree real estate. A fisherman's rental when old man Peachtree used to stock Thygerson Lake with bass and trout and hobnob with senators and such; now it was dilapidated and the only known use of the place in past years, or so rumor had it, was for some of Roberta's and later Ashley's encounters; be they sexual and or of the illegal drug party variety.

He peered through the picture window between the parted drapes, cupping his free hand to diminish the glare. The inside looked sparse, dark and foreboding. He turned the door knob and found it locked. Bending down he examined the lock for a jimmy and to his great relief found nothing; then with less trepidation he clunked back down the steps to go around and check the back door, which led into the first floor pantry. It was there Gary froze in his tracks. The lower case window in the door had been broke out. There was a white lacy curtain hiding his view to the inside but he knew anyone in there would see the shadow he cast, so he stepped to the side of the cement stoop, walking in the broken glass there, and turned the handle to the door. It opened and Gary stopped and let go. He crouched down with his back against the shingled house and the wind blew the door open wider with a sonorous creak right out of a Hollywood ghost story.

Jim Case was getting anxious for the dogs to arrive. He honestly thought Wheatley would have been seen if not already caught by now and he was beginning to worry that maybe he had underestimated him. A tall black, gay man should stick out in these mountains like a turd in a punch bowl and yet he eluded all contact for more than two hours of what was, after all, a relatively intense manhunt. Case was on his way back down the mountain to meet Bill Pulley and his dogs or possibly hurry them along when he was met on a curve by a Subaru with a woman behind the wheel and as they passed she opened her horn on him.

“Christ bitch do you need the whole road?” He hollered out his open window when he noticed the driver and passenger were waving at him as they passed; and when he straightened the turn he pulled over, though there was no shoulder where he stopped, and he watched in his rear view mirror as the Subaru turned around with great difficulty, came back and pulled up alongside him.

“Good morning Sheriff.”

He recognized her from someplace; a little old woman with a cheerful smile, sitting in the passenger side seat, not two feet from him when they stopped.

“What can I do for you ladies” he said patiently “I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

“We’re very aware of that Sheriff” the driver leaned forward and said; and all Case could make out were inquisitive, intelligent eyes and a husky female voice “can we find somewhere off the road to talk to you a minute... it’s about Timothy Wheatley” then she added “I know him.”

Gary Hollenkamp was driving back down a switchback and trying to rationalize what he had just done; or more aptly, what he had just failed to do. He had not gone in to investigate the chalet and he had yet to report that it had been broken into. As he was sitting with his back against the

house with his gun in his hand a cool morning breeze came off of Thygerson Lake, rustled through his hair and finished opening the back door. But all he could think of was his wife's eternal question:

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH SIX KIDS IF SOMEONE SHOOTS YOU DEAD? And he sat there for the longest time; listening. He didn't consider the fact that the man that may be inside had murdered two people or that he was being trusted and paid to take these sort of chances. What he did think about was self preservation and he ran. He ran like hell back around the house through the tall weeds and to his car. He didn't radio for back-up but ducked into the seat, threw the Ford in reverse and swept back through the brush in a clumsy race down the slight decline and out of harm's way; praying as he went that he wouldn't catch a bullet between the eyes on the way. How he was going to explain himself to Case was what was on his mind as he came back down the mountain. He would have to tell him and he could imagine the look on his boss's face when he told him that he may have had Wheatley holed up and let him get away.

"I don't think he's your man."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I don't believe Timothy Wheatley is capable of the crimes."

Jim Case couldn't believe his ears; or his eyes. The woman before him; spouting nonsense in a nice fitting pair of Chic jeans, had a striking resemblance to Kate Jackson; always his favorite Charley's angel. She had introduced herself as Caitlin Rutledge an ATF agent and the little woman with her; the 'murder she wrote' lady from the day before was her mother. They had found a spot half a mile down the mountain with a shoulder and then, standing alongside her Subaru the tall brown eyed beauty stood

shoveling him a load of bullshit with a cool mountain breeze tousling her hair.

“Well then why did he take off running?”

“I believe he did that because he fears reprisal from the Carlos drug cartel”

Case just stood and blinked his eyes; now he had heard it all; first Sheriff Simmons up in Beckley was trying to make a Carlos connection to his drug problems and now this woman was trying to put a different cover on the book he was writing.

“So he was standing in the yard with me and he suddenly feared The Carlos cartel might take him down any second.”

Caitlin had little patience for sarcasm from men and Case’s last sentence was dripping with it but she managed to curb her natural reaction; with the help of a hard look from her mother; who had chosen to stay in the car and listen to the proceedings from an open window.

“Not hardly Sheriff” she answered with a smile “what he was afraid of was being arrested by you and having his employer find out” just then a Sharon County Highway Patrol car came around a bend and eased by; the driver giving Case a big zero made with his left hand as he passed signifying what he had come across.

“Well what you’re saying may be true Ms. Rutledge but we gotta catch him before we worry about what we try to convict him of.”

“Very true” Caitlin agreed “I just wanted you and your men aware that he’s not some mad dog killer so no one gets trigger happy.”

Had Case had the opportunity to impugn on that last remark the sarcasm would have sent Caitlin Rutledge into a tailspin but just then there came the crackle of gunfire; three seconds of shots over top of one another in quick succession then it stopped. Case threw up a hand for quiet and the highway patrol unit that had just passed was returning in reverse.

“Where’d that come from?” The trooper asked excitedly.

“Farther below” Case answered with conviction; as he ran to his Jeep tossed in his hat and followed it.

Gary Hollenkamp was only half a mile up the mountain on the same road when the shots were fired and before Case had gone round the bend behind the Sharon Highway Patrol he was the caboose of the law train, snaking down the switchback.

“I take it you heard that?” Case said over his radio, as he looked in his mirror at Gary

“Yeah I did”

“BRIAN, FRED REPORT IN” he demanded, as the trooper in the lead hit his lights but refrained from the siren in case there was more gunfire to follow.

“BRIAN, FRED...”

“I got my ears on good buddy.”

“Fred, we have shots fired.”

“I know chief I’m comin up on big Garr’s rear end right now.”

Case consulted his rear view and sure enough Dollop was joining the train with his lights flashing.

“BRIAN REPORT IN.”

“Yeah.”

“Where you at?”

“I’m with Pulley; he just now turned the dogs loose.”

“You left the house?” Case asked, ignoring the obvious.

“Well, yeah... is that a problem?” And before the sheriff could answer “I figured you’d want me with the dogs... you know, in case they get onto something.”

“Yeah that’s alright... we have shots fired up here.”

“So I heard... hey we’re startin’ em off where he was last seen... that’s how ya’ gotta do it.”

“I know I know... listen something’s up here... you keep me posted.”

When they got a mile further down, on a switchback called Jenson road, Case and company saw a commotion off in a clearing before a wall of tall oak trees. The lead Trooper saw it first and stopped his vehicle. Case was out of his Jeep and moving past his window as the patrolman picked up his mic. Marty Dutch and his three compadres were in the distance doing, what looked to Case like a victory dance. There was much hooting and hollering and general excitement. When they finally saw the sheriff and his cavalcade, for by then Gary, Fred and the state trooper were all out of their vehicles, they raised their rifles in the air and hooted and hollered even louder. Case knew the four of them well; not as acquaintances but in the line of duty, for he had been called out to the various bodies of water around the county to break up one of their all night drinking fishing parties that always got too loud. Marty Dutch, the grocer was the ring leader standing in his loud orange hunting vest and white John Deere ball cap and there was Tom Berger a toothless, beer bellied, pony tailed drunk in an oversized long sleeved flannel and sweats. Rounding out the great white hunters was a retiree named Billy Smart, who ironically wasn't; and one of Charles Hilliard's crowd, and the only semi-intellectual of the bunch, the Ichabod Crane looking Alan Billings. Terror rose into Case's throat for a second as he considered the idea that these yahoos may have just gunned down Wheatley.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU IDIOTS SHOOTING AT?" He hollered, as all heads from his party turned to see Caitlin Rutledge ease up in her four door and block the outside lane from oncoming traffic.

"We bagged us a beauty sheriff" Marty Dutch howled through cupped hands "come on out and see!"

"Got us a handsome buck" Tom Berger added, as Caitlin Rutledge came around the Cherokee Chief in her designer jeans, white running shoes and a fuzzy blue sweater; arms folded against her chest and her hair pulled behind her ears.

“Please tell me a buck isn’t some local racial slur.”

But Marty Dutch had lifted the head high enough to be seen by then and Case, with a sigh of great relief, could see a rack of antlers through the tall grass.

“No Ms. Rutledge, bucks are just male deer down here, just like in the big city.”

“Damn” Fred exclaimed “that sucker’s huge. Want me to arrest them Chief? It’s way the fuck past deer season.”

But Case didn’t answer; he had already left the road and high stepped his way into the tall grass. The four men were about seventy yards away, at the very edge of the clearing and Case lit a cigarette along the way to cool his anger.

“He’s a daddy white tail” Marty beamed proudly as Case arrived “bet he’s every bit of two hundred fifty pounds” the four men were standing around the kill as if they expected to have their picture taken. Alan Billings had his shotgun’s butt resting on his bent knee and the barrel pointed towards the trees like some big game hunter in the wilds of Africa and the deer lay with its white neck twisted back unnaturally and its antlers, looking like long alien fingers poked into the wet ground. The eyes were placid and wide open staring vaguely at heaven just as Ashley Peachtree had been doing twenty some hours before.

“Are you assholes aware that I’m in the middle of a manhunt?” Case said through gritted teeth and Marty Dutch stopped smiling.

“Well no shit sheriff” he replied with a huff “that’s why we was out here in the first place.”

“The deer just come out of the trees sheriff” Billy Smart added defensively “for all Marty knew he was takin’ out that nigger.”

“Goddamn it” Case exploded “that’s the whole fucking trouble here; what if me or one of my deputies would have been coming out of the trees?” to which the four men exchanged a mixture of either guilty glances at one another or indignant glares at Case but the point had been made and

just then Gary Hollenkamp called out urgently from the road and Case did an about face and left the four men wondering if they were allowed to gather their catch and secure it to the hood of one of their trucks before they skedaddled.

“Sheriff, can we take the buck or do have to leave it lay?” Marty Dutch cautiously asked

“I don’t give a shit” Case answered disgustedly without turning around “I don’t care if the four of you get shot between the fucking eyes.”

When he got back to the road his boots and pant legs were wet, where the dew stays long in the high grass; to go with the grass stains on his ass, he thought dejectedly, as he took off his cowboy hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the same sleeve.

“Brian’s on the horn” Gary informed him as he stepped onto blacktop “must have bad news; he wouldn’t even tell me” the corners of Case’s mouth turned down as he placed his hat back on his head. More bad news he didn’t need. He took the mic from Gary’s hand, where he stood at the passenger’s side window of his squad car; the cord was pulled almost straight.

“Yeah Brian what have you got?”

“We turned the dogs loose and they roamed around up the slope there where he went in; then they came right back down and around The Quickie Stop and back around the long way to the house again.”

“What house?” Case asked but a sick feeling was coming into his stomach.

“Tomlin’s place.”

“Goddamn it” Case exclaimed “Please tell me the fucking Sunbird has already been impounded.”

“ ‘Fraid not sheriff” the deputy answered sheepishly and Case closed his eyes for the blow he knew was coming “but the car is gone.”

All five of the people at the scene were near enough to hear every word Blakely said and no one said a word for a

long moment after the fact until the impact had had a chance to set in.

“Get on the road Brian” Case said with his head hung down.

“Where to?”

“Towards Beckley” he answered flatly, and then he threw the mic into the passenger seat of Gary’s Crown Victoria, as to not snarl the cord, opened the door, sat down inside and fiddled with the station buttons on the radio.

“This is Sheriff James Case of Henchford... I’d like to issue an APB on one Timothy Wheatley... black male... height about six feet three or four...age mid thirties... short square haircut... last seen wearing black designer jeans and charcoal denim jacket... driving a blue four door Pontiac Sunbird... suspect is armed and dangerous and should be approached with extreme caution” Case examined Caitlin Rutledge’s face as he spoke the last damning warnings but her expression was impassive. “Alright boys let’s roll” he said, looking from anxious face to anxious face “Brian is heading north-east... Fred, you take Cumberland west... Gary you take it to the east” then he looked at the trooper who was reading his thoughts and spoke before Case had a chance.

“I’ll get some help from my department and hit some of the back roads towards Beckley” he said confidently and Case merely pointed in agreement and started for his Jeep.

“Where you goin’?” Fred asked and Case stopped at his door.

“Go on up the mountain” Gary suddenly said “he just might duck into one of those lodges up there until the heats off” to which Case grinned before tossing his hat into his car.

“Good thinking Garr” he said and then there was a chorus of slamming doors followed by four of the five vehicles at the summit all snaking off around the bend, leaving Caitlin Rutledge and her mother to watch the distant hunters trying to pull the deer across the clearing.

“WHY DON’T YOU GET A TRUCK OUT THERE?” she hollered as loud as she could and then watched as the idea reached them on the breeze and they stopped in their tracks.

“Idiots” she said under her breath, as she continued to watch them.

“Folks in these mountains must drink a lot” her mother stated matter of factly “so are we not going to join in on the cross country chase?” Dorothy asked her daughter without even a hint of sarcasm.

“Of course not” Caitlin answered sharply without taking her eyes off the distant show “they’ll have every lawman in the state on the chase by this afternoon; they sure won’t need us.”

Bubba Gardner was getting updates on the big manhunt all along his route that Saturday afternoon. There were only eight stops where he regularly came into human contact; the rest of the time just pulling up alongside roadside boxes and slipping the mail behind the door. But that day he was pulling into driveways of those he considered in the know and delivering by hand to get the latest on the crazed faggot L.A. nigger on the run. The trouble was nothing was happening; the Pontiac had disappeared just before eleven A.M. and at three o’clock neither hide nor hair had been seen of the man or the car.

It was near the end of the route and with this excitement on his mind that Bubba pulled up to Indrey Quinn’s roadside, birdhouse looking, mail container on a stick in his little box truck and went to stuff it.

“Hey fat man.”

He had come from nowhere. Indrey Quinn was suddenly standing with an elbow perched on the box as if they’d been discussing the weather.

“Christ Indrey you scared the fuck outta me... where the hell did you come from?”

“You’re at my house” Quinn answered sarcastically. He was wearing ratty blue jeans with two hundred dollar running shoes and a short sleeved Batman T-shirt rolled up to show off more bicep and his long hair was either filthy or wet and hanging like black corn husk out from under a well worn Cincinnati Reds baseball cap.

“Here’s your mail” Bubba offered and Quinn accepted a handful of junk ads and stood glaring at the postman with his black, dark set eyes looking as evil as Satan himself. And suddenly Bubba remembered the altercation on the stage at Dirty Ernie’s the night before and he had to swallow a lump from his throat.

“You been following this Tim Wheatley bullshit today?” he asked feebly but Quinn raised a long barreled, ivory gripped Colt from behind his back and stuck it not two inches from the postman’s mouth.

“I have a good mind to blow your fuckin’ teeth right out the other side of this truck” he said casually.

“Goddamn, you still pissed off about last night?”

“Well I am pointing a gun in your face so... yeah, I guess I am.”

“Man I was just playin’ dude... I was fucked up and excited about announcing my wedding and...”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass... you called me a fag on the microphone and got me thrown out of the bar.”

“Fuck me dude” Bubba had his hands up in surrender and he feared he would repeat his performance in Spooner’s truck and soil himself again “look man, I owe ya’ one awright? I’ll get you some kick-ass weed for nothin’.”

“Kick ass weed huh” Indrey inquired and seemed to be considering the offer “tell ya’ what... give me the kick ass weed for nothin’ but I’ll still have to humiliate you the way you did me.”

“Fuck that” Bubba replied, momentarily forgetting there was a gun pointed in his face but Indrey pulling the hammer back more than reminded him “Goddamn it Indrey stop fuckin’ around that thing could go off.”

“You think I’m playing?” the close set eyes in the stern chipped features said he wasn’t.

“What the fuck dude” Bubba said, throwing his hands in the air “you gonna blow my brains out for making fun of you?” Bubba’s postal uniform shirt was as big as a tent and badly in need of a wash. He kept his dark hair short and though the temperature that day barely hit fifty his body fat kept him warm enough to rarely ever wear a coat.

“Ok take off your drawers.”

“What the fuck...”

“Take off your drawers” Quinn demanded “and whatever undies you got on underneath and toss ‘em out this window.”

“Fuck you.”

“Alright then” and casually, without taking aim Indrey pointed the Colt into the floor between Bubba’s legs and fired off a round. The sound was deafening in the metal cab and Bubba’s heart stopped for a second for fear he had just lost a toe or the middle of his foot.

“Did I get ya’?” Indrey asked casually and with the veins in his temples throbbing with his wildly thundering heart Bubba took a look down and saw a pinhole of white light coming up from the floor an inch away from his left foot. “Now, you wanna remove your drawers or shall we go again?”

There was plenty of room in the postal truck, relatively speaking and Bubba had no trouble finagling off his work pants and the Fruit of the Looms underneath and tossing them out the window.

“I see now why you’re gonna marry a midget” Indrey observed “you got the penis of a five year old boy. No adult sized portions would be much satisfied with that.”

“Fuck you” Bubba said under his breath and clamped his teeth tight for he felt his nerves dissolving. His palms were sweating on the steering wheel and he no longer knew whether he was going to start begging for his life or take a lunge for Quinn’s throat.

“Well this just ain’t gonna get it is it?” Indrey said with dissatisfaction, as he looked down at Bubba’s big shirt hanging over his genitals and Bubba just glared at him “No, I believe you better take off the shirt too while we’re at it” and without so much as a plea the large man undid the buttons on his blue work shirt, popping off the last two and pulled it off and threw it square in Indrey Quinn’s face.

“Damn son, you ain’t just fat you’re fucking sloppy fat ain’t ya’?”

“Well, you’re making me strip... it must be doin’ something for you.”

“I oughta make you get out and walk home like that” Quinn mused, as he rubbed his cheek with the Colt’s barrel “but I s’pect abandoning the mail is probably a federal offense.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that” Bubba said, unable to stop the jibes even under his duress “your insane ass is goin’ to jail regardless.”

“Look at you, I can’t even see your dick under all that sloppy fat” Indrey laughed “I didn’t realize you were such a hairy fucker either; got that nasty curly shoulder hair. Does that shit run down your back?”

“Yeah” Bubba replied wearily “right down to my hairy butt-hole wanna see?”

“Well, I believe that’s gonna make us about even” Indrey stated, ignoring Bubba’s comeback as he had all the rest “get on outta here” and he began waving his gun like an impatient traffic cop “go on finish your route” and Bubba threw the truck into gear and it lurched away from the box and Quinn stepped out into the street to watch him go. But Bubba didn’t

stop at the next house half a mile on down or the one after that. Instead he made a B line for the sheriff's office.

“Do you believe he expects me in at the usual time tonight?”

Fred Dollop was speaking to Gary Hollenkamp. They were sitting in one of the cushy, high backed booths at The Blue Moon Inn restaurant.

“Oh man” Gary replied sympathetically “you’re gonna be wiped out.”

“I am wiped out.”

Gary was having a late lunch and Fred was either having a very early breakfast or else dinner; depending on how he chose to look at his wrecked schedule. Sheriff Case had determined that the manhunt had reached such proportions that Fred had better go home and get some sleep before his next shift and Gary should get back to Henschford and take any calls coming in; and maybe nose around some of the more hidden away spots in case Wheatley had ditched the car locally and was still on foot in the area. But for the moment the two deputies, and Brian Blakely before them, were eating for free because Roberta Peachtree had decreed that the sheriff's department could have anything off the lunch menu on the house. This in response to the swift manhunt for her daughter's alleged killer; and if they actually caught him they could have anything off the dinner menu and free liquor from the bar as well. So Fred Dollop, freshly off the clock, was sitting before a plate of three cheese burgers with extra onion and a frosty mug of Coors from the tap to wash it down. Gary, was picking at a tuna fish salad sandwich and sipping ice tea.

“It's three-twenty right now” Fred declared, consulting his watch “no way I can be in bed before five so I'm looking at four hours of sleep tops.” And to punctuate his disdain for his lot, he drained his mug, let out a long sonorous belch and

held the empty glass above his head “INNKEEPER” he hollered “MORE GROG!” and in the library like quiet of the too late for lunch, too early for dinner room, his server was immediately at the table.

“Can I tell you something Fred?” Gary whispered across the table after the young woman had left with Fred’s glass “it’s something that if it ever got out...”

“Sure” Fred answered semi-seriously, for Gary had never confided in him before “I can keep a secret.”

Gary was relieved to finally get the floor, because Fred had been ripping into his usual nonsensical repartee; most of which Gary didn’t even get, let alone find funny. And since his guilt over not investigating the fishing lodge had turned out to be a non issue; what with Timothy Wheatley stealing Tomlin’s car in the hollow far below at the same time he was up top; his cowardice had become a moot point and could remain his own secret. So now he could turn the page on that indiscretion and once again focus on the one that had been nagging at his conscience for days; his recent infidelity, or more accurately put, his rape but he would treat it as just cheating on Michelle, for that was bad enough.

“This past Sunday I did something really stupid.”

The pained look on his face; the confessional tone in his voice; Fred just knew this was gonna be good

“Yeah?”

“I went to Yvette’s” the admission almost brought tears.

“What, you mean like, as a customer?”

Gary didn’t answer but the continued look of physical pain said it all; Gary was being eaten alive by guilt.

“You ever been there?” He asked Fred hopefully but Fred’s definite ‘no’ gave his guilt an added loneliness.

“And I can’t believe you went there either” Fred declared “I thought you lived in total devotion to your wife... or at least in total fear.”

“I know, I know it’s crazy” Gary said wringing his hands.

“So who did you have, Yvette or Alice?”

“Yvette” Gary answered sheepishly and scanned the room for hidden eavesdroppers.

“Wow, you even went for the dark meat.”

“It was like a drug addiction or alcoholism” Gary said helplessly “I lost control of myself”

“Why didn’t you go to Beckley or Charleston; somewhere the whore didn’t know you or that you’re a deputy?”

“I couldn’t” Gary said defensively, leaning his head across the table for emphasis “there wasn’t time. My in-laws had four of the girls and Michelle had the other two with her at church.”

“Ah Church” Fred repeated “small window.”

“What?”

“Small window... not much time” But Fred was trying to conceal that he couldn’t believe his ears. So Mr. Rogers here had not only had himself a black whore but he had her while his wife and kids were at church... Gary Hollenkamp was going straight to hell; that’s what he was thinking but he said “so how was it? I hear some crazy shit goes down in that trailer.”

“Oh my God” Gary answered “Alice has lizards running loose in there.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that.”

“Big ones... like...”

“Monitor lizards” Fred informed him.

“And snakes” Gary said, wanting to get away from the thought of the lizard that had scarred him for life.

“Yeah, but the poisonous ones are in a terrarium”

“There’s a plaque on the wall that says: IF YOU CAN SECRETE IT I CAN EAT IT”

Fred was grinning and slowly shaking his head with acknowledgment; apparently, thought Gary, he’d heard that too.

“So how was the sex?” Fred asked, as his third beer arrived and Gary hid his face from the waitress in case the guilt was too obvious on his face.

“Oh my God; I tried to change my mind but she wouldn’t let me” he whispered desperately after she’d gone “Yvette has rubber sheets and fuzzy handcuffs” he spoke as if he was telling a horrible war story and Fred had to squelch a laugh; for he knew all about Yvette’s place. Hell, practically everyone knew all about Yvette’s but Fred couldn’t help but make Gary give up all the details because it was so fascinating hearing it from someone so straight. It was like having to hide your marijuana from your mother and then catching her using crack.

“Rubber sheets huh; I never heard that one” Fred lied “what are they for?” and Gary leaned his head in closer and spoke as close to Fred’s ear as he could reach.

“They’re in case you poop” he said with embarrassment “and you do.”

“Jim? Jim? Where you at?”

Case had been inside a Speedway paying for gas and caught the tail end of the third attempt to reach him. He was wearing well worn blue jeans, running shoes, a bomber jacket and a ball cap with his sheriff’s insignia. His gun was slung in a shoulder holster hidden beneath the coat; his foot race attire.

“Yeah” he barked into his mic holding a bottle of Cocoa Cola and a new cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Where you at?”

“Blaylock.”

He had decided to circle Henschford in a fifty mile radius and stop anywhere and everywhere that Wheatley might stop. It was painstaking and probably futile but the bigger towns had been alerted so it seemed one of only a couple other angles to try.

“I have Eric Gardner here at the station with a complaint and Gary doesn’t have his ears on.”

“What’s that?”

“Well... want me to put him on?”

“Sure.”

There was a short pause as Case pictured Bubba sliding his wide ass through the swinging gate and taking the mic from Melissa.

“Sheriff, Indrey Quinn threatened my life and shot up my truck with me in it” then before Case had responded he added “and he made me strip naked.”

Unbeknownst to Indrey Quinn Bubba always kept a raincoat in his postal truck along with a pith helmet for the nastier days; so there he stood in the Sheriff’s office wearing a blue, caped slicker that covered his bulk halfway down his thighs, looking like a mini-skirted orangutan in tennis shoes. He was even wearing the helmet, just to top off the ridiculous, having regained a bit of his sense of humor. There was such a long pause on the radio Bubba was about to repeat himself when Brain Blakely’s voice came over the air

“Want me to head back Sheriff?”

“No, no” Case answered “you continue on Brian. Bubba you sit tight. Melissa, call the Blue Moon on the phone and get Hollenkamp in gear and if for some reason he still hasn’t responded in thirty minutes give me a holler.”

“Fair enough” Bubba answered and signed off by tossing the mic back to Melissa who simply said: “over” and the air went dead. Case hung up his mic and sat in his Jeep facing the little store in Blaylock; a billow cloud stood in the sky like steep stairs coming down from heaven and Case let his mind wander up the steps and meander with his exhaustion and his caffeine and his cigarette smoke. How on earth could Tim Wheatley be so clever? What were the odds?

Suddenly in the peace and relative quiet something whispered in Sheriff Case’s ear. Something told him that

Wheatley hadn't made a run for it at all, but had pulled the same trick as going straight back to the house when it seemed he was going up the mountain. And that's what he had done again; when they assumed he was on foot he had taken the car, so now, since they assumed he was in the car, why not ditch it and take to the brush? All those units searching the roads to Beckley and spanning the interstate and the clever bastard was probably somewhere in Henschford. Somewhere hiding in the mountains that Case knew better than anybody and by God he was gonna find him. Someone coming out of the mart noticed a Henschford Sheriff's Jeep squeal its tires out of the lot and wondered what emergency he could have way out here.

No matter how empty the waiting room might be in an emergency room it will be at least an hour and forty-five minutes before your turn. And if, God forbid, there is a crowd before you it's an all day affair. At least that's how the young man saw it who was sitting opposite Emily and Emmett Mills in the smoking lounge at the Urgent Care way out Route thirty-one. He had fallen off a ladder while cleaning out his grandmother's gutters and may have broken his thumb; pretty much definitely had broken his thumb.

"But then no good deed goes unpunished."

He had said to the very attractive woman but got no response. Her eyes looked China blue in the florescent lights and though she was wearing a baggy, slate gray sweat suit he could tell the body underneath was killer. Her boy, for he supposed it was her boy by the way she worried after him, looked to be seven, eight, nine tops but then the young man wasn't very good at guessing such things; but he did notice that the times she had to get out of her plastic, potato chip chair and go after him she walked gingerly, like she was on ice. The young man figured she was having what his mother called 'female troubles' something out of whack in the box.

Something else he had noticed in the hour or so he'd been sitting there... he couldn't keep his eyes off her. There were six other folks in the room and a TV was playing the news in a corner but otherwise it was quiet.

"You from around here?" He asked directly, finally taking a chance on absolute rejection.

"Henchford" she answered abruptly, managing to keep the reply at one word, as she rubbed out a cigarette in an ashtray.

"Yeah" the young man said with a grin "I have friends in Henchford."

"Good for you" she said nervously, almost sarcastically; then possibly noticing her tone added politely "do you have a cigarette I can have? That was my last one."

A moment later he was sitting next to her and they were both burning his Marlboros as the boy looked on suspiciously from the floor near her feet where he was flipping through a copy of a Highlights magazine. Up close the young man could see that the pretty lady had a nasty bruise on the side of her face which she had tried to hide with make-up; so maybe not female troubles but more like an abusive boyfriend; boyfriend, not husband because the 'spoken for' finger was naked.

"Look at that thumb" he said through his cigarette burning between his teeth and holding up the grossly swollen disfigured digit "looks broke don't it?"

"Oh" she said with disgust and turned away "don't show me that. I'm nauseas as it is."

"Sorry" he said and put it away "I'll tell ya' if they don't set this bad boy soon I'm just gonna go someplace and get stinking drunk and come back."

"Stinking drunk sounds so nice" she said and her voice trailed off; her eyes looked far away. There was pain in her face. She looked like she'd been crying for hours. This was definitely no place to pick up chicks.

Indrey Quinn had a beautiful house. It was barely visible from the road for its long drive and its low lye and the foliage in the summer, but anyone who saw it thought it looked the idyllic place to live in peace; it was ironic the man living there found so little. It was a three bedroom traditional Ranch style with a covered porch that ran its full length and had another screened porch that attached the house to the two car garage and made for an eighty-nine foot structure. Painted dark gray with redwood shutters it set on level ground in the front and on stilts in the rear and was a three minute walk from the largest fishing lake in twenty miles; the manmade Lake Willy Rilly.

As Gary Hollenkamp went down the paved driveway and the house came into view he saw that Indrey was sitting on the bottom step of his porch with a drink and a cigarette. He was still wearing the ratty jeans and Batman t-shirt but the Cincinnati Reds ball cap was lying on the step above and his greasy hair was pulled behind his ears.

“You see that smoke comin’ up yonder?” Quinn was pointing off to the distant line of trees with his cigarette hand as Gary approached.

“Yeah” Gary lied without even looking.

“That’s the fireplace goin’ at old man Pollard’s place. That son of a bitch poisoned a dog of mine once.”

Gary’s nerves were already frayed for what he was about to do; now he was hoping Quinn wasn’t drunk already.

“Indrey I’m here about the incident earlier with Bubba.”

“Know how to keep a dog from eating somebody’s poison?” Indrey asked rhetorically, ignoring Gary “you cut up a steak see; and you put some of it in the dog’s bowl right? Now you lay the other out on the floor and you hook up a nine volt battery to it. You just push the leads right into the meat, so when your dog takes a bite he gets a little shock. Nothing too harsh but enough he drops that meat pretty damn quick. Now you do that a few times and what you’ll have is a dog that won’t eat anything that didn’t come from

his own feeding dish” Indrey took a pull off his cigarette and looked up at the deputy with pride.

“How many drinks have you had?”

“This is orange juice you stupid bastard” Quinn explained, holding up the tall glass

Gary stepped closer and sure enough, the smell of alcohol was evident and it caused his blood to go cold.

“Did anybody ever follow up my sighting?” Indrey asked, looking up at the deputy now standing over him “you do remember my sighting” he added sarcastically “you answered my call.”

Then Gary did recall; it was out on Bartley Road a couple of days before the double homicide. It seemed like an eternity ago.

“Yes I do remember” he answered “but I’m sure no one has followed up on it; not with everything going on” and then he had a puzzling thought; what on earth did Quinn expect in the way of a follow up anyhow? Certainly the department can’t be out beating bushes at the far end of the county for some wolfman, or whatever Indrey’s imagination had conjured up this time.

“I don’t suppose any of you bastards are smart enough to consider that maybe the two are connected” he said with irritation and took a drink from his glass then a hit from his cigarette “they’ve been messing around my lake again too; heard ‘em out there earlier today.”

Gary Hollenkamp let a long hissing breath pass between his clinched teeth. This was going nowhere and his nerves were growing into a jangling mess; he had to make his move or it would be the chalet all over again.

“The thing is Indrey I’m not here about your sighting; I’m here about your confrontation with Bubba Gardner. He’s filed a complaint.”

“Bubba Gardner is an ass clown.”

“Well be that as it may” he said, with his last bit of diplomacy “I’m afraid I’m gonna have to ask you to stand up and put your hands behind your back.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You’re not going to arrest me” There was fire coming out of Quinn’s eyes and it seared right through Gary’s forehead and into his brain and his resolve began to melt in the face of the heat.

“I’m afraid so” he heard himself say and his throat went dry and his stomach rolled over.

“FUCK YOU MOTHER-FUCKER” Quinn spit venomously and tossed the contents of his glass straight up and into Gary’s face. The deputy’s eyes were suddenly on fire as the vodka and orange juice found their mark and Quinn leapt to his feet as Gary tried to quickly wipe his face with a shirt sleeve and Indrey decked him with a roundhouse right that connected to his left cheek bone and sent him sprawling to the ground flat on his back.

Indrey Quinn’s anger always flared white hot, especially when he was drunk, but it also burned out just as quickly; and as he stood with clinched fists looking down at the sheriff’s deputy the rage which had so suddenly took him, left him again. He was standing placidly with his arms at his sides as Gary struggled to his feet and unholstered his gun.

“Face down on the ground right now” he demanded and pointed the gun at Indrey’s heart

“Come on man chill out” Indrey said rationally, holding up his hands “look I’m sorry I hit you”

“Face down on the ground now or I’ll kill you” and if the words didn’t sound sincere enough, just as Indrey had done for Bubba, Gary pulled back the hammer. Gone was any of the affable, amiable, Mr. Rogers in Gary Hollenkamp’s voice; this was an armed man who could and would shoot him dead. Without further petition Indrey Quinn assumed the position on the ground and Gary proceeded to cuff him much too tightly. Then he pulled him to his feet with one hand by

twisting the collar of his t-shirt and Quinn nearly strangled making it to his feet.

“Goddamn it” he hollered “watch what the fuck you’re doin’! I told you I was sorry” but Gary only shoved him into the yard towards the cruiser; his face beet red with anger; his jaw muscles working. Indrey Quinn’s long, wild hair had fallen into and all around his face and he looked like one of the Manson family members being hauled away from Spahn Ranch. He took two steps towards the car but when Gary came up close behind, about to help him along with another shove, he turned abruptly and with all his weight and every bit force he could muster, leaned into a head butt that caught Hollenkamp right on the bridge of his nose and he went down like a sack of potatoes.

“What’d I tell ya’ mother-fucker!” Indrey sputtered, his wrists locked behind his back, his biceps bulging with the strain of his new found white hot energy. Gary Hollenkamp was flopping on the ground like a beached Carp with his nose broken; oblivious to everything except his own pain. He was barely even aware of Quinn rifling through his pockets for his keys and passed out from the pain before Indrey drove off in his SUV; leaving him sprawled on the ground with his gun lying cocked alongside him.

Emily Mills had heard all about Gary Hollenkamp’s broken nose before she even made it to her mother’s house. She had stopped off at the pharmacy to have the prescription filled that she had been given for her condition and the young girl who rang her up told her all the sorted details. It seemed to her quite surreal that on one of the worst days of her life the whole town had gone ape shit over this manhunt and suddenly it seemed every television had been turned off in favor of a police scanner. So when she came in the door and her mother tried to give her the same news; before she

and Emmett could even get their coats off, she had to tell her she'd already heard.

"I wish you'd have heard that poor man make that call for help" the stocky fifty-eight year old woman declared "it was so pitiful"

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit if they've been hunting the wrong guy all day" Emily stated in a tired voice, as she pulled loose the staple on the Vicker's Pharmacy bag and pulled out the long, thin brown bottle within.

"So what's the trouble?"

"Lacerated rectum and irritated hemorrhoid" Emily answered with a frown, as she turned the bottle around for its directions

"That son of a bitch" her mother ranted, as Emmett went past her for the living room and the TV "somebody needs to string him up."

"Has he called yet?"

"No, and he'll be sorry he did if I answer the phone."

"I sure thought I'd need stitches the way I was bleeding."

"You scared me to death" her mother agreed, watching her open the bottle "so what are those... suppositories?"

"Yep, I'm supposed to shove these up my ass and lay around for at least today and tomorrow"

"Well get your ass in there and prop up on the couch then" mother demanded.

"I gotta get my stuff outta the car."

"Why?"

"Well..."

"Well hell, ain't nothing in there can't wait and if you need anything I'll get it."

Emily dropped the bottle on the counter top, hung her head and began to quietly cry. Her mother stepped over and hugged her tightly and she sobbed into her shoulder. She had confided in her mother all about the nasty pictures she'd let Jon Tomlin take of her. She'd told all about how he'd wooed her, in his own way, with his L.A. looks and his baritone

voice. No use trying to keep it from her now anyway; not since Evan knew. And she was so glad she had because Martha had been so understanding; so supportive.

“It’s gonna be alright now” mother whispered.

“God my life is so fucked up.”

“No it’s not” mother corrected “you’re getting it on the right track now...you’ll see.”

The 911 emergency operators got over fifty calls right after Gary Hollenkamp’s weak voice went over the air begging for help. Not that there were that many police scanners operating in the area but apparently those that did were well connected to grapevines; although it was true also that by Friday evening two electronics stores in the county had sold out their entire stock of the scanners. And a half hour after that dramatic call they all got their money’s worth for sure, as the second shift dispatcher in Henschford came over the air sounding as desperate as a heart attack.

“Sheriff Case! Sheriff Case!” Her voice was distorted and Case, still some twenty-five miles away had his heart jump into his throat at the sound of it.

“Audrey? What’s the matter?”

“Are you close by yet?”

“Not yet; what’s wrong?”

“I got Indrey Quinn in here.”

“What?”

“Indrey Quinn just walked in here carryin’ a gun.”

“Jesus, is Bubba still there?”

“Well of course he is; why would this be a crisis if he wasn’t?”

Audrey was a little fifty-three year old country girl. A five foot nothing, ninety pound, bleach blond with leathery, golden brown, tanning bed skin and a life story and a pluck straight out of Loretta Lynn’s old song ‘Coal Miner’s Daughter’.

“Well Goddamn it tell him to get down in the basement and bolt the door.”

“I ain’t a tellin’ him shit” she said firmly “I’m back here in your office and if there’s gonna be shootin’ this is where I’m a stayin’.”

Jim Case’s foot hit the pedal on his Jeep, flipped on the siren and hit the lights and did eighty plus miles an hour down the straightaway of Route thirty-eight.

“I bet that’s Gary’s gun” Audrey said near tears into the mic “that son of a bitch” then there was a pause before she came back on and said “wait a minute” then he couldn’t raise her again.

When he arrived at the courthouse; a single story brick building with Case’s office in the front the court in the rear and the jail in the basement, Case found three extra cars, along with Bubba’s postal truck, in the lot and the group of men they belonged to standing in a huddle around the corner from the front door. Marty Dutch’s deer hunters were there, with rifles at the ready; along with Charles Hilliard, the newspaper man Bailey Bishop, and three others he didn’t recognize. Case had no intention of speaking to them and made a B-line for the door.

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you sheriff” Charles Hilliard warned as he passed but he didn’t acknowledge him, as he pulled his gun from his holster and pointing it at the sky on a crooked elbow strode straight up and pulled open one of the double glass entrance doors. Case had been considering this situation while he was on the way and it occurred to him that if Indrey had designs on killing Bubba Gardner he would have already done it and hit the road. No, it seemed to him that Quinn was either there to explain himself or else surrender or both.

“Well” Charles Hilliard said to Bailey Bishop “he’s either dumber than shit or else he’s a lot braver than I gave him credit for.”

“Are you getting this?” Bishop impatiently asked the young man standing alongside him. He was holding a digital camera and pointing it in the right direction.

“Oh yeah” the twenty something kid answered enthusiastically “this is good stuff.”

“Want me to go in?” a second employee asked from behind the editor.

“No, you wanna get shot?”

Case disappeared inside the building and the posse got quiet; listening for the shouts and gunfire they were certain were bound to begin any second.

Case’s nerves were taut as he silently entered the second set of double doors and stood on the welcome mat listening. What he heard caused him to drop the gun to his side and his heart to start beating again.

“I fell a good fifteen feet for sure” he heard Bubba say, in as casual a voice as someone having a drink with a friend.

“You’re a fucking maniac” Indrey Quinn could be heard saying. Case decided they were sitting in the dispatcher’s cubicle; off to the right so he went through the four foot partition wall using the swinging entrance door.

“Oh, I’m a maniac? Who’s about to do hard time for assaulting a sheriff’s deputy?”

“What the fuck is going on in here?” Case asked incredulously, as he walked around the three free standing walls to the opening.

“Howdy sheriff” Bubba said from his perch. He was sitting on Audrey’s desk in his blue caped raincoat and had shoved the microphone over against the radio, his feet dangling above the floor, his hairy thick legs showing more than looked decent on a man so large. Indrey was in the cushioned seat with his feet up on the desk crossed at the ankles.

“You boys look comfortable” he said sarcastically, as he put his gun away “what’d you do with Audrey?”

“She’s making coffee” Indrey offered “I take it I’m under arrest” he added

“Yes you are.”

“Well that’s fine ‘cause I’m suing your office for brutality.”

“That so; well I bet you look a lot better than my deputy right now.”

“Damn straight” Indrey crowed “I won the fight alright but he had it comin’.”

Just then Audrey came from a separate room with three coffee cups balanced on a clipboard, almost like the waitress of a fine restaurant.

“Why the hell didn’t you come back on the radio and tell me you were serving drinks and everything was ok around here” Case said to his dispatcher with irritation “I could have killed myself getting here.”

“Oh shit” the little woman exclaimed “I did kinda leave you in the dark there didn’t I?”

“A little bit” Case answered, as he watched what could only be called his two guests take their cups and start sipping “Well, I hate to break up the festivities here” he finally said “but we need to get downstairs and start on all the paper work; not to mention it’s time we put you in a cell Indrey.”

And without saying a word Indrey Quinn got up with his cup and began walking towards the stairs.

“Do you need me for this?” Bubba asked.

“Of course.”

“Then I better get a hold of somebody to finish my route.”

“Don’t you have anything more you could put on?”

“Nope” Bubba declared casually and pointed at Indrey’s departing back “that asshole didn’t think to bring my clothes.”

As he passed Audrey, Case asked discreetly about the gun and she eased his mind by telling him Quinn had handed it over to her and she had locked it up. Case then pointed out how he hadn't received his cup of coffee yet; and then he said in a normal tone.

"Oh, and get Brian on the horn and tell him to come on back; I would, but as soon as I lock Indrey up there's a posse lingering out front I gotta disperse.

By seven-thirty that evening Gary Hollenkamp was home and uncomfortably in bed. His nostrils were packed with gauze and he was propped up on three fat pillows, looking, as his wife lovingly joked, like a psychedelic raccoon; for his eyes were so bruised they were ringed in yellow, black and purple and swollen until his face was unrecognizable. The doctor in the emergency room had realigned the crooked break just below his eyes and he was oozing in and out of consciousness in a Percocet fitted sleep. In this drug and anxiety induced nether world, reality and imagination joined in a kind of calliope rat race which ran circles in his mind throwing up real events and then crossing them with nightmares; as he breathed and snored through his mouth. And oddly enough, though he'd just gone through the most violent and painful event in his career; it was the trauma suffered at the hands of a five foot two prostitute that was most on his feverish mind.

"WHAT'D I TELL YA' MOTHER-FUCKER" Indrey Quinn threatened again and Gary shrank from him in his mind's eye. Then his ordeal at Yvette's would come screaming back; for unlike the straightforward weirdness that he had confessed to Fred Dollop, what had actually happened had been a nightmare.

"What can I do you for sugar?" Yvette had asked, as Gary, nervous as man going to his own hanging, had been staring with trepidation at the plaque on the wall.

IF YOU CAN SECRETE IT I CAN EAT IT.

It was obscene. It was horrible and Gary already knew he'd made a mistake in going there.

"Did you place a call to the sheriff's office?" he offered lamely and rubbed the sweat from his palms onto his pant legs.

"Oh" Yvette said theatrically "you here on official business deputy?"

"Sure" he muttered and tried to swallow.

"Then how's come you're in your civvies?"

The look of guilt he gave back in reply was all the little chocolate woman needed for an answer. She was draped in a red floor length sheer robe; something right out of Victoria's Secret and her D cup bra and lacy panties were as plain to see as her thick brown legs and pink varnished toenails. Her shoulder length hair was piled on top of her head like something he'd seen on Gladys Knight and she was casually smoking a joint and grinning at him in a way that made him feel naked.

Then he could see his own hand reaching for a door knob. It didn't look like the door knob on the chalet at the fishing lake but somehow Gary just knew that it was. The world was silent. As silent as the bedroom where he lay and his hand reached out steadily to try it and it jerked back away from him and Timothy Wheatley was standing there in the doorway with his gun. And then the gun roared so loudly that it threw him out of his sleep with his heart pounding like he'd just run a mile and he raised up in the bed to the throbbing pain in his head and he almost reached up and touched the fat mask that used to be his face but he caught himself; and he fell back onto his pillows and the journey began again.

"Come on back here lover."

"Nah, I really better go."

“Ain’t gonna cost ya’ nothin’ just to have a look see. Come on, don’tcha wanna see some of Alice’s more dangerous critters?”

The bedroom looked oddly out of synch with what he had expected; with what the living room had looked like. Where the main room had been cluttered with newspapers and half empty glasses and paper plates the back room was neat and sparse. It had a king sized bed that filled a quarter of the space and an oak dresser with a mirror and a matching chest of drawers that made up for another half. And on the floor a throw rug you’d expect to see at your grandmother’s house; one of those coiled, striped, snake ring looking things; and there was a little refrigerator about the size of a bread basket setting inconspicuously on the hardwood floor near the door.

“Is that a rubber sheet?” he asked, as the bed was pulled down and it obviously was.

“That’s right sugar; momma don’t want no permanent stains.”

The words were as grotesque as the plaque in the other room.

“I’ve really changed my mind about this” he admitted but she had gotten behind him and closed the door.

“I don’t much give a shit at this point” she answered candidly “I think you’re hot” She purred it like a big black cat and Gary suddenly felt like dessert.

“No seriously” he tried to say without the panic he felt rising “we’re gonna have to make a rain check.”

But now her back was against the door and Gary looked about but it was the only way out except the window; and as if she was reading his mind.

“Only way out is by me law-dog; you too big to squeeze through that lil’ window”

She was teasing him; taunting him.

“I thought you were gonna show me some of Alice’s lizards.”

“Oh we’ll get to that... how much time we got?”

And there is where Gary saw some hope.

“Not very long, my wife only went to church.”

“Then we best get started. You gonna pull off your pants or you want mamma to help ya’?” the joint was laid aside, its ash end to burn in the air off the dresser.

“Listen” he started and now his voice was firm and sure “I don’t wanna have to get nasty about this but I’m going to leave and I’m going to leave right now.”

“Ok now let me tell you what” and she took two steps forward “I say me and you gonna fuck and I gonna do some shit to you ain’t no uppity lil’ white wife ever dreamed of and if you wanna stop me then you better be kickin’ my ass and you better get at it right now” Then she came at him like a sumo wrestler and Gary; instead of taking the offensive; using his strength and size to take her out and out of his way; reacted like a little boy being attacked by a swarm of bees. He swatted and he pushed and he smacked and before long Yvette; who had waylaid and been waylaid by many a big man in her day had him stripped to his shorts and handcuffed to the bed in the pink fuzzy handcuffs he later told Fred Dollop about. She was barely breathing hard when she went to the top drawer of the dresser, opened it up and took out a jar of Vaseline. When she came back to the bed the joint was back in her mouth and the lid was off the jar and she yanked off his underwear, like she was pulling off a tablecloth without disturbing the plates.

“You ever had anybody squeeze your prostate lover boy?”

“Oh my God.”

He was crawling back to his squad car. It looked like a mile from his place on the ground and he was seeing double and had a headache that was coming out his ears.

“WHAT’D I TELL YA’ MOTHER-FUCKER.”

That hairy head had come at him so fast but somehow played back in slow motion. He heard his own nose snap so loud it hurt his ears.

“Look at that mess you done made on your belly? Looks like you ain’t been done like momma’s done ya’ in long, long time.”

Then there was a huge lizard sucking on his balls. No, there was a huge lizard perched on his thigh and it was wearing a studded dog collar and he was seeing it through the marijuana smoke that Yvette was blowing into his mouth in the deepest open mouth kiss of his life; then she was gone, busily digging in the fridge.

“Oh God... what is that?” and she held up the pint sized tub and showed him the label.

“Philadelphia cream cheese.”

“Oh my God!”

He was backing away from the chalet in the squad car. But this time the decline was steeper and he couldn’t control his descent; couldn’t get his foot on the brake. One foot was outside the car and he was irrationally trying to slow down the fall with the heel of his shoe and Timothy Wheatley was waiting for him with his own gun at the bottom of the hill. Only Gary Hollenkamp didn’t really have Wheatley pictured in his mind’s eye for he had only seen him a handful of times, so in his place Gary substituted his favorite black actor... Louis Gossett Jr. So the star of his favorite movie, ‘Iron Eagle’ was waiting to kill him at the bottom of the hill and the car wouldn’t stop.

“Stop? Honey we just gettin’ started.”

“Please” Gary pleaded “whatever you’re charging I’ll pay you double if you’ll let me go” He was in decent shape for a forty-eight year old man; merely soft around the middle where once he had been pudgy, his long legs lily white and his whole body having not sprouted much more hair than the average fifteen year old boy.

“Didn’t I tell you?” she asked playfully, as she scooped out a heaping of cream cheese on three fingers “this first ride’s for free. We gonna smear this up your butt-hoe and Sid there is gonna go after it; cause that crazy lizard just love the shit outta cream cheese.”

“YOU’RE CRAZY!” Gary exclaimed and became hysterical. He thrashed his legs, trying to kick Yvette. Pulled so hard trying to free his hands from the cuffs that he would have places on his wrists he could never explain to Michelle.

“Now see” the little black woman cajoled “you gonna get Sid all excited and he liable to open you up in there real bad; maybe too bad to get you to the hospital before you die.” And she patiently waited for his energy to wane and then, when his struggle was more manageable she secured his ankles to the foot board with kite string and he laid spread out as she administered to him like a mother to her baby and he was stuffed like an hors d’oeuvre.

“Please don’t do this” Gary was breaking down beginning to cry.

“Ya’ know you’re reacting the same way a very prominent citizen of this town did on his first time. But now that same VIP pays top dollar for this privilege” and with that she guided the three foot monitor lizard to his feast and once the bug eyed monster was firmly entrenched she took her place alongside the hapless deputy and performed oral sex on him.

“What happened?” Gary asked, fresh from a faint “am I bleeding?”

“No silly” Yvette assured him, as she readied a white tube “this ain’t no I.V. Bottle, this here’s an enema bottle.

“Oh my god.”

“How is he?”

Jim Case was standing in the dark at Gary’s front door at eight o’clock and his wife Michelle answered wearing one of

Gary's sweatshirts and a pair of Dockers' short shorts, which she immediately regretted when she saw it was the lecherous sheriff who'd come calling.

"Come on in" she said hesitantly and stepped back as Case entered. She kept a well ordered house but more impressive to the sheriff, she kept up a great figure for a woman pushing forty-five and especially one who'd had six daughters; simply amazing.

"Can I see him or is he asleep?"

"He sleeps off and on" she answered, as Case admired the fat, chipmunk cheeks that, in his opinion, along with the body, kept her looking young "I don't think he can get comfortable" and then as she turned to lead him down the hall and he watched the nice firm ass swaying to and fro as it tried to pop the seams of the shorts "I gotta warn ya' he looks awful" but Case was busy following the perfect legs that went down from a perfect ass and into a pair of house moccasins. Then she turned around halfway down the hall and caught him ogling her and said quietly "he's talking about quitting the force" then she slid along the wall with her back, so as not to touch him and went back up the hall to leave him alone with her husband. She was indeed a fine woman, Case thought, but she had that condescending attitude she carried so naturally it was always there. An aloofness that made her seem bored with everyone and bordered on outright rudeness; especially with her own husband. As he entered the open door of the back bedroom he wondered how Gary had put up with her for so long.

Gary was lying prostrate on his back in the glow of a single lamp on a night stand that only threw light on the bed. He was wearing the sort of snappy clean pajamas that Beaver Cleaver might wear and his face was every bit as grotesque as Michelle had warned him it would be.

"You asleep big guy?" Case whispered and got no response so he asked a little louder. Gary sat bolt upright in the bed like he was spring loaded, with a confused, horror

stricken look on his face that made him look even more like an alien than he already did.

“Easy buddy” Case consoled “it’s just me.”

As his deputy sat with his heart hammering and the bewildered look of someone who knows not where he is or what is going on; Case just stood and waited until calm slowly washed over him, starting in his pinhole eyes “you with me now?”

“I been having bad dreams” Gary answered.

“Probably the pain medicine; what they got you on?”

“Percocet.”

“Those are good with beer” Case commented; knowing good and well Hollenkamp would never even use the entire bottle of pills let alone use any recreationally. “Listen, I need your official story on what happened at Indrey Quinn’s place. I realize this is a bad time but I gotta get the charges filed so the judge can see it Tuesday.”

“Forget it” Gary said hopelessly.

“What do you mean?”

“I ain’t gonna file any charges.”

“The hell you ain’t... that fucker assaulted a sheriff’s deputy we can put him in the penitentiary!”

“Yeah and I’d have to testify and the whole thing would be all over the papers.”

“So?”

“So, I ain’t putting my family through that.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? If you don’t press charges all I’ve got is aggravated menace against Bubba. The post office won’t even make it a federal offense for shooting the truck ‘cause he didn’t hit anything.”

“My mind’s made up Jim” the alien under the sheet said.

“Well, the bail will probably run five thousand and he’ll have that” Case said dejectedly “which means he’ll be on the street in twenty-four hours.”

“I’m quitting the force” Gary suddenly said bluntly.

“Yeah, Michelle told me you were thinking about it.”

“No, the thinking’s all done; it’s all decided.”

“Well come on Gary” Case said impatiently “let’s don’t make any rash decisions right now. Get well and then think about it” and when Gary didn’t answer he continued “take three weeks off to heal up then I’ll come over and we’ll talk about it some more... I practically guarantee you’ll feel differently by then.”

“And if I don’t?”

“If you don’t then... ok, I’ll accept your resignation. What the hell would you do with yourself?”

“I wanna be a basketball coach” he said in a little voice, as if it were still a secret from his wife and family.

“Really?” Case asked incredulously “since when?”

“Oh always.”

“On what level; you wanna coach high school, junior high?”

“I wanna put together my own team; intramural to start I guess.”

Now Case decided he was just listening to the Percocet talking and wasting valuable time at that, when he could be scouring the hills for Wheatley.

“Why don’t you try to get some sleep pal” he said kindly, patting the mountain under the cover that was Hollenkamp’s feet “I’ll check on you tomorrow if things aren’t too crazy.”

“Jim” Gary said, as the sheriff turned to go “it’s not the pain medication talking; I’m done” to which Case said nothing but went on down the dark hallway and out the door into the cold night air; cursing under his breath as he went down the sloping drive to his Jeep.

Tim Wheatley was five airline miles away from Sheriff Case at that moment; hunkered under a thicket of wild bushes trying to get out of the cold wind. He had none of the backwoods moxie that the Henchford sheriff’s office believed he possessed. And the one and only reason he had

not been picked up an hour after his flight was sheer dumb luck, for just as Fred Dollop had seen the Spider-man on the entrance post, Tim had not only seen him but thought he'd recognized him. Now granted, he had been running for his life at the time and had only seen the costumed figure for a total of three seconds but in that three seconds the blue and red clad character had been climbing onto the pedestal and not only had Timothy thought he'd seen something familiar in the masked man's cat-like agility but long before he could take the time to sort out his thoughts on the matter all he knew is, as he passed at full gallop, that figure gave him hope at a moment when there should have been nothing but blind terror. And it was as the sheriff stood half a mile away and watched him pull himself up the steep incline by soil eroded, naked tree roots, that he realized it was none other than Jon Tomlin that he had been reminded of. And it was in the slimmest hope of this that Tim doubled back with what, strategically had been a very savvy; a move that had dumbfounded his pursuers. He went straight back to the house to see if Jon was possibly there in the kitchen smoking a cigarette as he ate a bowl of corn flakes, for some ungodly reason, dressed up as Spider-man.

Creeping into the quiet house in a heightened state of awareness bordering on panic, Tim tiptoed down the hall after finding no one in the main room but otherwise the house eerily quiet. He assumed that Jon's visiting brother had alerted the sheriff that he was leaving and if Duane wasn't out and involved in the manhunt he could very well be waiting behind one of these doors with a baseball bat or a gun. He had to stop midway down the hall to control his own breathing for he feared he wouldn't hear the nuance of say, someone raising an arm to aim. Now he was at the guest bedroom door which was shut and he carefully turned the handle and it eased open. Inside was the cool darkness and chemical smells of his profession and he lingered in the doorway to soak in what now seemed a lifetime of thirty

years past; then he heard breathing and he stopped his own. Letting his eyes grow accustomed to the dark he stood like a statue and waited for the gun to fire or at least a voice to threaten but nothing happened. Just a steady breathing under a pile of covers and Tim realized Duane was asleep. How could it be? No one alerts the sheriff that a desperate killer is going on the lamb and then an hour later goes back to bed. No, no, Duane apparently had no knowledge of anything going on and obviously someone else had tipped off Case; more than likely... It was then he heard the car pull up outside. He trotted down the hall and peeped out the very bottom corner of the main room's picture window and found a cruiser sitting directly behind Jon's Sunbird in the driveway. It didn't take him long to recognize Brian Blakely sitting behind the wheel obviously talking on the radio and for a moment Tim thought he'd been found out and a dragnet was about to scoop him up like a cat turd; but as the minutes passed it became clear that Case's second shift deputy was just making sure he didn't double back and get the car. God what a great idea and Tim didn't even have to think of it. Sheriff Jim Case had done that for him.

The whole day had gone that way; just one near miss or rash decision away from being found out and something would turn his way. When the dogs arrived he almost came out the front door with his hands over his head, for he knew damned good and well the jig was up. But when Blakely knocked on the door instead of knocking it down Tim simply hid in his own room and let the knocking wake Duane. A few minutes later and Bill Pulley had an article of his clothing for scent; and here's where the luck got almost to the point of divine intervention, Duane went all the way out to the garage for his smock instead of coming to the room. Now it was only a matter of waiting for Duane to depart to some room of the house where he could slip out to the car unseen or heard; and that happened almost at once, for moments after Blakely had gone Tim could hear Duane

talking, either to himself or on the phone, in the rear of the house and took advantage of this by rushing out the front door; taking the keys that were still in his jacket pocket and firing up the engine; watching the picture window for Duane's face all the while.

His first instinct was to push the pedal to the floor and try a mad dash for the county line; but the sight of a highway patrol car crossing his 'T' at the corner of Archer's way and Benning sobered him out of that foolishness and he sat holding his breath before the intersection, hoping his approach had been hidden by the bushes that lined someone's property there, and evidently they had for the patrol car went on. Next he had gone off road and bounced the Pontiac up and down steep terrain that would have done in Case's Jeep. This led to the next happenstance and the one responsible for the freedom he was still enjoying, albeit a very uncomfortable freedom, for the Sunbird suffered a flat tire and he was just able to limp it down the mountain towards Edmund's Hollow and Willie Rilly Lake. Remembering something he'd heard Indrey Quinn say one night in a club; how one end of that lake was dangerously deep almost to the edge, Tim did a quick, paranoid survey and decided on a spot to send the car in. Finding a heavy, fat stone, he set up at water's edge and placed it on the accelerator, shut the door, reached inside and threw it in gear and the Pontiac splashed into the green water and sunk like a diving bell until its top could barely be seen in the murky depths. After that it was just a matter of lying low and staying out of sight in hopes that he could walk out after nightfall and maybe hitch a ride out of the county; if indeed that was now far enough to be safe. Tim knew the state troopers were in on the hunt but how far the story had spread he could only guess. What he was truly regretting, as he lay balled up in the brush trying to get warm, was that he hadn't grabbed some food from the house when he'd been there. To

have remembered his wrist watch would have been nice too. And God, there are bears in the woods.

By nine o'clock that night Sheriff Jim Case was patrolling the switchbacks above Brisco Hollow in his Jeep Cherokee. He was easing along at three miles an hour with a spotlight, shining white light into the pitch blackness and scaring up critters that weren't used to such direct intrusion into their world. A bear cub tried unsuccessfully to shimmy up a tree to escape the glare, fell on its back and ran off into the darkness. Raccoons and opossums would show their red eyes and then disappear in a rustle of brush. It was a long shot that he would actually see Wheatley this way but Case just knew he was in these woods somewhere and he wanted Tim to know he knew. Either that or he just needed to be doing something. There was an eight pack of Schoenling Little Kings in his passenger seat, at least what was left of it, he had drank five and they were going down like water to a man in the desert.

"Anything?"

Fred Dollop's voice sounded over the horn. He was doing the same business a little higher up the road and Brian was searching above Edmund's Hollow.

"Just scared the shit out of a bear cub."

"Couple deer did the same for me a little while ago."

Case laughed. He was drunk. It wasn't at all like him to drink this way on duty and he wouldn't have, had he not run home for a bite to eat and decided to listen to his missed calls on the answering machine. There were three of them but two were sticking in his craw. One was from Bill Montgomery, the coroner; Bill had called to say that Ashley had apparently been raped to death by some large object or objects. He said her vagina had been mutilated, her uterus and colon ruptured but no seaman or any other bodily fluids had been found. He also said she had lost a lot of blood so it was spilled

someplace; and he would have the full report faxed early Monday morning. And if that call didn't prompt Case to pop a top the last one made it final. After a message from his father in Florida the disgusted voice of old man Peachtree came on and simply said: YOU LET HIM GET AWAY.

His spotlight was a thirty-five watt, magnet based Lumen with a grip handle that could swivel ninety degrees; which he'd picked up to read house numbers at night but it had come in handy searching for lost dogs and once to scare off a coyote. He was nearly into the hollow and he was starting to get glimpses of the light from The Quickie Mart coming through the trees on the left. His eyes were moving from his headlights on the road to the spot in the woods and he was playing with the idea of maybe grabbing a bite to eat when something came into his headlights on the road ahead. Instinctively his foot tapped the brake and he saw a figure squatting in the road like a baseball catcher or perhaps a frog. Case squinted and leaned forward in his seat. Was it a man or a bear? It hadn't moved since his lights hit it and when he let off the brake and rolled forward a little more he could make out that it was someone in a costume and a mask.

“JESUS CHRIST IT'S FRED'S SPIDER-MAN FROM THIS MORNING!”

Throwing the Cherokee into park he jumped out the door but it had leaped from the road and disappeared into the darkness. Case unholstered his gun and ran to where the thing had been and stood in the flood of light from his own headlights and listened; the only sound was the breeze in the high tree tops and the hairs on his neck stood on end when he realized this guy must be close; he must be lying in the tall grass that stood for a square acre of clearing before the tree line, but which direction? Then he thought he heard Fred or maybe Brian coming over his radio. Faint but clear and he cocked his ears to hear. No, it was a whisper... coming from the weeds. Case felt his scrotum tighten... ‘Christ, the fucker

was baiting him. But what the fuck was he saying?' Case scanned the gently waving tall grass with the point of his pistol...He couldn't make out the words. They were being spoken over and over... the same phrase... three words... then a chuckle... Fuck, it could be coming from anywhere... Why did the grass have to be so Goddamned high out there?

"WHO'S OUT THERE?" He asked and was unable to keep the fear out of his voice. Fuck it, he would have to walk out there and force him out of cover. He took three steps and left the pavement for the shoulder and stopped... Yes, off to the left... Then he saw a shrub moving violently... It was about thirty yards away and was the center one of a group of bushes that had grown so together they looked like one big one. It was being shaken and Case swallowed a dirt dry lump that had grown in his throat.

"COME OUTTA THERE RIGHT NOW!"

He was getting angry now and he walked purposely down the lip and into the tall grass. He was grateful to be wearing his sneakers because he could see a foot race about to ensue; that is if he didn't choose to just shoot the mother-fucker.

"ALRIGHT DIP-SHIT I'M NOT TELLIN' YOU AGAIN; COME OUTTA THERE!"

Only one sane reason to be drawing him out by shaking that bush and that was this bastard must have a gun. Then the thought occurred to Case that assuming a man sitting in the road like a bull frog in the dark dressed up like Spider-man was sane was a stupid assumption.

"I'M NOT GONNA TELL YOU AGAIN... YOU HAVE ABOUT THIRTY SECONDS BEFORE I PUT A BULLET RIGHT THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF THAT FUCKING BUSH."

The shaking stopped. The night was so still he could hear the breeze again.

"ONE."

Case cocked his gun and took two steps towards the row of bushes.

“TWO.”

He pointed at the one that had been shaking but his eyes were scanning both ends for movement.

“THREE.”

Then he made a mad dash around the right side; gun arm extended. He came around the end and went down on one knee, moving the gun with his eyes. The near total darkness betrayed him and he sat frozen in place waiting for a shot to be fired at him or the sound of movement but a half minute passed and nothing happened. As his eyes grew accustomed to the deeper shadows along the bushes he slowly came to the conclusion that no one was there. Standing up, Case cautiously treaded towards the bush that had been shaking. There he saw something running along the ground and he reached down and pulled it up. It was a string. Thinner than kite string, more like thick thread from a wool cap. It was tied into the center of the bush and ran along the ground into the woods.

“Very clever” He said out loud, as he examined the tree line with his eyes and then slowly followed the white string into the thicket, where he found its end about five feet in.

“Very, very clever.”

So the head start he got, after he shook the bush from the trees meant he could be half a mile away by now. Then he noticed the yellow light of The Quickie Stop sign again; coming through gaps in the trees like a setting, man made moon; and a thought struck him and he ran back to his Jeep.

“Fred?”

“Yeah.”

“Meet me at The Quickie Stop.”

“Right now?”

“Yes” Case answered and hung up his mic to start around the bend for the store. There on the passenger side seat set the remains of the eight pack of cream ale getting warm and

Case decided they were a lost cause as the freak in the road had ruined his buzz anyhow.

When Fred Dollop pulled into the lot of The Quickie Stop eight minutes later he found the sheriff standing around the side of the store with a cup of coffee in his hands. The place was deserted, and other than the Caravan that belonged to the single second shift employee, Case's Cherokee was the only vehicle around.

"What's up?" Fred asked, as he stepped out of his cruiser and put on his hat.

"I just had a run in with your Spider-man."

"Really?" Fred answered with surprise, for he had pretty much written the incident off as being a product of his imagination due to lack of sleep.

"He was around that last bend back there" Case said pointing behind them "sittin' right in the middle of the road."

"Where'd he get to?" Fred asked and here Case felt a bit of embarrassment.

"Son of a bitch outsmarted me" he said, and before Fred could throw out one of his jibes "I thought he was behind a bush but he had a string tied to it and had snuck off into the trees as he kept shaking it" to which Fred laughed.

"I'm shakin' it boss" the deputy said.

"What'd you say?"

"It's a famous movie chief. Cool hand Luke... Paul Newman's in it."

"Yeah, yeah" Case said with recognition "I've seen that... and that's what that fucker was saying"

"You heard his voice? Damn chief were you that close?"

"Man oh man" Case exclaimed and pulled off his ball cap to rub his forehead "I'll tell ya' right here and now Fred; I believe whoever that was is our killer."

"Huh?" Fred responded with confusion "but what about Wheatley? Why's he runnin' from us if he didn't do it?"

“Don’t know and don’t care” Case said absent mindedly “‘cause you and me have to pay a house a little visit” he said coyly and looked up the hill, where the Tomlin house was but could not be seen.

“Tomlin’s place?”

“Spider-man has been seen right around here both times” Case stated “and who else lives close by?” The way he said it Fred knew he’d already given it plenty of thought, so he didn’t really even consider it a question.

“Things around here just keep gettin’ weirder and weirder” Fred stated, as he started back for his car but Case started towards the steep hill on foot.

“What are we doin’ ... walking?”

“Yeah, let’s see what we can see.”

“What are you watching?”

“I don’t know.”

“Still?”

“Yep.”

“Still drinking pink ladies?”

“Nah, I gave that up hours ago. Now I’m just swilling gin”

Duane Tomlin was slouched in the center cushion of the black couch of his brother’s living room. He sat in the glow of the only light; the twenty inch television he’d found in Jon’s closet. With no cable to hook up to he could only pick up three channels and had settled on a PBS station that he’d left it on all day. Not that it mattered what was playing for Duane’s mind was elsewhere anyhow.

“You call your sister yet?”

“Nope” Duane was answering in a monotone voice that gave away none of the turmoil that bubbled and gurgled in his soul. Slowly he turned his head and took in the slight young man standing beside him. Skylar Parsons looked out of breath.

“Where you been?”

“Out on another nature walk.”

“In the dark?”

“Why not?”

“There’s bears in these mountains ya’ know.”

“I didn’t see any.”

“You wouldn’t” Duane answered casually and drained his glass.

“You seem nice and toasty; you oughta call your sister right now.”

“If I do she’ll run straight down here.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t want Connie in the middle of this mess; at least not until we find out something for sure” Duane was back staring at the tube in that hypnotic way people stare at a campfire.

“Duane, Tim is on the run from the sheriff. I think it’s safe to say he’s guilty.”

“Guilty of what?”

But before Skylar could answer there was a loud knock at the door and the boy took off down the hall.

“Where you goin’?”

“Where you think?”

Duane sighed and slowly got up; the room swayed and the dancing shadows from the TV made it hard for him to walk but he made it to the door and flipped on the outside and inside lights.

“Hi Mr. Tomlin; remember me?”

Case was standing front and center and Fred was back admiring the artwork which still graced the door

“What can I do for you sheriff” Duane asked sleepily “I was just about to hit the sack.”

“This won’t take but a minute” Case promised “can we come in?”

“Sure” Duane answered and stepped aside so the lawmen could enter. Case noticed he looked more disheveled than

last time he'd seen him and he reeked of alcohol. He was badly in need of a shave; his hair was tousled and the untucked shirt and jeans he wore looked baggy and slept in.

"Have you seen anything odd around here today?" Case asked candidly as he unzipped his jacket

"Like what?"

"Well, this is gonna sound strange as hell" and Fred snorted a laugh at the understatement "but my deputy here saw someone near here wearing a Spider-man costume. Now, at the time I thought it was just one of his shenanigans; on account of Fred here is a bit of a play baby but I just saw him myself not twenty minutes ago."

"Near here?" Duane said "that's scary."

"Mind if we take a look around?"

"No not at all Duane answered with concern "what, you think he's hiding around here? Maybe in here?"

"Well, there's no reason to be alarmed. It might just be one of those nuts from Minion's hollow trying to get some attention."

Case walked straight over to the Spider-man picture that hung on the wall.

"Well somebody's a fan" he said ironically, staring at the twelve by twenty cartoon-ish drawing.

"That's Jon's" Duane answered obviously and Case went down the hall where Skylar had just been and opened the first bedroom door and flicked on the light.

"I'm kinda thinking this whole murder has brought some of the weirdoes out of the woodwork" Then he went into the room, threw back the covers on Tim's bed, got on his knees and looked underneath" Duane held his breath expecting Skylar's discovery but Case only got back up and looked under the seat cushions of the couch; then he opened the sliding door to the closet. There he looked through the few clothes hanging and toed the shutters and lens boxes in the floor. He saw the huge dildo in the top of Tim's duffel bag.

“Are you looking for the guy or just the suit?” Duane asked insightfully and Case turned around to him with a coy smile.

“I’m looking for anything Mr. Tomlin. Anything at all.”

“Look” Duane started defensively “I can assure you I’m in no condition to be running around in some silly costume... fact is, I’ve been hitting the sauce pretty heavy today... I’m trying to screw on the courage to call my sister and try to explain what’s happened to our brother.” Fred winced with guilt from this statement; having been the one who’d let Jon’s body get stolen. Case, satisfied that Tim’s room didn’t hide what he was looking for, took a glance at Renoir’s ‘Dance at the Le Moulin De La Galette’, found it vaguely familiar, shut out the light and moved down the hall.

“This is Tomlin’s room right?” He asked, stopping at the next closed door across the hall.

“Yeah” Duane said, and as Case turned the handle “he keeps it locked.”

“Got a key?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, how about down here?”

“Bathroom on the right; bedroom I’m in on the left.”

Case turned on the bathroom light, walked in and threw back the shower curtain. Again Duane held his breath and expected disaster but the light only went out and the sheriff moved across the hall. But the search in Tim’s developing room came up as empty as his bedroom and Case made polite apologies as he and Fred made their way back down the hall and with few amenities were quickly out the door.

“Man I feel like garbage for losing his brother’s body now” Fred admitted, as Duane shut the door and walked into the cold, crisp night air.

“Feeling sorry for brother?” Case said sarcastically.

“A little.”

“Oh, but it was alright before; when all you were doing was fucking up on the job.”

“Well shit boss...” But Case cut him off.

“Didn’t you pick up anything odd in there?”

“No, like what?”

“Well, first off he said he was in no condition to be running around in a costume”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, it might not be anything but we never said anything about this Spider-man doin’ any running. I just said we saw him.”

“Yeah but that doesn’t mean anything” Fred argued “Hell, we were hunting him and we’d just seen him. It stands to reason we were chasing him.”

“Does it?” But before Fred could reinforce it Case continued “And what about that bedroom door?”

“Which one?”

“Jon’s... We were here yesterday and we were in that room, remember?”

“Hey that’s right!”

“So how come now it’s locked?”

“Damn chief, you’re like Colombo.”

“No, our friend in there is hiding something.”

“Wanna go back in while he’s drunk and get it outta him?”

“No” Case answered coolly; as they arrived at their separate vehicles “He’s not going anywhere. Any who, we’ll get to the bottom of this mess sooner or later.”

“I hope it’s sooner than later” Fred confided “I need some sleep.”

“You and me both” Case agreed and climbed into his Jeep and fired it up.

“You goin’ home finally?” Fred asked loudly from outside his open car door.

“Yes I am... Cruise up and down the switchbacks a couple times tonight... I don’t expect you’ll see anything but we want Mr. Wheatley to know we’re on the job.”

“Yeah” Fred agreed “Mr. Wheatley and whoever else is prowling around out there... Goodnight.”

Down in Dog Run is a character-driven, psychological, mystery, thriller set in the hills of West Virginia, and filled with strange characters, a bondage killer and enough twists and turns to keep the pages turning. After an attempted suicide, a man tries to reconcile with his estranged brother and ends up in the mountains, where young girls are turning up dead and he's the prime suspect

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