



## Being John Bland

A novel by A.J. Church

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# Twelve

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By the time I got home that afternoon, I was feeling more than a little confused. I had done it, though not the way I had originally planned. In fact, the more I thought about it, the madder I got. I should have been gloating, but all I could feel was disappointment. And that in itself was a disappointment. After all, I'd been planning for this moment for months, and now the fact that it had happened by accident was ruining the whole thing. What good was frying a guy with 220 volts of electricity if you didn't mean for it to happen?

I took a quick shower then popped open a beer, intending to plant myself in front of the TV and surf for something reasonably entertaining to distract me from my angst, but it wasn't working. No matter how I tried to rationalize it, killing Stan the Electrical Man didn't prove a damn thing because it wasn't part of the Master Plan. I hadn't gone over to CompTek with the intention of killing anyone, aside from Randy, but that's another story and really wouldn't have proven anything other than he could be a royal pain in the ass who deserved to be killed now and then and maybe more than once. No, I had simply turned a routine repair and debug exercise to my advantage.

Okay, so maybe I was just looking at this from a half-empty point of view. Sandra was always telling me I was too negative. Who knows, maybe she was right. I mean, I had woken up this morning feeling pretty inadequate after two attempts to snuff out my old man had blown up in my face. And while the day could have been a total waste, considering I had to spend it working and listening to Randy bitch, I had gotten some much-needed experience in how it feels to see someone die as a result of my own efforts. Yeah, it was just an accident, but maybe it was also a sign that things weren't totally hopeless.

When I looked at it that way, I felt a little better. I started imagining how good I'd feel when I finally did do it on purpose. All I had to do now was tweak my Master Plan a little, and I was off to the races.

I hopped up and sprinted over to my computer to pull up my secret files when I spotted the shattered monitor. Okay, no problem. I'll just go buy a new monitor. Something even better than what I'd had. A new widescreen with all the latest and greatest specs.

I headed to my bedroom to grab my wallet, humming to myself and thinking how even Hack couldn't upset me now, when I realized I hadn't seen the old fart since I'd gotten home. I peeked into his bedroom; empty. The bed had even been made. Oh well, more good news. Maybe he *had* cut his foot and bled to death. I nearly giggled at the prospect.

I noticed the note on my pillow when I was leaving my room. From the dingo scrawlings on the paper, I figured it was from Hack, though all I could make out was something about him and Krystal going shopping. I smiled to myself. Things were getting better and better. Maybe I'd get lucky and they'd run away together and get hit by a bus.

Of course, to get really lucky, I'd have to be driving the bus.

## Thirteen

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I wasn't a half hour into the inaugural test run for my new monitor when Hack and Krystal made their appearance and pretty much shattered both my concentration and the bubble of delirium in which I'd been floating. So much for good moods.

They got as far as "You won't believe what we found today," before I turned on the distraction filter and happily tuned them out, but of course it wasn't the same. Just knowing they were there, hovering around me like two mosquitoes on a blood hunt was enough to set my teeth on edge. When they suggested grilling out, I offered to go for the steaks with no intention of coming back. At least, not before dinner.

Most everyone I knew was either already busy or pretending to be out of town, so I decided to opt for a little research into the finer points of herd mentality. And there was no better place to watch the herd on a Saturday night than one of those thrumming, techno-beat mausoleums where young, single—at least for the night—professionals go to compare brands of commercial slavery and look for Mr. or Ms. Right For The Evening. I headed for Zanzibar, the city's latest mecca for shallow materialism.

So there I was, not buying steaks for the barbecue and nursing a Jack and Coke while some woman who was old enough to be my mother but hadn't realized it yet gave me the green light with her eyes from across the bar. Sorry, darlin,' I wanted to say, I've already been in the Mama-Womb once. I downed my drink and turned to signal the bartender for another, and suddenly, like one of those afternoon thunderstorms that pop up from out of nowhere, there she was, Mama-Womb and all, blocking my view.

"I've never seen you in here before," was her opening gambit. It was obvious she wasn't interested in wasting brain cells on banter.

Since I knew ignoring her would only make her more persistent—I had learned *something* from Krystal—I came back with an understated, "Really?" I think that one might have stumped her, because she got this blank look on her face for a few seconds. Ten million years of evolution; kind of makes you wonder what they did with the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand.

She touched her finger to my hand in contrived nonchalance, as if I wouldn't notice or care, and batted a pair of Tammy Faye eyelashes. "Are you here alone?"

I shook my head. "Naw. I got my wife and girlfriend tied up out in the car. I just came in for a quick drink before I take 'em home and beat 'em both senseless."

I couldn't believe I'd actually said that. Apparently, neither could she, but after a moment's hesitation, a tiny lightbulb flickered somewhere inside that vacuous smile. "You're kidding, right?"

What the hell, I was on a roll now. “No, I’m not,” I insisted with just enough disdain to cause her to pull back a step. Her eyes narrowed, flickering from me to the cowboy on the next stool, who had taken an unnatural interest in the conversation. I considered asking him what was so damned fascinating that he couldn’t mind his own business, but that might give Mama-Womb a chance to recover.

“Oh, I see,” she finally said with all the air of someone who didn’t. “You’re one of *those* guys.”

I leaned closer to her, nodding. “Why, you looking for someone like that?”

She sputtered something about all men being pigs before grabbing her drink and huffing off to bother someone else. The guy next to me started laughing so hard I thought he was going to have a stroke. I tried to ignore him, but, like Mama-Womb before him, he wasn’t buying into that.

“Let me buy you a drink, pardner,” he gasped, wiping his eyes. “Every time I come in here that filly’s hittin’ on every wagging dick in the joint. ‘Bout time someone put her in her place.”

“Glad I could oblige,” I offered with as much disinterest as I could muster. Now go away, I wanted to say, but he’d already summoned the bartender over to make good on his offer.

“Set ‘em up again, Hal. Double—the good stuff.” He winked then turned back to me, extending his hand. “Waylon Orleans is the name.” Seeing no way out of it, I shook his hand. “My daddy named me after Waylon Jennings.”

“No shit? I’d have never guessed.”

He convulsed into laughter again. “You’re a real hoot, you know that?”

This guy had the home-on-the-range thing down pretty well—hat, boots, even one of those snap-front shirts with the red piping around the pockets. Only thing missing was the spurs and the gold tooth, and I’m not so sure he wasn’t hiding them out in his pickup truck with the six-shooter and the branding iron.

“Didn’t catch your name, pardner?”

“John. John, um . . . Winston.”

If he noticed the hesitation, he didn’t let on. Instead, he grinned and slapped me across the back like we were lifelong buddies. “Well, John Winston, you and me’s gonna pack down some likker tonight, so just kick back and loosen your belt.”

Great, just my luck; a social drinker. I leaned closer, pretending I didn’t want the bartender to hear. “Don’t you think this place is a little pricey for serious drinking?”

“Don’t worry about it, John, I got ya covered. Got payment on two hundred head of beef today and I owe it to myself to get shitfaced in the dirt.”

Christ, I realized, he really was a cowboy. Fucking died-in-the-wool goat-roper with the cows to back up the name. This might be worth my time after all. I mean, how often do you meet a real, honest-to-fucking-god cowboy? The research possibilities here were endless. I downed my drink and gasped as the fire slid down my gullet.

“Damn!”

Waylon chuckled, delivering another slap to my back, which didn't help my malfunctioning lungs, and asked with a smart ass smirk, "You okay?"

If I'd been able to see through the tears, I might have punched him off his high horse, but it was all I could do to breathe. I felt like I'd just swallowed the lighter with the lighter fluid, but I wasn't giving this grinning son of a bitch the satisfaction of knowing that. "So," I managed to sputter with as much nonchalance as I could muster, "what are you doing here? Doesn't seem like your kind of place."

"Oh hell, I come in here all the time. The women's a damn sight better lookin' here than those dives out on 301, though the music kinda leaves me cold."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I agreed, glaring across the room at the DJ, who had just inched the volume up another hundred decibels.

"What about you?" Waylon asked. "You lookin' to score?"

I snorted. "Hell no. I already got a girlfriend I'd like to kill."

Why the hell did I say that? I held up my glass and peered inside, wondering again what was in that stuff. Waylon had launched into another fit of laughter.

"You're a regular comedian. Hit him again, Hal, and leave out the Coke this time. That's for pussies."

"I'm not sure I need any more," I protested as Hal refilled my glass. At this rate, I'd be confessing my life story before the night was through.

"No such thing, pardner. If you're still standin', you need more."

I stared at the glass for half a minute, then lifted it and glanced over the rim at Waylon's taunting I-dare-you-to-do-it grin. Figuring I'd gotten myself into one of those macho drinking games, I tipped up the glass, ignoring the bite as the treacherous poison seared my throat. As soon as it hit my stomach, I could have sworn I'd swallowed dynamite. Waylon nodded approvingly.

"Now that's the way you're supposed to drink."

I could stand it no longer. "What the hell is this stuff?"

He laughed and motioned Hal over, instructing him to leave the bottle. "Special stock. Tennessee Crawlin' Whiskey." He pushed the bottle towards me. "Drink up, John. Plenty more where that came from."

With no nerve endings left to kill, I dumped another splash into the glass, sentencing my liver to certain cirrhosis. Waylon grabbed the bottle and doused his own glass, downing the noxious contents in a single swallow, forcing me to match him or look like a wuss.

Waylon, it turns out, had a phobia about empty glasses. Within an hour, we had drained the bottle and were hanging all over each other in repulsively drunken splendor.

"So why you wanna kill this girlfriend of yours?" Waylon asked as he broke the seal on the second bottle. By then I was having trouble focusing, and I wasn't sure my tongue would fit in my mouth anymore, like someone had shot it full of Novacaine.

"Shesafuckinditz," I slurred.

"Huh?"

"A ditz. Dumber'n box of rocks."

He laughed, spraying me with spit. "So where's she now?"

"Home with my fuckin' father."

His eyes grew wide. "She's home fuckin' your ol' man?"

I shrugged, considering this. "Maybe . . . who knows?" I giggled at the prospect; wouldn't that solve all my problems? I squinted at Waylon and motioned him closer. "Know what I did?"

"What?"

"I left 'em at my house together. Told 'em I was going out for steaks to barbecue."

"When?"

I turned my wrist, squinting at my watch. "Three hours ago."

We both burst out laughing, slapping each other on the back and sputtering all over the bar. "Reckon they're still waitin'?" Waylon wondered aloud, sending us both into another fit of hysterics.

I shook my head, feeling more and more light-headed. "Ya know, I tried to kill my ol' man by throwing a radio in the shower last night, but all he did was cut his foot."

"You're shittin' me? That's a bitch, man. I tried to kill my ol' man once a few years back. Ran over him with a tractor."

"He get hurt?"

"Not as much as I'd have liked. I was trying to hit him with the thrasher I was towin', but it caught a rut and hopped over him."

For some reason I found this hilarious. We were both laughing so hard Hal came over to warn us he'd cut us off if we didn't settle down.

"Aw, fuck that, Hal," Waylon spewed. "Come on, have a drink with us."

Hal walked off shaking his head, but he left the bottle, which Waylon wasted no time emptying into our glasses. "Down the hatch," he toasted, draining his. I stared at him, his face swimming in front of me like a desert mirage, and tried to muster the willpower to follow his lead, but I could already feel the bile backing up in my gut at the mere thought of another shot.

"How do you do that?"

"Easy," he said, smacking his lips. "Got a cast iron stomach. Comes from eating my mamma's cookin' all them years. She coulda poisoned us a dozen times and we'd never known it. Woman was half blind. I seen her one time dump a handful of rat poison in the stew thinking it was salt. By then we'd built up such a tolerance we probably coulda eaten nuclear waste without passin' gas."

I felt that bore further consideration, but my brain was starting to feel like one of those melting watches in a Dali painting. "I think I'm gonna puke," I blurted out, much to Waylon's obvious delight. He stood up and clamped an arm around my back.

"Well then, let's get you outta here so you don't upset the customers."

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Waylon stood by without comment while I emptied my guts in the parking lot next to his blue four-wheel drive pickup with the rifle rack in the back window and rebel flag mudflaps. He

didn't even seem to mind that I got some oversplash on his tires. I should have felt better after that, but I think it only stirred things up more. I was starting to see some seriously weird shit jumping out of the corner of my eye. I parked myself on the lowered tailgate of Waylon's truck while he paced back and forth in front of me, bottle in hand, stopping now and then to take another pull.

"Sure you don't want no more? Hair of the dog."

I shook my head, swallowing hard, and looked up. That's when I noticed the change.

Waylon looked different out here. Younger and not quite so much a hick. In fact, the longer I looked at him, the more convinced I became the whole hayseed country boy thing was just an act. Oh yeah, he was a cowboy in the sense that he raised cattle, but the rest of it was getting a little dark around the edges. Things like why did his accent suddenly seemed to cut in and out like a bad radio transmission? When I finally could trust myself to speak without worrying about my stomach spewing out of my mouth, I asked, "Did you really try to run down your ol' man with the thrasher?"

"You really try to fry yours in the shower?" he countered with a sly grin.

I nodded, suddenly embarrassed by the ineptitude of that confession. "Pretty lame, huh?"

"Well, you gotta start somewhere."

Something about the way he said that struck a chord with me. I could feel my heart speed up, pushing adrenalin through my veins like a dealer working a junior high dance. "You did it, didn't you?"

He looked away, though I could tell he was smiling. Not one of those happy, hey-I'm-just-kidding smiles, but something a little more shrewd. I waited for him to answer, and somewhere in the parking lot a car revved up, people yelling and laughing, and then they were gone and we were alone again. I stared down at Waylon's black boots and it seemed, in the shifting shadows, they had come to life. Like the toes had morphed into snake's heads and were slithering out of his pants.

I'd almost convinced myself it was just the booze, that I was hallucinating and should probably go home and sleep it off, but the longer I stared, the more certain I became there was something that shouldn't be there. After a couple of minutes, I had myself so worked up into believing there really was a snake on Waylon's foot and that it was going to uncoil its scaly length and come shimmying right over towards me that I found myself inching back on the tailgate, looking to put some distance between me and the threat.

Waylon seemed to be getting a hell of a charge out of my distress, because he just let the moment drag out forever. In the meantime, I was trying not to be obvious as I looked around for something to defend myself with in case my imagination was telling the truth.

"What the hell's your problem, boy?" Waylon asked. He stepped towards me and I scooted further back into the truck bed, where I spotted something laying next to the wheel well. I grabbed hold of it and dragged a three-foot length of threaded pipe out of the shadows. I glanced at Waylon curiously.

"You a plumber, too?"

"Insurance," he grinned. "Nowadays you can't be too careful."

I weighed the pipe in my hand, nodding. Okay, I could see where it might be an effective persuader, but why did he leave it rolling around in the back of his truck? Seemed to me that would make a hell of a racket, not to mention being a little inconvenient to have to reach back there to corral it in a pinch. If it was me, I'd have kept it under the front seat like any normal person.

"Have another drink," Waylon offered, the slur creeping back into his voice.

"No, I'm fine. Really."

I wasn't. I was wishing the world would hold still long enough for my head to stop pounding. I was wishing Waylon would back off and give me some room, because he was really starting to creep me out. But mostly, I was wishing I could see better, because things were getting fuzzier by the minute and I was getting more and more confused about what was real and what wasn't.

I gave the parking lot a quick scan; Waylon's truck was sitting by a ditch right next to entrance. In fact, we were so close to Dale Mabry Highway I could feel the truck shake every time a car went past. Not many of them were pulling in or out of the lot, however, this being the height of the grab-em-or-lose-em part of the evening. Those who were still inside were staying put for awhile, and those who'd gotten lucky were already gone. We were pretty much alone out here, which suddenly seemed like a dumb idea, considering my condition and the fact that I didn't know this guy from shit and he seemed to be having an identity crisis before my eyes.

Waylon stepped closer, raising and planting one foot on the tailgate, and looked me straight in the eye. I couldn't tell if it was menace or amusement that made his lip curl as he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

"Man, you're drunker'n shit, ain't ya?"

There was no sense in denying the obvious. My eyes drifted down to his boot, resting a half foot away from my own, the sleek black skin shimmering in the glow of passing headlights. Writhing around his ankle. I rubbed my eyes; looked again.

Ah, fuck, what the hell was going on here? I raised the pipe and, before indecision could turn me into a reptile snack, brought it down hard across his foot. Twice.

"Jesus Christ, you fucking idiot! What the hell are you doing?"

Waylon had fallen back away from the truck, grabbing his battered foot while hopping around on one leg like a flamingo with jock itch. I jumped out of the truck, still not convinced I had killed the thing.

"Hold still, dammit!" I yelled, chasing him around while waving the pipe over my head like a sword.

"Stay away from me!" he shrieked, spinning around and slamming into the side of his truck. He groaned as his injured foot instinctively hit the ground. He tried to put his weight on it and let go a blood-curdling scream that seemed completely out of character for such a macho kind of guy. He leaned against the truck, finally getting his balance, and turned to face me.

By then the adrenalin had helped to clear my brain and I could see it was just a boot, after all. Waylon glared at me, all trace of that drinking-buddy good humor gone now. "You stupid asshole, you broke my fucking foot!"

“Hey man, I’m sorry,” I offered, and I meant it. I mean, how the hell was I supposed to know the snake was just an hallucination? I thought I was saving us both. “Here, you need some help?”

“Son of a bitch!” he growled, lunging for me and grabbing me around the neck. It was like being attacked by a one-legged grizzly. I balled myself up and spun away, the pipe still in my hand, and it wasn’t until I turned back unscathed that I realized I must have caught him on the upswing. He fell back against the truck, sliding down the door like a month-old sack of potatoes, the unmistakable imprint of inch-thick lead carved across his forehead. The weird part was, there wasn’t any blood, just this caved-in look to his skull. I tossed the pipe into the ditch and knelt beside him.

“Waylon? You still in there?”

If he was, he wasn’t answering, and maybe that was for the best, because I figure when he opened his eyes, he was going to be one pissed-off son of a bitch, and what was I going to do about that? He’d kick my ass in a fair fight unless I took away the option.

I fished around in his pockets for the keys to his truck, assuring him that I wasn’t trying to get personal or anything, and dragged him around to the driver’s side and shoved him into the seat. He slumped forward, his head banging against the wheel just about where the pipe had left its calling card. Well, that worked. Maybe he’d wake up and think he’d cracked his own coconut.

And maybe he wouldn’t. No, after about a minute’s consideration, I decided I wasn’t interested in taking that chance. I hadn’t given him my real name, but I was pretty sure he’d figure it out and come looking for me, and he’d find me, sure as hell. It’s always like that in the movies; the bad guys find you no matter how well you hide. No, the prospect of having a liquor-crazed cowboy ambush me in my sleep didn’t hold much appeal. I decided it would be better for everyone concerned if I just made sure Mr. Orleans didn’t regain his memory about any of this.

It took me less than a minute to formulate a plan, and I had to admit, I was pretty proud of myself. I was really getting the hang of this improvisation thing.

Waylon had dropped his bottle of rotgut when he started his dancing routine and I remembered seeing it roll under the truck. I crawled underneath to retrieve it, surprisingly unbroken and capped. I opened it, nearly gagging on the fumes, and poured some over his clothes, then set the bottle between his legs, wrapping one hand around it. The other on the wheel. His foot on the gas pedal. Oh yeah, this could work.

I started the truck and dropped it in gear, then shut the door. It sat there for a minute like it couldn’t make up its mind what it wanted to do until I gave it a little push. That got it going. It started rolling slowly past the shallow ditch, towards the curb. Dale Mabry Highway loomed beyond with its most notable commodity—traffic. By this time of night, most of it was piloted by people who were just a hair more conscious than my buddy Waylon.

The truck nosed into the outer lane, eliciting a bleating honk from a speeding motorist, who braked and swerved to avoid it. I was backing towards my own car, keeping one eye on the parking lot for witnesses while I followed the truck’s progress. Two lanes, and somehow the four cars that zoomed past managed to dodge it. I figured that had to disprove at least some of those statistics about reaction time while under the influence.

Three lanes and the center median, and the truck bounced merrily over and into oncoming traffic. That's when the reaction time theory proved true. It was a lumbering beast of a panel van, some poor guy probably delivering diapers to the 7-11. It clipped the right front fender first, sending the pickup into a death spiral and wreaking havoc on all three southbound lanes. Two more cars hit it before it pinballed into a light post on the opposite shoulder. When the dust had settled, there were four mangled vehicles and their respective debris scattered over a hundred yard section of the road.

I got into my car, watching as the door to one of the victimized cars opened and the driver jumped out with whoop-ass written all over him and stormed over to Waylon's truck. He kind of lost some steam when he yanked open the door and Waylon's lifeless body slumped out into his arms. I smiled to myself, satisfied that I wouldn't be worrying about him remembering who broke his foot. Even if he'd managed to live through the skull crushing and the car accident, the guy on the road certainly would finish him off.

## Fourteen

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I guess I was halfway home when it hit me: I'd accidently caused the death of another man. I couldn't be a hundred percent certain he was dead, but I was pretty sure Waylon Orleans wasn't going to be hanging around the bars any time soon. And I was just as sure it was either the blow to the head or that stunt with the truck that had finished him off. If the guy who yanked him out of his truck got any action out of their encounter, it was doubtless a one-sided dance.

Shit. Why was this happening to me? Why couldn't I have seen this coming and actually *planned* to hit him? It would have made things so much easier. I deserved that much, didn't I? It's not like I had dreamed up this scheme then sat around masturbating with it for years like a lot of people do, wishing they had climbed that mountain or rafted that river or done their neighbor's wife when she passed out drunk in their kitchen. So why was I having so much trouble getting the whole premeditated thing off the ground? With all this practice, you'd think I would have been a pro at killing people on purpose by now.

As if I wasn't feeling bad enough, Krystal's car was still cozied up by my house when I pulled into my driveway. The windows blazed with light while music seeped out into the quiet suburban night. What the hell were they doing in there?

I thought of Waylon's earlier suggestion and chuckled to myself with a momentary pang of regret. Hell, I might just miss that old boy. He was a decent enough drinking partner, even if I wasn't crazy about his taste in footwear. And there was no doubt in my mind that he had whacked his ol' man with that thrasher. I'd loved to have heard that story. Maybe gain some insight into how he had succeeded where I was still failing.

They were playing cards when I walked in. Hack looked up, his leathery face twisted into that stupid grin, and pointed to the empty chair at his side.

"How's about joinin' us, mate? This sheila's beatin' the bloody pants off me."

I decided I'd ignore them, brushing past the table on my way to the kitchen, where an empty pizza box told me how the barbecue had gone. I reached into the fridge for a beer, popped the top, and drained half of it before glancing back towards the dining room. Hack was watching me, still grinning. The putz.

"Keg go dry?"

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "Most benders finds me crawlin' home 'less the keg goes dry."

He winked, motioning towards Krystal with his head, and mouthed something about her not having to know. I really wasn't interested in getting into a philosophical discussion with this nutwad at two a.m., but naturally that wasn't going to stop Hack.

"No need to feel bad. I'm just surprised you're home now, is all."

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“A walkabout. That’s where ya went, right?” He shrugged. “Man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. That’s how I left your mum, to be truthful. Told her I was goin’ out for milk, and stopped at the pub along the way to see me mates. By the time I remembered, I’d figured she’d be whinging at me till next Christmas if I came home then, so I just stayed gone. Took me over thirty bloody years to find me way back.”

He laughed then, and something inside me almost joined him, but I stopped myself just in time. After all, this was my mother he was talking about, not that it made a hell of a lot of difference to me. I’d walked out on her myself when I was eighteen, and except for that stint with the funeral, I hadn’t looked back, so in a way, I guess I could kind of relate to where he was coming from. As I recall, she was something of an artist when it came to bitching.

“Are you going to talk or play cards?” Krystal whined, and I realized this was the first time she’d spoken since I’d walked in. It was the quietest I’d seen her since, well . . . ever. Who knew, maybe the old man *had* fucked her.

Hack looked at her, frowning. “Believe I’ve had enough. What say we call it a night?”

“But I’m winning.”

He grinned at her, tossing his cards down and pushing them into a pile in the middle of the table. “That’s why I’m quittin’, luv. Can’t have that, can we Skippy?”

I shrugged, not really caring one way or the other. As far as I was concerned, they could play cards or fuck or whatever they’d been doing all evening as long as they kept it to themselves. I’d had a long day, during which I’d accidentally killed two people, and I needed some rest.

“I’m going to bed,” I announced and headed for my room.

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The effect of that rotgut Waylon had conned me into drinking was losing the bulk of its punch by the time I crawled into bed. I laid awake for a long time, listening to my stomach rumble in harmony with the thunder in the distance and thinking about the events of the day. About how I had been instrumental in sending poor Stan the Electrical Man and Cowboy Waylon on to their greater rewards, and I wondered again why it was I couldn’t do this thing as planned but had managed to snuff out two lives without even trying. Wondering about that got me worried, which got me thinking maybe all this was going to give me some kind of complex, which made me realize I had to do something to get my thinking straight again.

Maybe it was just the choice of my intended victim. I’m not what you would call a religious person by any stretch of the imagination, but I was beginning to suspect my old man had some kind of guardian angel watching over him. They say God protects little children and idiots, so maybe he was looking out for Hack too, since he had to fit in there somewhere.

Of course, that didn’t do me any good as far as my personal situation was concerned. I was still stuck with Hack in my house and Krystal under foot, and between the two of them, I figured I’d either be insane or suicidal within a week. Maybe if I could get them both into the

same bed at the same time, I could set it on fire and say it was spontaneous combustion. I don't know how well that would fly with local fire marshal, but it would make the jail time go down easier.

I guess the thing that bothered me the most about this whole mess was how goddamned unlikely it all was. I mean, how many people have this kind of shit happen to them? Finding a father they've never even met before, trying—and failing—two times to kill him. Then having him hit it off with a girlfriend you'd just as soon see with a railroad spike pounded through her head. What the hell kind of luck was that? You take any other person on the planet and this would never happen in a million years. Most people couldn't even comprehend it happening.

And speaking of Krystal, it was getting to the point where I wasn't so sure killing her wouldn't be more satisfying than offing Hack. The woman annoyed me beyond comprehension. In the past I might have settled for just getting her to leave me alone, but having seen her more in the past three days than my worst nightmare would even allow, she was starting to have the same effect on me as a sandspur in my underwear. I'm surprised her own mother didn't drown her in the toilet before she left the hospital. The woman had to have been either certifiable or a saint for not doing it, because if having to listen to a baby Krystal crying wasn't grounds for an insanity defense, I don't know what was.

But I was getting myself all worked up again and not solving a damn thing. These were givens, things I knew. Things that were as they were unless I could figure out a way to change them, which meant I had to try to put my personal feelings aside and approach this like any other problem.

I'd spent the last six months perfecting my Master Plan, and I wasn't ready to abandon it yet. Sure, I had accidentally killed Stan, and probably Waylon as well—though, as I said, I really hadn't seen that confirmed. And I could probably justify both deaths by calling them practice runs, but that still didn't change the fact that I hadn't been able to get the real thing done.

For crying out loud, it was one simple murder. If I could commit two in one day by accident, you'd think I could at least pull off something as premeditated as this without screwing it up. If Randy or Alan, or especially that dickhead, Charlie, ever got word of how badly I'd screwed this up, I'd be the butt-end of every joke they ever told for the rest of their lives. They'd be telling their grandkids how John Bland could fuck up a three car funeral, and that's not the way I wanted to be remembered.

I heard Krystal's car leave around three o'clock, and soon after that Hack's bedroom door closed. I had to admit to being just a tad disappointed. All I was asking for was one little break; just something to get the ball rolling. It didn't have to be anything earth moving, just the sound of them rooting around in there in self-absorbed oblivion long enough for me to sneak out to the garage and grab the gas can.

Not that I was getting off on that image or anything. Hell, if I squeezed out one drop of jism with either one of them on my mind, I'd fry my own self.

Hack wasted no time on preliminaries once he hit the sack. Within seconds of turning out the light, he was sawing away like two beavers at a lumberjack convention. I laid there for awhile

trying not to listen while my nerves wound themselves up tighter than a closer in the ninth inning, until, finally, I was sure my brain would implode if I didn't get up and do something.

I've always felt snoring should be justifiable grounds for homicide. It's a scientific fact that sleep-deprivation can cause all manner of psychosis, and nothing wrecks a good night's sleep faster than some buffalo doing a motorboat imitation.

I really can't say I was conscious of having any sort of plan when I grabbed my pillow and tiptoed into Hack's room. Maybe that was good, too, in that my subconscious mind didn't have time to dream up ways to screw this up. My only driving need at this point was sleep, which meant I had to find a way to shut down the buzz saw.

In the dim glow from the streetlight through the open blinds, I could see Hack sprawled on his back diagonally across the bed, his mouth hanging open like a Venus fly trap. I crept closer, one eye on him while I concentrated on being as quiet as possible, the pillow raised in anticipation of achieving the nirvana of silence before he had a chance to wake up and realize he was dead.

I didn't see the barricade of clothes Hack had left in the floor until my right foot got tangled in a pair of his underwear, causing me to pitch forward and lose my balance. I landed on top of Hack with a force that should have knocked us both unconscious.

"You okay?" he asked, opening his eyes. I noticed he didn't seem the least bit perturbed to find me creeping around in his room in the middle of the night with a pillow. Maybe his imagination just wasn't that strong.

I struggled to my feet, feeling like the clumsy turd he was forcing me to become, and managed to squeak out an answer.

"Yeah, I just, well, thought I heard someone in here." I cringed as my own brain started hurling insults at my lack of originality.

Hack reached over and switched on the light, glancing down at the pillow in my hand. "What were ya gonna do, put 'em down for a nap?"

I sighed, dropping onto the side of the bed, figuring I was busted and probably deserved it, but Hack was just sitting there grinning up at me like all this was the most natural thing in the world, and I wondered if that was because he felt sorry for me or was just gloating because I'd screwed up another attempt on his life. Either way, I didn't like it.

He could have said any number of things—God knows I'd given him enough ammunition—but what came out of his mouth then kind of caught me off-guard.

"I was figurin' you'd wanna talk sooner or later."

"Huh?"

He nodded towards the pillow and scooted to one side of the bed. "It's okay, mate, slide on up here and spill the beans. I got no secrets, and I imagine you got at least thirty years worth of questions to ask me."

I couldn't believe it—he thought I'd come in here for a father-son chat? That surfboard must have cracked him in the coconut more than once. You just don't get it, do you, I wanted to scream, but as I've already mentioned, I was tired and my confidence had just suffered another

devastating blow, and I just didn't have the energy to refute his thinking. So I sat down and listened to him talk.

"I could see you understood me before, talkin' about your mum. She was a hell of a looker when I met up with her, but she had a way of drivin' a man off, ya know? Nothin' was ever right with her. Me, all I had back then was me board and me mates. I was happy that way, ya know?"

"But like I said, she was a looker. All me mates wanted to dip into that, but I was the one she chose, which made me kind of the bloke to beat out on the beach. If I'd bothered to peek behind the smile to see the bloody teeth, we might not be sittin' here havin' this talk. That shiela was scarier than a croc after a two-week hunger strike. By the time I figured that out, only thing I could do was piss off. I didn't find out till later she was carryin' you. Not that it would've made a bit of difference; I won't lie to ya there. I was gettin' out, and that's all there was about it. I'm sorry we haven't known each other the way a father and son should, but I guess things in me life have kind of gotten away from me, so to speak."

As if I wasn't already pissed enough for botching up this latest attempt, I found myself identifying with him. I'd spent eighteen years with my mother, so I knew exactly where he was coming from there, and I resented him even more for having the option of running away. I'd had no such luck, at least, not till she had pretty much fucked up the best years of my life, and I told him so.

"Guess that's why you hate me, huh?" he said, though there was no animosity in his voice. I nodded, suddenly feeling pretty miserable and not knowing why. "Well, I'll tell ya something, mate," he continued, rubbing at his chin like he had something there. "There was a time I might have ended this for all of us."

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Just that, one night I come home from a bender and there she was, carryin' on like a bloody dingo in a rusted trap, like me drinkin' with me mates was gonna destroy her life, and I picked me up the first thing I could close me hands on, it bein' a hammer I'd been using earlier to hang a curtain she wanted hung, and I was this close to openin' up a direct path to her brain. That's when I decided I'd better get my skinny arse out of there or they'd be fryin' me up for breaky."

"You tried to kill my mother?" I'm sure it came out sounding more incredulous than I intended. The fact that anyone wanted to kill my mother should have been a foregone conclusion. Still, hearing it come out of his mouth made it seem so much more, well . . . concrete. Kind of like when you hear about someone else getting screwed over by the IRS. *See there, I told you they were a pack of bloodthirsty vampires.*

Hack nodded like he was following my thoughts. "I reckon that little close call woke up an appetite in me, cause when I got back to Oz, things just sorta started happenin', and I really can't say one way or another whether I'm sorry about any of 'em. I didn't set out to hurt no one, you understand, and the way I see it, most of 'em got what they deserved anyway."

He paused, letting the dust settle in my mind. "Trouble is, I can't go back there now, so I'm kind of stuck here—not that here is a bad place to be, long as I don't have to see your mum

again. I have to say I still think about the feelin' of holdin' that hammer over her head and smile. The way I see it, I reckon you just can't fight what you are inside."

I was speechless. I didn't know what was crazier, him telling me this or me finding it hard to believe. After all, we had the same genes.

"You killed someone there?"

"Like I said, it's not something I'm especially proud of. Things just sort of happened, ya know? Like the bloke down in Newcastle--"

"How many?" I interrupted, not caring to hear the details. We weren't getting *that* friendly.

He was thoughtful for a moment, like he was ticking them off in his head. Meanwhile, I was still trying to get my mind around all this. My ol' man was a killer, and he had so graciously passed his genes on to me. I didn't know whether to dance or vomit.

"Not exactly sure," he said finally. "You have to understand, I've had me some bloody hellacious benders out in the territories where things just sort of blacked out, so I can't say for sure what I did, but I reckon it don't really count if you can't remember it, does it?"

Did it? I shrugged; I didn't know how well that defense would hold up in court, but then, who was I to pass judgement? I didn't know what I was doing when I flipped the juice on Stan the Electrical Man or whacked ol' Cowboy Waylon in the skull with that lead pipe. Maybe it was just beginner's luck. What was it Waylon had said, you had to start somewhere?

I looked at Hack, wondering how he had started and if this meant I had to change my opinion of him, something I desperately did not want to do. I liked hating him, I realized. Almost as much as I liked hating Krystal. The difference was, I'd been hating Hack my whole life. To change now would be like invalidating half my existence.

No, murderer or not, I couldn't let him get to me. I decided I wouldn't ask and I wouldn't bring up the subject again. If he wanted to tell me, I guess I wouldn't stop him, but I wasn't going to let any of the details of his exploits warm my feelings where he was concerned. Some things were just meant to stay the way they were.

I just had two questions for him now. "You kill anyone here?" I asked, getting the first out of the way.

"Nope, can't say that I have, mate. I suppose you could say I've confined me exploits to me own country, so far."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. I don't need anyone poking around here looking for dead bodies."

"Can't say I blame you there, mate."

Time for question number two, and this was the biggie. "You know how you felt about my mother?"

"I thought I just told you that."

"Well, that's how I feel about Krystal. So if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd appreciate you keeping me out of the electric chair by not encouraging her."

He looked at me and nodded. "Reckon I can respect that, mate, though she's not an easy one to ditch. She's like a bloody leech, that one."

“You’re finally seeing that, huh?” I grabbed my pillow and headed for the door, but I stopped when I got there and turned back, smiling to myself.

“You know, I think she likes you.”

“Piss off,” he spat, turning off the light

## Fifteen

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Having a notorious bar brawl killer for a father kind of put a whole new perspective on things for me. Like I said, I wasn't going to let that change my opinion of Hack, but it certainly colored the way I felt about myself. More than ever, I realized I was just answering the call of my own DNA.

With all of Hack's accidental strikes, it was no wonder killing on purpose had become such a compelling challenge for me. More than ever, it became something I *had* to do. Sort of like the way Joan of Arc had to lead the troops when she started seeing those visions. Some people are meant to be the sheath, and others are meant to be the sword. I figured I was just a sword person.

My new perspective endured its first test the next morning when I read about Waylon in the paper. LOCAL CATTLE RANCHER DIES IN CAR ACCIDENT. ALCOHOL SUSPECTED.

Alcohol, hell, I spat. That cowboy could've drunk two more bottles and still walked a wire without losing his balance. I scanned the article, noting they didn't mention anything about a blow to the head. The cops must've figured he'd hit it in the accident, just like I'd planned.

The article went on to talk about how Waylon had passed up a football scholarship to Florida State to stay home and inherit one of the biggest cattle ranches on the west coast of Florida after his father, Marvin Orleans, had died in a freak farming accident. I got a chuckle out of that. They also mentioned something about his mother dying a year later from some rare stomach ailment. Must've hit the rat poison a little too hard.

As interesting as all this was, it wasn't until the next day that the really good stuff hit the streets. A routine look around his house revealed a scrapbook of incriminating Polaroids, leading police back to five unsolved murders in the past two years. Waylon wasn't kidding when he said you had to start somewhere. He'd developed a taste for the ladies—literally.

The five victims mentioned had been found nude and beaten to death with a blunt instrument, their hearts cut from their chests and their bodies dumped along Highway 54. I remembered some talk awhile back about what the media was calling the Highway 54 Butcher, but never suspected I'd actually come face-to-face with the man, let alone have a drinking binge with him. And who would ever believe I'd been the one to bring him down? I was starting to feel like a hero.

It got better when a search warrant turned up some women's semen-coated underwear and part of a human heart wrapped in aluminum foil in the freezer out in his garage. The DNA matched that of one of the victims found along the road. The cops actually seemed sorry Waylon was dead because they wouldn't be able to blame him for more unsolved cases, though they gave

it a good try. I clipped all the stories and started gluing them into a scrapbook of my own, wondering what Waylon would have thought of that.

Reading about Waylon's extracurricular activities had only made me sorrier I'd wasted him. Talking to him, you'd never suspect he was anything other than another redneck, cattle-farming good ol' boy, but he had a lot more than that going on. He had himself a hobby that set him apart, and he was secure enough not to let something as trivial as indecision or guilt interfere with his artistic expression. I felt privileged to have spent an evening with him.

I also felt stupid for panicking into thinking he'd try to kill me just because he was pissed. Nope, I was pretty sure Waylon Orleans had never killed in passion, just as he'd likely never gotten emotionally involved with his victims—not unless he was into necrophilia, and I doubted that. He didn't seem the type who got off poking around rotting corpses. There was the heart-eating thing, but I would bet that was another one of those macho one-upmanship deals like drinking that crawling whiskey.

I remember seeing a movie once where the Indians ate the heart of their prey to consume its power. I liked that one so much I would've used it myself if Waylon hadn't beat me to it, which was just as well. While the philosophy behind the act might have appealed to my ego, the thought of chowing down on a warm heart didn't exactly tweak my appetite. It would have taken more of Waylon's crawlin' whisky than I could possibly stomach to make that one go down easy.

## Sixteen

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It was Tuesday when the repercussions of other half of my accidental Saturday spree rippled out of the shadows. CompTek had been closed on Monday due to some off-site meeting for the staff, so it wasn't until the next day that the cleaning lady there wandered into the storage closet for some supplies and passed out in the middle of the floor, no doubt from the smell of Stan's ripe body rotting in that heat. A check of the security log showed Randy and me as the only visitors to the plant since Friday, prompting a visit of our own from the two detectives assigned to the case.

I'd almost forgotten about Stan in light of the news about Waylon, so I figured when Patty Marlo summoned us to Baxter's office, it was to bust us for not getting the computer fixed. I wasn't expecting to find Sheriff Andy and Barney Fife waiting for us.

"We understand you were both at CompTek on Saturday," the first detective, Quint, began. He was a shifty-eyed bugger in a wrinkled suit that looked like it had seen its share of mustard stains. No doubt the more senior of the two. His partner, Detective Gammons, looked like the typical gung-ho, up-and-comer, just watching and taking orders. He'd be the one to study our reactions while Quint asked the questions.

"Yeah," Randy replied, looking from one to the other. "Look, there was nothing we could have done, okay? When the AC broke down, it caused the whole system to crash."

Quint glanced from his partner back to Baxter, who cleared his throat in preparation of saying something worthy of forgetting. "Um, I sent them over there to clear up a problem CompTek was having with some software we had installed."

Quint turned back to Randy. "And you said you couldn't fix it because the air conditioner was broken?"

"Yeah. We figured that little prick security guard turned it off trying to be funny. When John went down to check, he said the breaker was on but the unit wasn't working. The computer has a failsafe that shuts it down when the temperature climbs over 68 degrees. Doesn't take long to get there when it's 90 degrees outside."

They all turned to me now. "You checked the air conditioner?" Quint asked.

I was on. "Like Randy said, we thought that dickhead guard shut it down. He was being a pain in the ass when we got there, bitching about wanting to go home and could we just lock up when we were done."

"And you say the breaker was on when you checked it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it was on." I remembered then that I had turned it back off after Stan had screamed. I glanced at the detective to see if he had a problem with that, but he was busy

scribbling something in his notebook. After a moment, he looked back up, glancing between me and Randy.

“You said something about the guard wanting to leave. Did he?”

I shrugged, glancing at Randy. “Well, I can’t say for certain, but that’s what he told us when we got there.”

“Think back, Mr. Bland. What *exactly* did the guard say?”

I pretended to be considering this, making it look good. “He said to make sure we locked up when we were done because he was leaving in about ten minutes.”

“And did you see him again?”

I shrugged again. “Nope. Didn’t see anyone else in there either.” I glanced at Randy. “Did you?”

He shook his head. Quint was scribbling in his pad as fast as he could write. “So what happened next?” he asked me.

“Nothing. I went back to the Clean Room to finish up, but by then the failsafe had kicked in and shut everything down, so we had to call it a day.”

I was pretty sure Randy wouldn’t say anything about me looking for a fan, since we were both guilty of foraging in a hostile environment, but I had a feeling he’d ask me about it later once he found out what this was all about. At that point, I didn’t know how much the cops knew or suspected, so I decided to play it as dumb as I could.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” I asked, “what’s this all about? The system blow up again?”

Gammons looked at me, speaking with just the right amount of smugness to reinforce my earlier impression. “No, Mr. Bland. It has nothing to do with the computer.” I looked at him, half expecting to hear him break into some sing-song rendition of, “I know something you don’t know.” The funny thing was, I knew more than he’d ever know. It was kind of hard not to smile when I thought about it.

“A man was found dead over there,” he continued. “Looked like a repairman. We think he was killed sometime this past weekend.”

“Sorry, but we didn’t see any dead repairmen,” Randy managed to say without a hint of sarcasm, causing Gammons to look at him like he was going to spit out his teeth. I bit back a laugh; it was times like this I realized why Randy was the closest thing I had to a best friend. If he’d been a woman, I might have kissed him. Then again, maybe not.

“Don’t get cute with me, Mr. Myers,” Gammons warned.

“Oh, he’s not cute,” I assured the detective.

“You got something to add to this?”

“Nope,” I said, figuring it would go better if I just kept my mouth shut.

“And you saw nothing out of the ordinary?” Quint asked. By the sound of it, I figured he was getting tired of his partner’s little pissing contest with us and wanted to get back to doing some real police work.

“You’ll have to excuse them, officers,” Baxter apologized. “Their attitudes can be a bit abrasive at times, but they are two of my best engineers.”

Randy and I looked at each other. Did he actually say that? Baxter giving *us* a compliment? I wished I'd brought a tape recorder.

"I can appreciate that," Quint told him, "but I have a job to do here. Could you please just answer the question, Mr. Bland?"

I shook my head, pretending to think back. "Nope, like I said, nothing except the AC being down."

They asked us some more questions and we told them the same stuff, just in different ways, and that seemed to make them happy. At least it made them go away.

On the way back to our desks, Randy asked me, "What do you suppose happened to that guy?"

"What guy?"

"The guy they found. The dead one."

"Oh." I shrugged. "Beats the hell out of me. Maybe he died of heat stroke."

We were almost back to our cubes. "You didn't see a dead guy down there, did you?"

I looked at him and flashed my most sincere grin. "Do you really think I'd hold out on something like that with you?"

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By that afternoon it was all over the plant that someone had offed a repairman at CompTek while Randy and I were in the building.

"It's a miracle you weren't both killed," Sandra assured us for the tenth time after we'd stopped off at Charlie's for a rare Tuesday happy hour. Alan had joined us, though Kenny had begged off. He and Carlos were on the skids so he'd lined up a hot date with the now-jilted Cha Cha Boombah's husband. Seems Mr. Cha Cha Boombahs, after spreading his wings and flying out of the closet, had decided it was his sworn duty to sample as much of the local talent as possible. According to Kenny, he was drawing as much action as a condom machine at a sales convention. Mrs. Cha Cha Boombahs had taken a leave of absence from work, having never recovered her ability to smile in the face of adversity, a fact we each mourned in our own way.

I was working hard at not drinking, afraid my tongue might overrun my head. The others took my sobriety as a sign of respect for my own mortality. Whatever works. I still got the feeling Randy was suspicious, that there was something he wanted to ask me but he wasn't sure what it was or how to put it into words. Did he think I knew something he didn't? That I'd seen something I wasn't sharing with the class?

I know he didn't think I'd killed Stan. No one would ever think that for the same reason Sandra never took my flirtations seriously. In their minds, I was incapable of such unprovoked individuality. I probably could have raped and murdered a dozen people on national TV and they still wouldn't believe it was me. It was a thought that was both liberating and enraging, and was the very reason I had to carry out my Master Plan. At that moment I think I would have given anything to have them look at me with eyes that said, "that was *you*?"

“Can you imagine killing the guy and leaving him in a storage closet right there in the building?” Sandra was saying as the TV news splashed the story across the screen over the bar.

Alan was shaking his head. “I told you there were some sickos running around out there.” He looked at Randy. “It’s a good thing you guys didn’t wander in on him.”

“What makes you think it happened while we were there?”

“What makes you think it didn’t? It had to be someone who worked there. How else would he have gotten in?”

“You know, that’s been bothering me, too,” Randy said, looking at me. “How do you suppose he got in there?”

“Does it really matter?” I countered, amazed at my own calmness. “We’re still alive, aren’t we?”

The others nodded and Alan raised his glass in a toast. “To staying alive.”

We all clinked our glasses to his and drank, but I caught Randy watching me from across the table. Trouble was brewing, I could feel it. I just didn’t know what kind yet.

When Charlie heard about our near brush with death, he set up the whole group with a round of drinks, though his motivation had nothing to do with gratitude for our safety. Charlie may have been warped, but he was also an opportunistic bastard, meaning he could smell a good publicity scheme better than most. I guess he figured having us in the bar was good for business, so he was determined to do whatever it took to keep us there.

“Come on, everyone, drink up,” he’d called. “A toast to John and Randy, who didn’t get killed and stuffed in a storage closet.”

Leave it to Charlie to find just the right words for every occasion. He should have worked for Hallmark.

I appreciate free beer as much as the next person, but retelling the story of our possibly imminent demise at the hands of some Psycho Storage Closet Killer, as Charlie termed it, was getting just a bit too schizophrenic for me. I let Randy do most of the talking, which seemed to put him in a better mood. At least it distracted him until Barbara finally showed up to drive him home. Thankfully, she’d left Krystal out of the mix. Even my self-control has its limits.

I made a detour to the john when everyone rose to leave. I was in there tending to my business when this guy who looked like he should have had *Frigidaire* tattooed on his forehead walked in. Charlie’s attracted an eclectic clientele, but I’d never seen this guy in there before. He was dressed in greasy jeans, a black Harley tee shirt that stretched across his ample gut like a sausage skin, and a black leather vest. His long hair was almost as greasy as his jeans.

He just stood there for a minute, watching me. The thought of someone like him too shy to do his business in front of a stranger brought an unbidden smile to my lips.

“What’s so funny, asshole?”

I glanced at him and zipped up, figuring silence was the best way to avoid confrontation, but when I moved toward the sink, he slapped a hand as big as a waffle iron on my chest.

“I said what’s so funny?”

I looked up at him. The light behind those eyes might have been dim, but I didn’t think pushing my luck would be a healthy thing to do. “Nothing,” I said and tried to skirt around him.

He stepped in front of me, thwarting the move, and I was thinking to myself that any obstacle that big should have caution lights mounted on it.

“You were laughing at me, weren’t you?” he growled.

There was a million things I could have said to that—no, I was laughing at my shoes; I accidentally tickled myself; a roach ran up my leg; I was thinking of a joke I’d heard earlier . . .

Unfortunately, none of them came out of my mouth.

“Get over it.”

*Get over it?* What the hell was I thinking? Maybe that was it; maybe I wasn’t thinking. That’s what I told myself later. It seemed to be the key to my success these days.

Frigidaire’s eyes narrowed, which made me wonder how he could even see in the dim light of the single naked bulb dangling from the ceiling. However, that consideration only lasted a split second, because that’s when he began to move. He stepped towards me with a grunt, pinning me against the wall with his ample girth. With wall-to-wall man in front of me, there was nowhere to go but down. I glanced at the floor; nope. If that floor was anything like Charlie’s kitchen, there wasn’t enough penicillin in the state to save me.

Now, if I haven’t explained this before, let me enlighten you about what kind of establishment Charlie’s was. “Colorful” would have been a generous way to describe it. Even “dive,” while it came closer to the truth, was still being optimistic. About all the owner had in his favor was cheap prices and convenient access. He wasn’t one for cleaning; no crew came in after hours to spruce up the place. The floors had once been some shade of green linoleum, but years of dried vomit, spilled drinks, and the accumulated dirt of a thousand feet had created a sticky coagulation even the roaches avoided. If you dropped something down there, you didn’t need it anymore. The exposed bricks and dark-paneled walls also had developed a unique subculture all their own. It was anybody’s guess what lived there now.

Charlie wasn’t big on maintenance either. His motto was, “if it’s broke, don’t fix it unless it closes the place.” Bulbs burned out, chairs fell apart, tables wobbled, faucets leaked, and bricks crumbled out of the bathroom walls. It was one of those bricks I felt now beneath the peeling paint as I tried to merge with the wall. My fingers clawed their way around the edge, sliding into the crack and giving the brick a small tug. It moved.

The behemoth in front of me sneered down his nose, flashing a nasty glimpse of brown teeth. I tried my best to look pleasant and worked harder on the brick.

“I think you owe me an apology,” he snarled.

I swallowed, weighing the options. Sure, an apology might get me out of this, but then again, maybe not. Maybe this dickhead was just looking for an excuse to squash someone with his formidable bulk. Besides, I hadn’t done anything to apologize for. I was just taking a piss, for Christ’s sake.

Now, I will say this. A week ago, I probably would have babbled out something sounding like an apology just to save my ass, but I wasn’t the same person I’d been then. I had accidentally killed two men, and I had no intention of groveling for this clown or any of his smelly relatives. Those days were gone.

Of course, that might not be the only thing that was gone if I didn't figure a way out of this. If nothing else, I could suffocate against this wall. I wrapped my fingers around the edges of the brick and wiggled it back and forth until I felt the crumbling mortar spill around my feet. Lucky for me, Mr. Frigidaire was too distracted by my impending doom to notice.

"What's a matter, asshole? You deaf?"

"No, but you might be," I replied as I yanked my arm from around my back and raised it, brick in hand, bringing it down across the side of his head. His eyes widened in surprise as an inch-long gash opened above his ear. Without waiting for him to react, I raised the brick again and this time clunked him on the forehead.

"What the fuck!" He grabbed his head and backed away from me, his face twisted into an angry glare. "You're dead, asshole."

This wasn't going quite the way I had planned. In the movies, they always pass out after getting hit in the head. Since he didn't, I braced myself for the worst, waiting for him to move close enough so I could smack him with the killing blow. Instead, he just stood there staring at me in disbelief while his body swayed back and forth like a lumberjack's worst nightmare.

Too late to go back now. I raised the brick again and he moved to faint away from the blow, but his feet slipped on the slimy floor, sending him windmilling backwards with the cumbersome grace of a dancing walrus. His hands floundered around in empty air, looking for something to grab hold of, but I was the nearest something and had already flattened myself against the wall out of his considerable reach. On the way down, I heard his skull smack against the sink with a dull thud. His eyes rolled back in his head as he sank to the floor in a gelatinous heap.

I dropped the brick and inched closer, poking him with my foot. No reaction. I leaned over and laid a hand on his chest. Still. Damn, now what was I going to do? I couldn't exactly drag him out of here without attracting a crowd. And Charlie would be closing the place in a little while. I glanced around the cramped room, searching for options.

The only window in the room was high on the back wall and had been painted shut. Even if I could manage to get it open, I'd never force Frigidaire's massive frame through it. I resolved then and there if I was going to keep accidentally killing people, I would at least try for smaller victims.

Since this was a bar and people were drinking alcohol on the other side of the door, making the restroom a popular destination, I knew the privacy of my interlude with the obviously-dead biker wouldn't last much longer. I had to think fast. I slid behind him and tried to scoop him up by the shoulders, but he was even heavier than Stan the Electrical Repairman. I had to squat down and put my back into it, dragging him across the floor while thinking to myself if he wasn't dead before, he'd surely find something down there to kill him.

I finally got him into the farthest of the two stalls and tried to set him up. Nothing doing. I had to settle for positioning him so he was kneeling in front of the toilet, hoping it would look like he'd cracked his head while puking. Of course, turning him around in the cozy confines of a toilet stall was no small feat. Sort of like trying to maneuver a drunken horse into a phone booth.

After five of the most exhausting minutes of my life, during which I revisited my earlier conclusion that killing was a lot more work than your average layman could imagine, I got his body slumped over the toilet with his legs folded up under him. His head had fallen into the water, but I didn't think that would be much of a concern to him now. I locked the door from the inside and after a glance at the floor, pulled myself over the wall to the next stall.

I made a last scan for evidence, picking up the brick and wiping it off with my sleeve before shoving it back into the wall. I scattered the mortar dust with my foot, blending it into the unidentifiable muck on the floor, then washed my hands and strolled out of the room like nothing had happened.

The place was nearly empty when I emerged. Charlie was collecting glasses at the far end of the bar while a handful of regulars were struggling to interpret the snow on the ancient TV. I ducked past without a second glance from any of them and made my way out to the parking lot.

Oops. I'd done it again.

## Seventeen

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I didn't go straight home. I knew I would pay for it when six a.m. rolled around and I had to drag my ass out of bed to go to work, but I couldn't have slept if I'd wanted to. I was too wound up. I drove around the empty streets thinking about what I had just done and wondering if I could now be considered a truly dangerous man.

A dangerous man. A killer. I rolled it around on my tongue, sampling it like a piece of rare, juicy meat. Killer. I laughed. Charlie had been toasting my luck in escaping the Psycho Storage Closet Killer without ever suspecting the truth. It was almost too funny for words. And now he had a body rotting in his own john and didn't even know it had been the work of the same lunatic.

Only it wasn't a lunatic. It was just me. Good ol' John Bland. The man no one suspects of anything. Well, anything short of being an asshole to Krystal. No one seemed to have any trouble at all believing that. Made me wonder what they'd think if I killed her.

Would they believe that? Would anyone believe that John Bland, the man who, as far as they knew, took dull and unimaginative to new and unrealized heights, could actually climb up the food chain from asshole to assassin?

Of course, that would violate all the conditions of my Master Plan, not that I had been particularly successful at adhering to them thus far. The victim was supposed to be someone I didn't know. No ties. Okay, Hack was still on the short list, but that's only because he was my father. Adding Krystal to the list would definitely raise an eyebrow or two, meaning I might have to eliminate Hack's name, and I didn't think I was ready to do that. I had a lifetime's worth of resentment to settle with him. And it still bugged me that he had escaped death three times at my hands. It was a trend I was determined to reverse.

Still, the thought of seeing Krystal's brain-numbing mouth permanently closed was almost worth the breach. And I could do it, I was certain of that now, though following through on that impulse would push the odds just a little too far in the cops' favor. They might overlook a coincidence or two, but having both my girlfriend and my father suddenly turn up dead could rouse their suspicions in a hurry.

Cops were like that, always looking for patterns. You could be the unluckiest son of a bitch on earth and still go about your business like every other dumb schmuck on the planet, but let your bad luck strike in the vicinity of a crime, and you can bet your ass you'd be the first one hauled in to jail. The fact that you weren't guilty didn't mean jack shit to them. I looked at it like a quota thing—crime committed, suspect found, case closed. One hundred percent success ratio.

So what was I going to do about Krystal? I was getting tired of making up excuses and hiding in bars. Telling her to hit the road didn't seem to faze her, especially now that she was all

buddy-buddy with Hack. She just didn't seem to understand that I couldn't stomach the sight of her. She was either really stupid or supremely conceited. From what I'd seen, my money was on the former. It takes at least a little intelligence to be an egotist.

I wasn't sure where that left me, but one thing was certain; I couldn't afford any more accidental murders. For one thing, it was distracting. Had I been like the rest of the mediocre masses, I might have allowed that first accident to satisfy the parameters of my Master Plan.

I'll admit I had thought about it. After all, it was a murder of sorts, though there had been none of that self-fulfilling glow of accomplishment when all was said and done. You know, that feeling a runner gets when he crosses the finish line or a scholar when he's awarded a PhD. Not that I've ever done either, but that doesn't mean I'm not qualified to judge the weight of such an accomplishment, or to recognize that I hadn't even come close. Not yet, anyway.

As far as I was concerned, I might have killed three men, but I still hadn't proven a damn thing, and I wouldn't until I managed to execute every aspect of my Master Plan from the birth of the idea to the drop of a cold corpse. That was my goal, and I couldn't allow myself to be satisfied with anything less.

It wasn't until then that I realized I had driven halfway across town, ending up in one of those ritzy neighborhoods in Palma Ceia where the cars cost more than most normal people's houses. There was a woman standing on the corner; tall, blonde, a body straight out of Fredrick's of Hollywood with legs that seemed to go on forever. Short black skirt, tight knit top. Since this wasn't the kind of neighborhood where hookers hung out, I had to wonder what she was doing out here alone at this time of the night. I stopped the car and rolled down the window.

"Excuse me. Is everything all right?"

Okay, so it was lame, but I was feeling pretty confident. After all, I'd just killed a man with a brick. What did I have to lose?

She turned to me, shaking her head, her long hair rippling across her shoulders like a silky curtain. A guy could get lost in that hair. Wrap it around him and hibernate. I could feel the spare change starting to jump around in my pocket. God, it felt *good*.

"My car broke down," she said, full lips curling into a pout. "I'm waiting for a friend."

"Kind of dangerous, a woman being out here alone at night," I offered. "Maybe I'll just sit here and keep an eye on things till your friend comes."

It was smooth, I had to admit, though it was obvious she didn't fully appreciate the gesture. She shrugged.

"Suit yourself."

Don't mind if I do, I grinned to myself, admiring the curve of her thigh where it disappeared under the short skirt. Wondering what kind of guy would let a girl like that stand out here alone at night. Must be a real asshole.

Then again, I countered, playing devil's advocate with myself, maybe she was a real bitch. Maybe she deserved to be out here. Maybe he threw her ass out and she was waiting on one of her bitch girlfriends to come and collect her so they could console each other on what assholes men were.

Yeah, the more I looked at her, the more I decided that was probably closer to the truth. She'd probably taken some poor schmuck for everything he had then fucked his best friend or his brother, or even worse, his worst enemy, just to spite him. Just to rub his nose in it because he'd forgotten their three-and-a-half-week anniversary or some other such bullshit. Like a guy has nothing better to think about. Fucking bitch.

She looked at her watch again, tapping her foot impatiently. Glanced up and down the street. Even her own girlfriend didn't want anything to do with her. Who knew, maybe the guy she fucked was her girlfriend's boyfriend. Maybe the girlfriend had been waiting for the chance to get back at her, really stick it to her. Telling her she'd be right there then leaving her stranded alone at night in the city, hoping someone would give her a little taste of her own medicine. Hoping someone would stick it to her the way she'd done everyone else. The way she'd probably always done everyone else.

Girls like her always got what they wanted, jacking guys around just because they knew they could. Because they knew we were vulnerable to a pretty face or great legs or a nice ass. Always playing on our weaknesses.

I glanced down at the clock on the dashboard: 2:15. I leaned out the window.

"Doesn't look like your friend is going to make it."

She looked at me, frowning. Scanned the street again.

"You want a ride?"

She seemed to think about it for a minute, sizing me up. Trying to decide if I looked dangerous. As if she'd know. Finally she shrugged and stepped off the curb and crossed the street, leaning in my window. Turning on the saccharin.

"Sure you don't mind?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I did." Like that would have mattered to her.

She rounded the car and climbed in, giving me a split second glimpse of black panties. Lace, I think. She shimmied her skirt down and turned to me, offering a perfect smile.

"I appreciate this. I guess my room mate must've gotten hung up."

I nodded, figuring I'd be better off not saying anything. Instead, I asked her where she was going.

"Temple Terrace. You know where the Rain Forest Apartments are out on Fowler?"

"Sure," I said as I pulled away from the curb and whipped a U-turn in the middle of the street. Naturally it had to be clear on the other side of town. No wonder her room mate hadn't bothered. Who the hell calls someone at two in the morning to pick them up on the other side of town? A girl like her probably expected everyone to fall all over themselves for the privilege of her company.

"What are you doing out this late?" she asked. She was suddenly all chummy now that I was giving her a ride. Probably sizing me up to see what she could get out of me.

I shrugged, glancing at her from the corner of my eye. Caught her rearranging her top, suddenly pretending to be modest. Two could play this game. "I was at a wake," I sighed.

"A wake?"

I grinned to myself; not bad. “Yeah, some friends and I were toasting the memory of a co-worker.”

“Was it someone close to you?”

I nodded, milking it now. “It was just so . . . sudden.” Damn, was that *me* talking?

Her hand slid around my arm, squeezing. “Are you okay?”

Was this really happening? If Randy could only see me now. So much for his theory about me being jealous of him and Barbara. Not that I would want a relationship with this woman. Like I said, she was probably the queen of bitches, a regular praying mantis.

That being said, it was too bad no one would ever see her in my car; it could do wonders for my reputation. Like the murders, no one would ever believe it of me unless they saw it. Too bad I didn’t have a camera on me.

I glanced at her; she was watching me, waiting for my answer. What the hell, might as well play this one out. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, forcing myself to sound dejected.

“Drunk driver?”

I jumped, or at least I felt like I jumped. “What do you mean?” I asked, shooting her a look, trying to gage whether she was making a point or just poking around in the dark. Figured it had to be the latter; she didn’t strike me as the shrewd type. Beginner’s luck.

“You said it was sudden. I just thought, well, it sounded logical.”

A drunk driver sounded logical?

“No, it wasn’t a drunk driver.” Well, that was sort of true. At least for Stan, anyway. “It was . . . a heart attack.”

“Oh,” was all she said, settling back into the seat. Getting comfortable now. “I dated a guy last year whose brother got killed by a drunk driver. He was only seventeen.”

Just like that, she’d turned the conversation around to her, forgetting all about my dearly departed co-worker and her half-assed attempt at sympathy.

I stopped for a light. Felt her eyes on me. Like she was waiting for something from me, that bonding of shared sorrow. Only hers was better, more tragic. Better drama. What could be better than a kid killed in the prime of his kidness? Figures she’d come up with something like that. People like her were always wanting to one-up you. You say you did something, they come back one better.

Randy could be like that, when he was being a prick, which, come to think of it, was a lot of the time. Take that fucking Weber grill of his. He’d spent damn near a grand for it so he could throw parties and have people tell him his steaks and burgers tasted better than anyone else’s. Like anyone really noticed. They were usually so bombed by the time they ate they wouldn’t know a steak from a combat boot.

Not that I thought this girl was trying to be a prick. It probably just came natural to her, having to always be the center of attention. High maintenance, probably needed constant stroking. Yes, you’re beautiful, no, you’re not fat, yes, that dress looks great on you. Who needed that?

But I had to admit, she was easy on the eyes. Perfect hair, perfect skin, perfect body. The faint scent of flowers and spice when she moved; no doubt one of those perfumes some

egotistical designer named after himself. She'd probably scooped up the whole line from some white-coated salesgirl in Dillards—powder, lotion, shampoo, even toothpaste. All the crap they con women into thinking they can't live without, and guys into believing it made a woman that much more unforgettable, like a song they can't get out of their head. Trouble is, it was my experience that only the really annoying songs got stuck in there, the kind that made you want to bash your head through a brick wall just to get them out, which had to say something about that whole concept.

Yeah, looking at her now, I'd be willing to bet Miss Perfect here probably spent more on personal hygiene products each week than I did on food. And did it really make that big of a difference? I mean, how bad was it in the morning before the war paint went on?

"Mind if I turn on the radio?" she asked, reaching a slender, perfect arm towards the knob. Red fingernails, kind that could make your back look like a roadmap. Little gold bracelet dangling there, catching the light from the dashboard. She had all the tools; made me want to build something.

"Go ahead," I heard myself say. I never listened to the radio in the car. I liked the silence; good for thinking. Besides, you never knew when you were going to accidentally stumble upon one of those annoying songs.

She flipped through the channels, hitting the SCAN button again and again until she found what she was looking for, some generic top 40s trash. She smiled and settled back in the seat again, humming along with the music as we headed up the ramp to the interstate, and then we were flying along on top of the city, seventy miles an hour, the lights whipping by. She rolled down her window and laughed as the cool night filled the car.

That kind of surprised me. I figured girls like her were allergic to anything that might tamper with their perfection, but she acted like she actually enjoyed the wind whipping through her hair. She gathered up about a yard of spun gold in one hand and held it up off her neck, closing her eyes, drinking the air, leaving me wondering what kind of new trap this was.

"Don't you love the night?" she sighed dreamily.

I grinned, nodding. Oh yeah, the night was just fine with me. I inched the speedometer up a notch, scooting around a minivan, back in the center lane. We were heading into the I-4 interchange near downtown, the road sweeping wide left, under the overpass, then banking right, up and over again. I loved going through here during rush hour when it was bumper to bumper and everyone was doing sixty and changing lanes, positioning themselves for their exits. Like a grand prix race. It was one of the few driving challenges in the city that tested your skill rather than your restraint. Most times you were just trying not to kill someone who pissed you off.

We were coming up on her exit too quickly, the right lane veering off to Busch Boulevard; Fowler was next. Despite her being a super bitch, I realized I wanted to see her again. For research purposes, you understand.

"I didn't catch your name," I yelled above the wind and the radio. Okay, so it lacked originality.

"Candy," she said, smiling to herself. Her own private joke.

Yeah, I could see that, I wanted to say, but I swallowed the words. Didn't want to sound like every other average Joe. Instead, I opted for the roundabout approach.

"I have to say, I'm kind of surprised your boyfriend would let you stand around alone like that at night."

She turned to me, grinning. "That's cute. You always this discreet?"

I shrugged. "When it's worthwhile."

"So am I worthwhile?"

"I don't know—are you?"

We were easing down the exit ramp, merging with the eastbound traffic on Fowler. I turned to her as we approached the red light at Nebraska Avenue. "You think if I called you sometime, you might answer?" Smooth. I almost wanted to pinch myself to see if someone else had slid into my skin.

"I guess that would depend on whether or not it was my number."

Okay, what was this, a chess game now? Tit for tat. Answer every question with a question. Probably figured I was like all the others. That she could tie me in knots, have me falling all over myself to get in her pants.

Trouble was, she had no idea who she was dealing with. No way of knowing that I was as far from the losers she was used to screwing with as she would ever come. I hoped she would give me her number so I could tear it up the minute she was out of my car. Make her wonder what had happened, how I had managed to resist her infinite charms. That would serve her right.

For some reason I thought about Waylon Orleans then. What he would have done with this one in his car. She sure as hell wouldn't be wearing that smug grin. He'd have seen to that for sure. Probably already be eating her heart with a slice of cheese and a glass of good Merlot.

I realized then that I actually missed ol' Waylon. I mean, we hadn't known each other that long, but I thought we'd really bonded—in a guy sort of way. And while I was feeling pretty good about myself just then, I knew I was no where near his league. A girl like this would've been a seven course meal for him. Something to linger over, to savor. A definite milestone. I thought about how much fun it would have been to have him here right now in the car with Candy. Sort of like a midnight snack. I almost laughed.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked, yanking me back into the Here and Now.

"Oh nothing," I lied. "I was just thinking about my friend."

"The one who died?"

I glanced at her. "Yeah, the one who died. He would have liked you."

"He have a thing for blondes?"

I chuckled to myself. "Blondes, brunettes, redheads—didn't much matter. He just liked women." Bitchy women, I didn't add. Of course this last was pure conjecture on my part, since I'd never actually asked him about his choice of victims. I was just going on what I'd seen and heard during our lone meeting. Waylon struck me as the kind of guy who had his own personalized sense of justice, and looking at Candy, she fit the criteria like a glove.

We had passed the University of South Florida campus, heading into Temple Terrace. Crunch time. I suddenly wanted her to give me that number I'd never use, though I wasn't going

to ask again. Maybe if she was real good, I'd even give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe call her, make a date, then stand her up. Leave her stranded somewhere along the road, waiting for me like her friend had done. Serve her right.

It all depended on how perceptive she was. Better hurry, I wanted to say, time's a wasting. Rain Forest Apartments loomed ahead on the left. I flipped on the blinker, eased into the turn lane. Scooted across three westbound lanes, for once free of traffic. Slowed for the speed bumps inside the gate. I hate speed bumps.

"Which way?"

"Go to the back, turn right. All the way to the end."

She had reached into her purse, pulled out a pen, was scribbling something on a scrap of paper. I slowed for another speed bump, the lights momentarily bouncing across the darkened windows of the next building, the only sign of life in the sleeping complex.

"You never told me your name," Candy said as I swung the car around the corner where the road forked and skirted around another speed bump. Two more buildings then the road ended. I slowed, turning to her.

"John. My name's John."

"Well, John, thanks for the ride." She handed me the paper she'd scribbled on, seven digits. I stuffed it into my pocket without looking at it. "Give me a call sometime."

"Sure."

She nodded uncertainly at my response, reached for the handle, slid out of the seat. Leaned back in before closing the door.

"I really appreciate the ride."

"So you said," I replied, though she'd already closed the door.

I figured I'd impress her with how much I wasn't impressed and swung the car around without a second look back, the radio still blaring that top 40s crap. Too much noise to hear anything short of a nuclear blast outside, so it was the speed bump that caught my attention. I didn't remember one being there.

I stopped the car and opened the window. Glanced out. She was no where around. No one was that quick, especially in heels. I shut off the car and climbed out to investigate.

Candy was laying face-down in the road behind the car, her neck twisted at a weird angle. I inched closer, calling out to her, but she wasn't answering. That's when I saw the side of her head. A swatch of scalp the size of my palm had been ripped out, leaving a bloody bald patch of skull. The hair itself was still hanging in the car door, wagging at me in the breeze like an accusing finger. All I could figure was she'd caught it in the door when she closed it. Must have snapped her neck when I took off, knocked her under the wheels of the car.

I rolled her over and her head flopped around like it wasn't attached to her shoulders, her eyes staring wide, like she was looking at something I couldn't see. There was a dusty tire track across her chest, her perfect knit top marred with road filth. She'd probably have a hissy fit if she could see herself like that, her perfection ruined. Not that she could do anything about it now. I guess that's when it hit me.

I'd done it again.

“Shit.”

Now what was I going to do?

“Well, you sure as hell can’t leave her there.”

I wheeled around, nearly tripping over Candy’s outstretched arm, and the voice laughed. “Who’s there?” I asked, certain that I’d heard that laugh somewhere before, and getting damned spooked about it. I was standing in a public parking lot with a dead girl at my feet. This was no time to be playing hide and seek with dismembered voices.

He stepped out from behind the car like he’d been there all along, hands shoved in his pockets, that smug sneer pasted to his face. “Looks like you got yourself a little problem there, pardner.”

“What the fuck? You’re dead.”

He laughed again, that same crazy hayseed bray he’d let loose with in the bar. He was even wearing the same clothes. “Yep,” he said, “that I am. Thanks to you.”

I had to be losing my mind. I closed my eyes, figuring it must have been my imagination. My brain playing tricks on me. Maybe it was guilt brought on by killing Candy. You know, my first female victim and all that. I pondered that for a second, recalling my reasons for not killing women—more police attention, higher probability of public outcry. I never figured on hallucinations as part of the bargain.

“You gonna stand there holding your dick or get rid of the body?”

I opened my eyes; he was still there. “How did you get here?”

“We can talk pleasantries later, pardner. Right now you better be thinking of someplace to stash the Ice Queen before someone comes out and catches you here with her. Believe me, you wouldn’t like jail.”

Ghost or no ghost, he was right about that. I glanced around, noticed a dumpster next to Candy’s building. It didn’t look to be overflowing with trash like apartment dumpsters usually were. Maybe there was room enough in there for a little Candy.

Waylon followed my eyes. “Good idea, but get rid of her top. They can trace your tire tracks.”

I nodded, refusing to speculate on the reality of any of this as I peeled the tight sweater over her head. She was wearing a sheer black lace bra that showed her nipples. I stared at them for a second, then slid my hand underneath, cupping a handful of breast. Her skin was warm and soft.

“Are you a sick fuck or what?” Waylon barked. “She’s dead!”

“So?” I countered. “It’s not like she’s gonna care.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, you really are a head case. Dump her and let’s get the hell out of here.”

Spoilsport, I murmured to myself as I pulled my hand out of the lacy binding and hoisted her body up over my shoulder. She hung there like a sack of flour, causing me to stumble as I straightened up. It took me a minute to get my balance with the added weight, then I began to walk, shuffling awkwardly across the parking lot, her head banging against my ass with every

step. I hoped it was the side with the hair, as I didn't know how I would explain a huge bloodstain on the seat of my pants. No wonder women got cranky at that time of the month.

Even with my heightened sense of urgency, it was slow going, especially when I had to leave the pavement to avoid the orange halo from the streetlight. When I finally reached the dumpster, I lowered my shoulder and balanced Candy against the side so I could open the top. Luckily, the lid was plastic and flipped open without too much fanfare. I peered down into the smelly darkness and was relieved to find it nearly empty. Just a couple of trash bags and an old lamp in the bottom. I leveraged Candy's body up over the top and eased her down slowly, head first, where she crumpled into a tangled heap of arms and legs.

I stared at her there for a second, wondering what she'd say if she could see herself now. I was pretty sure that's not how she would have wanted to be remembered, but, I reasoned, anyone stupid enough to close their hair in a car door couldn't really expect much more. I just hoped the garbage trucks showed up before the sun began to ripen her too much. Even so, I didn't think anyone would actually notice her there unless they had an overwhelming masochistic streak. Most people would probably hold their breath, toss in the bag, and run, figuring some stupid possum or raccoon got caught foraging in the trash and ate something that didn't agree with it. There were enough woods around here to make that plausible.

I closed the lid and took a quick glance around, then slipped back to the car and pulled her hair out of the door, wrapping it in the sweater. I figured I'd ditch it somewhere along the road on the way home, along with her phone number. No evidence, remember?

I started the car and drove slowly out of the complex without the benefit of headlights until I approached Fowler Avenue. I was so busy congratulating myself, I'd almost forgotten about Waylon

"So, how does it feel?"

I jumped, nearly running over the curb. He was sitting in the passenger seat, grinning at me big as life. I reached over to touch him, see if he was actually real or just a figment of my imagination, one of those self-fulfilling specters of guilt, but he clucked and pointed towards the road.

"Eyes front, pardner. I've already had enough excitement on the road this week."

I felt bad then, and then foolish for feeling bad. What the hell was happening here? Was I really losing it? Maybe I *had* been under too much stress lately. Maybe the whole thing with Hack and Krystal and then the accidental killings had finally taken their toll. I mean, this couldn't be real, could it?

Waylon Orleans was dead; I'd killed him. And there was no such thing as ghosts.

Still . . . I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the figure sitting in the seat next to me. It sure as hell looked like Waylon.

"Spooky, isn't it?"

"Stop doing that!"

"Doing what?"

"Talking like him."

He laughed. "How the hell else am I supposed to talk?"

“I don’t know. Just don’t say anything.”

He nodded, quietly looking out the window, but even without the talking, I could still see him there, out of the corner of my eye. Looking just like Waylon Orleans, the last-only-time I’d seen him. Dressed in jeans and that snap-front shirt with the red piping around the pockets. I tried to concentrate on the road, but my heart wasn’t in it. Maybe if I just ignored it, it would go away, sort of like a bad dream. Then he started humming to himself.

“Can you change the station? I hate this crap.”

I reached for the radio, then caught myself, shaking my head. “No, not until you tell me what the hell is going on here.”

I felt like an idiot the minute I said it. I was talking to a ghost, or at least, something that looked like a ghost. The ghost sat there nonchalantly looking out the window as though we were two buddies out on the town. For the tenth time in as many minutes, I tried to convince myself this was not happening. Then he turned and smiled at me.

“I sure could use a drink. That’s the worst part, ya know?”

“Worst part of what?” I heard myself ask. What the hell, if I was going to hallucinate, I might as well enjoy the company.

“Being dead.”

I stopped for a red light and turned to him. “Is that really you?”

“I’d say in the flesh, but, well, we can both see that’s not true. But yeah, it’s me.”

There it was again, that feeling of guilt, and then the stupidity for feeling it, all at the same time. Talking to a goddamned ghost. Still, I figured it would be best to cover my bases, just in case. “You may not believe this, but I’m really sorry about killing you. It was an accident, ya know?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know. I gotta hand it to you, though, you took me by surprise. I didn’t think you had it in you. And that bit with the truck . . . that was fucking brilliant. The cops never put it together. Figured I’d just got drunk and passed out.”

“I’m still kind of new at this,” I admitted. “You were only my second.”

“No shit? Well, it was a pretty good effort for a second time.” He glanced back towards the road. “You might wanna go—the light’s green. First rule of successful killing—don’t attract attention to yourself.”

I pulled away from the light, careful to stay within the speed limit. “I read about your women in the paper. I would have liked to get to know you better, you know, if I hadn’t killed you and all.”

“Yeah, well, these things happen.”

“So you’re not mad at me?”

He grinned. “I was, at first. But now stuff like that doesn’t seem to matter anymore. Anyway, I can’t do anything about it.”

“So why are you here? Are you haunting me?”

He scratched his head, looking thoughtful. “To be honest, I’m not really sure. I just sort of heard you talking about me, so here I am.”

I thought about that for awhile. What if this really was Waylon's ghost, and I had somehow summoned him in my mind? Did I really mean it when I thought I wished he was here? And why *was* he here? Had he come back to haunt me? Didn't that mean he was supposed to hurt me or something? I mean, I'd seen those horror flicks where the ghost terrorizes its killer until he jumps off a cliff or throws himself in front of a speeding train. Not that there were any cliffs in Tampa, and most of the trains were so slow a flock of turtles could cross the tracks at a hundred yards. So what the hell did he want with me, and why was he here now? Was he trying to give me a message? Scare the piss out of me? Show me the error of my ways. A little late for that one, I laughed to myself. I don't think they pass out Mulligans for what I'd been doing lately. Four bodies in less than a week. I'd be willing to bet even Waylon hadn't been that prolific. I wondered how many women he had actually killed and whether he would even tell me if I asked.

Which brought me back to Candy, and how I felt about killing her. Perfect little Candy, the sweet-assed, cold-hearted bitch. Of course, I wasn't one hundred percent sure of that last part, but I'd be willing to bet it was more true than not. I'd probably saved a lot of guys from broken hearts. Too bad I didn't have my knife; I could have cut hers out, offered it to Waylon as a peace offering. Compensation for taking his life and all.

I was turning down my own street, and I didn't even remember how I'd gotten there. Like time was caught in some kind of rubbery warp. Not that that should have been surprising to me, considering what had happened to me the past few hours.

"I sure could use a drink," Waylon repeated as I pulled into the driveway.

"So could I," I agreed, not even surprised when I discovered the seat next to me was empty. Maybe I *was* losing my mind. Then again, maybe I was just getting used to it.

## Eighteen

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Hack was sitting in the diningroom waiting for me when I got home. Well, I'm not sure he was actually waiting for me, but he certainly was awake and aware that I hadn't been home. He looked up at me when I walked in, his eyes all red and watery.

"Don't tell me you missed me that much."

I headed past him into the kitchen, foraging through the refrigerator for something to drink. Preferably something strong. Waylon may not have been able to drink, but I still could and I needed one right now.

"Another of me coughing jags," Hack sputtered. He watched me for a moment, that silly grin of his plastered to his face. "Takes a lot out of ya, doesn't it?" he asked after I'd uncapped a beer and drained half the bottle.

I made up my mind I was going to ignore him. Drink my beer and try to sort through the night's events before hitting the sack. Maybe I'd even get lucky and get some sleep before I had to face another mind-numbing day at work. Ever since Hack had moved in, I was averaging two hours of sleep a night, and I was starting to feel the affects.

Aside from the obvious mental aberrations, which I would have just as soon forgotten right then, there was the matter of my physical health. I was starting to feel like a zombie, a dangerous thing for a guy like me. Fatigue caused mistakes, something I could ill afford. Not now. Not if I was going to succeed at this. I finished the beer and tossed the empty into the trash. Headed for the bedroom.

"It's the first sheila what does it. Gives ya a real taste for it."

I stopped, turning to him, a rush of adrenalin flooding my veins.

"What are you talking about, old man?"

He grinned. "Oh, I think you know. I can see it in yer eyes. Seen it in me own eyes, back at the beginning."

I didn't need this right now. Not after Frigidaire and Candy and the whole Waylon Orleans ghost thing. In fact, all I could think about at that moment was making him shut up, even if it meant choking the life out of him. And I think I could have done it right then. Could have wrapped my bare hands around his neck and squeezed until the life ebbed out, left his eyes looking like Candy's had, all wide and empty, staring at that great something beyond. Not seeing anything.

But I didn't, and I don't know why. Maybe it was curiosity, wanting to hear just what it was he thought he knew. Then again, maybe it was just fatigue, like the day had finally worn down my resistance to weird shit. After all, I'd spent the last twenty minutes talking to a man I'd killed three days ago with a lead pipe.

“And just what is it you think you see in my eyes?” I heard myself ask, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“I call it The Gleam. That look you get after the deed is done and you know you’ve gotten away with it. It’s like nothing else, which is why I knew it when I first seen it in your eyes the other day. Day that repairman bloke bit the big one.”

I had lowered myself into the seat across from him at the table, my heart pounding in my ears. Damn, could he hear that?

“What do you know about that?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Just what I heard on the telly. Bloke was found dead in the closet where you and that friend of yours was working. Looked like an accident.” He grinned. “That’s the beauty of it—it always looks like an accident.”

“Jesus Christ,” I murmured to myself, shaking my head.

Hack reached over and clapped me on the arm. “Don’t take it so personal, Skippy. Only reason I know is ‘cause I done it meself.”

I looked up at him. “How do I know you didn’t do this one yourself?”

“Oh come on,” Hack chuckled. “We both know who did it. Just like I know there’s been others, though I’m not sure who or how many. I do think the repair guy was the first though.” He sighed. “First is always the hardest.”

“Shows how much you know,” I snorted, anger replacing shock. Who the hell was he to tell me how I felt? So he had killed a few people, that didn’t make him an expert, and it sure as hell didn’t give him carte blanche to my psyche. I wondered how he’d feel if he knew how many times I’d tried to kill him. How many ways I’d fantasized his death. Of course, I didn’t bring it up because I was hoping the next attempt might be the charm. No sense throwing away the element of surprise.

“I used to think it was a curse, some weird mojo someone had put on me. Tryin’ to get me tossed in the pokey. But then I started to realize it was more than that, something that came from inside me, like a power over the odds, ya know? Sort of like God’s right hand. Like maybe it was just their time to go and I was the one picked to ease ‘em through it.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “You’re nuts. What the fuck has God got to do with this? Besides, I don’t even believe in God, so where does that leave me?”

Hack shrugged. “Just cause you don’t believe in him don’t mean he don’t believe in you. I wasn’t much of a believer myself, till I started analyzing it. I remember the exact moment I came to that conclusion. I was sittin’ in a cell down in Dongara, little piss hole north of Perth. I’d tipped a few too many and the local constable threw me in there to dry out. It was a good thing too, as it turned out.

“See, me and this bloke had been havin’ this discussion, and he was really starting to get under me skin. Like I was wishing somethin’ would happen to him. You know what I mean—the kind of somethin’ that tends to happen like accidents around us. We’d moved the discussion outside and that’s when I got meself noticed by the men with badges. The other bloke—the one I’d been itchin’ to fight—made himself scarce. Turns out he lived in this apartment building with six

other families. About two weeks later the place catches on fire in the middle of the night and he woke up and got everyone out before they got barbecued. Became a local hero.”

“So?”

“So, if I’d killed him, he wouldn’t have been able to save those people. Innocent women and children would have died.”

“And what makes you think someone else wouldn’t have saved them?”

“Don’t ya see, Skippy, that’s just it. He was the one who was supposed to save ‘em. It wasn’t his time. That’s why I was thrown in jail that night, to keep me from killin’ him.”

Bullshit, I told myself. What kind of hokey logic was that? If that was the case, then Stan the Electrical Man, Waylon, Frigidaire, and Candy were all just waiting for the angel of death—a.k.a., me—to send them to their great reward. Great defense; I’d like to see you try that one in court.

“Nice story, old man, but I think you might have a few holes in your theory.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “But you might ask yourself why you could kill them but you couldn’t kill me.”

I nearly swallowed my own tongue. I reached for his glass of water, downing it in a single swallow while Hack flashed that irritating grin. The one that implied he knew exactly what I was thinking. I stood up, pointing a finger at him, wanting more than anything right then to just get away from him.

“You better watch yourself, old man. Accidents happen.”

“Yep,” he agreed as I backed out of the room. “That they do.”