



## Being John Bland

A novel by A.J. Church

© 2009 by A. J. Church  
no part of this novel may be reproduced without the author's permission.

# Seven

---

I'd been standing out in the rain soaked to the bone for what seemed like days when I finally spotted The Victim. As I watched him stagger along the soggy shoulder in my general direction, I couldn't help thinking if anyone deserved to get whacked for posterity, this joker fit the bill. I could barely contain my excitement as I waited for him to get within range, the guitar string coiled so tightly around my palms they had begun to feel a little dead themselves. This was it—my moment of truth. There was something almost spiritual about it, and I was certain if a white light suddenly split the heavens above me, I would have dismissed it as appropriate.

Fortunately, that didn't happen. In fact, I got so worked up by the sheer proximity of my imminent liberation from the bonds of mediocrity that I nearly blew the plan before I'd even made the first move.

I leapt out behind The Victim with what I thought was surefooted stealth, only to have the mud suck my feet right out from under me. My momentum carried me forward, knocking him to the ground like a tackle dummy. Not that I had any previous experience with tackle dummies. The closest I'd ever been to one was a movie screen, and I most certainly had never been mistaken for a jock, though at the moment I was experiencing an unprovoked spurt of exhilaration at my own physical prowess. Then again, it could have just been gratitude for finally getting to do something other than stand in my wet shoes.

The Victim landed on his hands and knees without so much as a backward glance. I guess he figured he fell all by himself and I wasn't about to give him a chance to reconsider. I jumped up and straddled his back, reaching around to pull the guitar string up across his throat, but it got tangled up in his collar. I was forced to compensate by putting more muscle into the effort than I originally had planned, though I found that strangling him while he was on all fours was a hell of a lot less work than it would have been standing. It made me wonder why I hadn't thought of that before. I guess there was something to be said for the value of improvisation.

The Victim managed a couple of muffled gurgles, a little token grappling and sliding, then his body went as limp as a spent dick. It was so easy it was almost anticlimactic. I guess I half-expected to be bombarded by lightning bolts from the guy's life force like those sword swingers in the old *Highlander* movies.

Okay, mission accomplished. Well, sort of. I glanced around; there was a clump of bushes about twenty feet from the road that would provide perfect cover for the next phase of my Master Plan—the dismembering. It had begun to rain harder, making everything more difficult than it should have been. I had planned to strip off The Victim's clothes so I could see the joints better, but I quickly realized that would be like peeling an orange without fingernails in this downpour, though I doubted cutting through wet denim could be any easier. No matter, it had to get done. I grappled the penlight from my pocket and shoved it into my mouth before grabbing hold of The Victim's ankles.

One thing I quickly discovered—dragging a dead body around in the rain was lot more of a workout than I had envisioned, and certainly more than I'd ever gotten at any gym. Not that I would advocate it as alternate fitness routine. At this point, I was thinking of the guy and his chipper over in Lauderdale with a pang of envy. I could have been done and home in a nice dry bed by now.

I pulled the knife out of its sheaf and stared at the body, wondering where I should start, and it was at that moment that I had a temporary attack of conscience. What if blew it now? What if that twit at the sporting goods store was wrong and the damned knife had lost its edge and wouldn't cut through hot butter? How would that look—leaving the job half done?

All these unforeseen obstacles were quickly draining my fervor, and I resolved that if I ever decided to do this again, I'd be a hell of a lot more thorough in the pre-planning phase. For some reason I was reminded of those jackoffs at work who stand around the coffee pot on Monday mornings commiserating over their latest home improvement disaster.

*“So, John, did you get that body cut up all right the other night?”*

While I didn't plan to be discussing this around the coffee pot in the morning, I hoped I'd at least be done in time to have that option. The way things were going right now, I was beginning to have serious doubts about that. I was debating whether to start with the arms and legs or just jump right into the gut, and well, the thought of it started to gross me out.

But none of this was getting me any closer to my goal.

“For Christ's sake, just stick the damn knife in and cut,” I scolded myself. “It's not like he's going to feel it.”

That might have been true—if he'd actually been dead. But when I started to turn him over onto his back, he made a sound like a vacuum-packed jar opening and started to cough. I jumped back as though I'd been electrocuted, dropping both the knife and my penlight.

“Bloodyfuckinhell,” he managed to gasp as he pulled himself up on all fours. His head turned sideways, staring right at me, and while it was hard to see with all the rain and my only source of light laying beside him on the ground, I'd swear the son of a bitch actually smiled at me.

“What the hell is your problem, you moronic piece of shit?” I yelled, scooting further back.

At that point I didn't know if I was madder at him or myself. He had flopped over and planted himself on his ass in the mud, his face twisted into a dumb grin that made me wish I hadn't been so quick to dismiss the possibility of a gun.

I noticed then that he had something in his hand. He held it up and I recognized my own wallet.

“How the hell--?”

He laughed then, a sound that had the same effect on me as a dentist's drill, and reached for my penlight.

“John Bland,” he read from my license. “Date of Birth August 6, 1976.” He looked up at me and grinned. “Has it been that long, mate?”

The accent—Australian? The fucker was Australian? Something began to tick in the back of my head; I could only hope it was a bomb. I reached for the wallet.

”Gimme that, you goddamned thief!”

“Thief?” he laughed, snatching it away. “Is that any way to talk to your ol' man?”

No fucking way. I stared at him closely now, resisting the urge to pinch myself. This was not happening.

“You're . . . Hack Bender?”

How many times had I imagined saying that? Of being face-to-face with the piece of shit that had shot me into the world? As a kid, I had fantasized a hundred ways to kill him—real creative stuff—and yet, standing there staring him in the eye, all I could think of was why I had actually bothered to remember his name. It was disgusting.

He tried to stand and was overcome with another fit of coughing. I would've done something to help, but to be honest I wasn't sure if it was to stop the fit or finish the job I'd started. Since I couldn't bring myself to do either, I just stood and watched while the spasm worked itself out.

At last he took a long ragged breath and pulled himself to his feet, looking at me with that sloppy grin I'd already begun to hate.

“What the bloody hell are you doing runnin' around out here in this pissin' rain?” He glanced around. “You got a car?”

This had to be a dream. One of those trippy, surrealistic scenes you read in a Kafka novel. This kind of shit was too weird to happen in real life. Months of planning, the work and research and split-second timing; the city with its thousands of idiots wandering the streets, and who do I happen to pick but my own long-lost father? What the hell kind of justice was that?

“I don't believe this.”

“Aw, it's not as bad as all that, Skippy,” Hack laughed, slapping me on the back. “Hell, I figured you knew. Why else would you be tryin' to kill me?”

## Eight

---

I woke up the next morning feeling like I'd just undergone a lobotomy with a spoon. I was actually afraid to comb my hair in case my comb came away soaked with some kind of bloody, viscous pulp.

Six months of planning—six long, tedious, agonizingly meticulous months of working out every detail to the umpteenth degree of precision—had been wiped out in a matter of minutes. With one sentence, Hack Bender had turned my Master Plan to shit.

Of course, if I wanted to get technical about it, he'd started that job over thirty years ago. Meeting him had just pushed everything over the edge.

I honestly don't know why I took him home with me. Why I allowed him to shower in my bathroom and put on clean clothes from my closet and sleep in my spare room. I laid in bed till past dawn wondering about these things and listening to him snore in peaceful bliss while I begged for sleep so I could wake up and find this had all been a dream. A very bad dream.

But he was there in my kitchen, wearing my new bathrobe, when I got up, engulfed in a cloud of brewing coffee and sizzling bacon, whistling some off-key ditty that no doubt involved kangaroo humping or some other bush hobby.

"Take a seat, mate," he called cheerfully. "I'll pour you a cuppa."

I didn't want a cuppa, nor did I want to share any part of my morning with him. My eyes wandered to the knife block on the counter. It's not too late to finish the job, a dark little voice inside my head whispered.

"I'm late to work," I snapped, turning and heading for the shower. I needed time to think, to form a new Master Plan. To rationalize this nightmare that had become my reality.

"You look like shit," Randy told me when I got to work. "I take it you still haven't resolved the Krystal Situation?"

I mercifully had forgotten the trauma of that horror. Right now it was the least of my worries, and realizing that showed me just how seriously the state of my life had deteriorated.

"I'm still working on it," I lied, hoping he'd take the hint and leave me to my misery, but Randy was as tenacious as Sandra when it came to open wounds.

"I don't see why you don't just go over there and tell her the truth."

"No!" I glanced around and lowered my voice. "Could we just drop this? I'm not going anywhere near her."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself, but I don't mind telling you, you're really starting to embarrass me."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

“Look at you. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were whipped. Next thing you know, you’ll be letting her talk you into marriage.”

I tried to hide the panic his words had evoked, but I could tell by the way he was staring at me the effort had been a complete flop. I must have looked like some tuft-headed psychotic. As if that wasn’t enough to keep my mind in a state of extended chaos, Alan chose that moment to come wheeling around the corner bearing bad news.

“Remember that software fix you guys installed over at CompTek last week? Seems there was a bug in it, caused the whole system to crash. Their VP called our VP at home last night raising holy hell about how our software just fried the hard drives and the entire database of their million-dollar computer. Baxter was yanked into the front office as soon as he hit the door today, and you know how shit rolls downhill.”

Randy started inching out of my cube. “I just remembered, I have a dentist appointment this morning.”

“Oh no you don’t,” I warned, grabbing his arm. “You’re the one who said go ahead and install it without debugging because you were in a hurry to get out of there.”

“Oh, and I twisted your arm for that?”

“Hey, look,” Alan interrupted, “it doesn’t matter now. Both your names were on the work order, which puts both of you at the top of his shit list.”

I spotted her out of the corner of my eye; Patty Marlo, Baxter’s secretary. Natasha to Baxter’s Boris. She stalked straight towards us, her heels drilling into the asphalt tile like a funeral dirge. Randy caught sight of her at the same time and turned to me with a look of impending doom.

“See you later,” Alan whispered, ducking down the nearest aisle. Coward.

“Okay, Maverick,” Randy murmured under his breath. “Give me some of that pilot shit.”

“Fuck you.”

“Mr. Baxter wants to see both of you in his office. *Now.*”

\* \* \*

Dick Baxter’s office always reminded me of a cheap motel room—simulated wood grain furniture, generic landscape scenes on the wall, a couple of those knock-off Danish modern chairs with orange vinyl cushions arranged around a matching table, the air ripe with the stale odor of fear and sweat. The only thing missing was the lumpy bed with the Magic Fingers.

When you thought about it, the analogy was a fitting one. Most people who went in there expected to get screwed. I’d spent my share of time behind that closed door, but always before I’d come armed with a ready supply of excuses and scapegoats. This time was different. This time I was heading in empty-handed and, judging by the way my week was going, fully expecting to leave with less. I wasn’t going to be disappointed.

I can remember as a kid wishing whenever my mother would start in on one of her rants she’d just smack me around a little and get it over with. Far better to endure a little physical abuse than hours of verbal assault and the ensuing dumping of parental guilt. I don’t know if

Baxter studied technique at his own parents' feet or was just a naturally sadistic bastard, but he could browbeat like a revival preacher on a caffeine binge. Halfway through his "personal and corporate responsibility" spiel, I wanted to stand up and shout, "Either fire me or shut the fuck up!"

But I didn't. I sat in my chair next to my partner-in-crime, nodding dutifully during the appropriate pauses and making the appropriate subservient responses, all the while admonishing myself for my failure of the night before. Had I succeeded, I reasoned, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. I would have had the courage to tell the dried up old fart where to shove his million dollar mistake and walk out the door with the knowledge that I was by far the superior in this contest of wills.

But I hadn't succeeded. I was stuck in the hole with the rest of the dogs, eating table scraps and begging for a pat on the head.

Disgusting.

That Baxter misinterpreted my shame for remorse was useful only in that it cut his tirade a microsecond shorter than it would otherwise have been. The upshot of the whole business was that Randy and I were going back to CompTek on Saturday to fix the problem we had so irresponsibly caused . . . *"or else."*

The "or else" was assumed to be understood.

"This sucks," Randy mumbled as we shuffled back out into the cold light of Reality As We Knew It. "I took Monday off. Barb and I reserved a condo out at Sand Key."

"Oh, shut the fuck up," I snapped, happy to finally get to use the retort on someone.

"You realize she'll be so pissed when she hears this, she'll probably take Krystal to the mall and spend the rest of my money."

"Don't even go there," I warned, cutting him short. "I got bigger things to worry about than whether your girlfriend and her loony sidekick are running up the gross national product."

Give him credit; Randy at least had enough sense to realize I wasn't kidding and left it at that. The way I saw it, the only good thing about having to give up my weekend was that it kept me away from home. The thought of spending two days alone with Hack was enough to curdle my stomach. I'd rather sit through a root canal with a drill press. Unfortunately, I still had to get through today, and as I could see no way to avoid going home, I decided I would make the most of the opportunity to gage his weaknesses.

## Nine

---

I still hadn't given up on my original Master Plan. I had chosen my victim, and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became I had made the right choice. True, he wasn't a total stranger, as my original premise had required, but who would know that? I never had mentioned having a father to anyone, and most certainly never, in the wildest stretch of my imagination, had I considered Hack Bender as a starter in that role. As far as everyone else was concerned, the man was dead already. No one knew he was at my house. No one had seen me bring him in. He was as anonymous today as he'd been yesterday, meaning there was nothing to stop me from finishing up the job I'd started the night before. All I had to do now was come up with a new way to stop him from breathing.

Naturally, strangling was out; he'd see that one coming a mile away. I needed something new, something I could handle by myself and still remain personally involved. After all, I wasn't killing him merely to get rid of him, even though his identity had provided me with a certain heightened satisfaction for the act. No, I still had an agenda to satisfy. I had to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I was superior to him and everyone like him. That I could take his life without any regrets or guilt, and get away with it. Then, and only then, would I succeed in becoming the man I was destined to be.

Now, given the choice of methods, I was thinking long and hard about electrocution. The exact means for conveying the current still eluded me, though I toyed with several options, the first of which was one of those tazer guns. However, that was quickly dismissed. Like the purchase of any gun, I figured it would be too easily traced. What do I know?

Then there was the quickly-aborted titillation of using an electric blanket. It would be a simple matter to strip the insulation off the wires embedded inside, then turn it on, toss in a glass of water while he slept, and watch the Aussie shrimp sizzle away on the barbie. The visual I got of that scene entertained me throughout the entire drive home until I realized an electric blanket in September in Florida would be a hard sell to anyone, even a speed bump like Hack.

I was still trying to overcome that disappointment while assuring myself things would most certainly get better—how could they possibly get any worse?—when I rounded the corner of my street and spotted the bright green micro-mini auto-wannabe squatting in my driveway like a June bug on a porch light. That could only mean one thing—things had just gotten worse.

Krystal was at my house.

\* \* \*

I could hear her inane giggle as I approached the front door, my gums curling up over my teeth in self-defense. Why was this happening to me? I reached for the knob, bracing myself for the worst.

They were sitting at the diningroom table having tea. I didn't even know I *had* tea. Of course, Hack set me straight on that one right away.

"What kind of host are ya anyway, Skippy? Good thing this sheila's got a car. Bought you a proper kettle as well."

I glanced at the stove, my jaw locking up in self-defense. Something chrome and blue perched on the front burner, its spout pointed accusingly towards me. "I thought you had no money," I managed to sputter through clenched teeth.

"Found some in your desk drawer. There was enough there to get some biscuits and cream as well."

I was already across the room, yanking open the drawer to my desk and surveying the contents. Notepads, pens, paper clips, the little wooden change box Hack had violated. Ah . . . I breathed a sigh of relief. There it was, still lodged safely in the back; the cloth-bound bundle that contained my knife. I closed the drawer and turned, determined to maintain control, then Hack opened his mouth.

"Nice knife. Needed a bit of sharpening, though."

You stupid, meddling shit, I wanted to scream, but I managed to pull it together enough to speak in a somewhat civil tone. For a minute, anyway. "I would appreciate it if you'd keep your hands off my stuff."

"He was just trying to help," Krystal volunteered.

I turned to her, my eyes narrowing. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Now, come on, Skippy. That's no way to talk to your girl."

"Shut up and stay out of this, old man," I snapped as the blood started to pound behind my eyes, turning the room to shades of gray. I remember reading something as a kid about a person's dreams being in black and white. I could only hope that's what this was, though I knew in my heart this was just about as far from a dream as it gets. That sadistic little fuck called Fate had no intention of letting me off that easily. I could feel his steel-toed boot planted firmly on my chest. I clenched my fists in self-defense, poised to show a good fight, vaguely aware of my nails digging into the flesh of my palms. The pain actually felt good. Something to hold onto.

Krystal didn't seem the least bit fazed by the fact that she was lined up in the sights of a potential Vesuvius. She sat there stirring her empty tea cup and smiling at me like she'd just swallowed a few million grams of Prozac with her cookies and milk.

"I came by after lunch to drop off a little making up present," she started, and I unconsciously filled my lungs with air like a swimmer preparing for a dive.

"Why didn't you tell me your father was visiting? He's from Australia, but then, I guess you knew that. I just love his accent, don't you? It's like talking to Crocodile Dundee. I'm surprised you don't have one since he's your father and all, but I guess you've never actually lived there, have you, and well, it's not like that's something that's hereditary, is it? Anyway, he made such a fuss about not having any tea to offer me even though I told him we don't drink tea

in America the way they do in Australia because we usually have it cold not hot, but I thought it would be fun to try it, so I took him up to the mall to Barney's because he said he wanted Devonshire tea and I thought Publix just had stuff like Lipton and those fruit-flavored things, and we also got some little English tea biscuits that are actually cookies—shortbread, aren't they, Hack? They're really yummy and I think I might have ate too many, then we ran into Penney's to get the teapot. He insisted on paying for everything, so I thought it'd be nice if we took him out to dinner tonight. Just the three of us—like a real family. Wouldn't that be fun?"

I let out the breath.

"She's a bloody prize, this one," Hack beamed, draping his arm around Krystal's shoulders. "A real keeper, if ya ask me." He winked at Krystal, who just returned that mindless smile.

I could feel my mouth trying to move, but nothing was coming out. It was as if someone had unplugged the connection between my brain and my vocal chords, causing all the rage and frustration of the past twenty-four hours to launch an all-out assault on my body. There were a million things I wanted to say, but they all morphed into a single, hypnotic chant: *killthemboth, killthemboth, killthemboth*. At that moment, I would have given anything for an hour with a chainsaw and Mr. Lauderdale's chipper.

And they were still talking.

"So what d'ya think, Skippy? Dinner on the town, maybe some dancin' after? Yer ol' man can still kick up the dust, ya know!"

To demonstrate, he pulled Krystal to her feet and swung her around like a chicken on a hot plate. She giggled and glanced at me, babbling in her best little girl voice, "Johnny's been under a lot of stress lately. He's been working too hard and that makes him all grumpy and tired."

Oh yes. Johnny had been under a LOT of stress lately.

"Well, nothin' better for the soul than a cold pint and a warm heart," Hack replied, his laughter escalating to a full scale coughing fit. He took a minute to recover himself, waving off Krystal's concern. I just stood and watched, hoping maybe he'd swallow his own tongue and do us all a favor. Unfortunately, after a few minutes of wheezing and hacking, he got things under control.

"You okay?" Krystal asked.

He nodded, smiling through teary eyes. "Don't worry 'bout me, girl. Guess that last swallow of tea went down the wrong way."

"Too bad," I murmured.

"I'm a tough ol' sod," Hack grinned, shaking his head. He reached over and smacked me across the back as if to emphasize the claim, and I felt something inside jangle loose. I was certain if I'd looked in a mirror right then I wouldn't recognize myself. It was like all of a sudden my skin didn't fit, like something dark and dangerous was growing under there.

You can't let this happen, I told myself. If you lose control, you'll be just like them. I tried to take deep breaths, to calm the rage that was boiling inside me, but all I could think about was getting my hands around both their necks and squeezing until their heads popped like swollen zits.

The mental image of that was almost zenful. I smiled to myself, not caring how it looked to them.

“See there, he’s got the spirit now. Get your bloody dancin’ shoes on, mate. We’re goin’ out.”

“Ooh, goody!” Krystal squealed. “We’re going out, we’re going out!”

## Ten

---

Just the way I wanted to start the weekend—going out to dinner with my insipid not-girlfriend and the man who claimed to be my father. Not only did I not want to waste one minute of the little free time I had in their company, I certainly didn't want it to be in public where anyone could see us together. And as luck would have it, *anyone* turned out to be Alan and Karen.

"I had no idea you were Australian," Karen purred in response to the introductions, compliments of Krystal, another reason why I should have boiled her in oil.

"Oh, he isn't," she assured the newcomers. "He's never even *been* to Australia, believe it or not. I know I'd go, if I ever got the chance, though I did see a panda bear in the zoo once."

A bullet to the brain sounded good.

"That's China, luv," Hack corrected with a chuckle.

"Hmm?"

"China. Panda's come from China, not Australia."

"Oh. Oh well, you know what I meant. They're those funny little things that hang in trees."

Hack leaned over to Karen with a wink. "A bit daft at times, but harmless enough, ya know?"

Karen laughed politely and glanced at her husband, who was watching me with such poorly-concealed amusement I wanted to deck him. "Little family gathering?"

I tossed him a warning look as Krystal took up the slack. "Isn't it great? Johnny's been working so hard lately he's barely had time to think. I keep telling him it's unhealthy--"

"Bloody unhealthy," Hack agreed, nodding sagely.

"--and that he should learn to relax."

"Stop all the whinging and have some fun in life, ain't that right, Skippy?"

"My name is not Skippy."

"That's cute," Alan quipped. "Is that something he picked up as a kid?"

"How would he know?" I snarled, glancing at Hack, who had adopted the demeanor of a repentant father.

"Afraid I wasn't around when he was growin' up, though as I told his mum just last week, I intend to make that up to him."

I looked at him. "My mother? When did you talk to her?"

"I just told you, last week. She's the one what gave me your address. Still a looker, she is, though she hits the bottle a bit too much, if ya ask me. S'pose I can't blame her, what with that

wimpish bloke she's livin' with. He's a piece of work, that one. Has a fancy for bettin' the dish-lickers and dressin' up in women's clothes, though thankfully, not at the same time."

Things didn't get any better from there. I kept glancing around, looking for the camera, certain I was being punk'd. I could only hope that insanity was terminal—and quick.

I could feel all my high-flung idealism slowly being leeched from my soul in their presence. Maybe if it was *just* Hack, or *just* Krystal I might have been able to resist, to stick to my guns and remain focused, but the combination of the two of them was more than any rational person—particularly one as evolved as myself—should be made to bear. And while it's true that Krystal had been screwing up my life since the moment she'd entered it, she was, at best, an annoyance.

Hack, on the other hand, was like a pernicious virus that was rapidly infecting every molecule of my existence. It was a threat that had to go away, and the less effort expended, the better. I couldn't even begin to focus on my higher objectives while he was around.

I think it was during dessert that I settled on the shower. It was quick, neat, and free from suspicion. I kept a small clock radio on the back of the toilet, next to the tub. It would be a simple matter to coax it into the water once Hack was inside, then ZAP! End of problem. It's a well-known fact that the majority of accidents happen in the home. And while it was true I wanted to commit an actual murder without getting caught, when it came to Hack, I no longer cared if it conformed to the parameters of my original Master Plan. As far as I was concerned, this didn't count. It was like a freebie; a dry run. This way, if something went wrong and it didn't work out, I could always claim he'd had an accident, or even better, committed suicide. One look at him would convince any cop worth his salt that he'd fried enough brain cells in his life to make that option plausible.

\* \* \*

It was late when we finally got home, and I was exhausted from all the pretense. I could only hope Hack would be equally tired and head straight to bed, but he and Krystal must have cooked up some conspiracy between them, because no sooner had we entered the house than he mentioned something about having another drink then ducked back to his room, leaving me alone with the second least desirable person in my life.

I wasn't *that* drunk.

Before she could burrow in, I pushed Krystal towards the door, claiming I needed sleep because I had to get up early the next morning. That much, at least, was true.

"But, Johnny, I thought--"

"Well, you thought wrong. Now run along like a good girl."

I shoved her backwards through the door, slamming it in her face and making a production of locking it to punctuate my message.

Somewhere in the house, water had begun to run. I tiptoed down the hall and listened at the bathroom door. Hack was in the shower warbling about trailer parks and aborigines in that bastardized British accent. Opportunity had just knocked. I turned the knob and slid inside.

I could barely see through the steam. I felt my way over to the tub, thankful now that I'd never replaced the outdated shower curtain with a glass door, and balanced the radio on the edge of the tub, then crept back towards the door to watch.

I saw the impression of Hack's arm brush against the inside of the shower curtain, causing the radio to teeter for a minute before sliding under the curtain and into the tub. As if in answer to my prayers, Hack picked that particular moment to launch into a grand coughing fit. I heard him kick the radio against the side of the tub and held my breath, waiting for the fireworks.

"Bloody hell, what the fuck was that?"

The last thing I expected to hear was him cursing. Screaming in agony, yes. Sparks, dimming lights, but not cursing. Something wasn't right here. I glanced down at the cord hanging over the edge of the tub, tracing it back up to the toilet. Damn! The plug must have pulled out of the socket when it fell.

"I've cut me bloody foot!"

I slipped out the door and scooted down the hall to my room, where I was putting on a good show of getting ready for bed when he banged on my door, his towel-clad body dripping all over the floor.

"Don't have a band-aid, do you?" he asked. "I cut me foot on your radio. Bloody thing must've fallen off the toilet. I'll buy you a new one when I get the money. Get your carpet cleaned as well."

"My carpet?"

I glanced past him to the trail of red footprints marking his path. Thirty dollars a square yard, on sale. They say you see red when you get mad, but I don't remember seeing anything.

*My hands around his neck, squeezing with euphoric gratification. "You asshole! Why don't you just die? Die! Die! Die!"*

And then I came to my senses.

He was staring at me as though I was about to be sick, and who knows, maybe I was. I sure as hell wasn't feeling too well. Dinner was clambering its way back up my throat and my skin felt like it was going to crawl off my body. "Band-Aids in the medicine cabinet," I murmured, ducking out in search of the antacids and some wet rags for the blood stains.

How the hell had everything gotten so screwed up? What had started out as an ingenious, well-crafted plan had degenerated into a catastrophe of unending proportions. I was not only emotionally involved in my scheme, I was nearing the brink of obsession. Hell, I was even hallucinating, for Christ's sake. What was next?

I took my anger out on the carpet, trying everything from Windex to dish soap to get the blood stains out, but all I managed to accomplish was to get things wetter. I finally resigned myself to having to call in a professional, and while there were a dozen things I wanted to do in retaliation for that unexpected expense, by that point I would have settled for sleep.

Unfortunately, my brain picked that particular moment to launch a flash of creative inspiration, and so I found myself fighting to drag my computer-desk and all-out to the garage to avoid any more interruptions from Hack. I should have known something as logistically-challenging as moving a piece of furniture at one in the morning was going to have disastrous

results, but by that time I was too tired to listen to reason, even my own. The wheels of the cart got caught on the computer cord, causing the whole thing to tilt and send the monitor crashing to the floor.

All of this happened within a matter of seconds, leaving me as helpless as a spectator at a train wreck. I'd never actually seen an LCD shatter before. It was even better than Krystal's dish-wielding episode, and had I been in a more lucid frame of mind, I might have taken the time to truly appreciate the spectacle. As it was, I just kicked all the pieces into a corner in the kitchen and dragged my tired ass to bed. Maybe if I was lucky, Hack would cut his other foot on it in the morning and bleed to death.

## Eleven

---

It was eight o'clock the next morning when I met Randy in the parking lot at CompTek. I felt like death warmed over, having managed a whopping forty minutes of restless sleep. Being the opportunistic bastard that he was, Randy was quick to notice.

"I swear you gotta find a way to get rid of her."

"Don't even start with me."

The guard at the front desk looked pissed about having his nap interrupted. He abandoned his little camera-infested nest with much sighing and rearranging of clothing and escorted us down to the Clean Room, as the weenies at CompTek liked to call the area where their mainframe resided. He made a major production of unlocking the door, like we should fully appreciate the enormity of his responsibility, before ambling back to his cocoon.

"Lock up when you're done," he called. "I'm leaving in ten minutes."

"Pompous little turd," Randy spat as he set down his Deluxe Field Service Tool Kit with the heavy-duty polyethylene case and twin vinyl-pocketed pallets and proceeded to pull out and set up his collection of screwdrivers.

Randy was truly anal when it came to his tools; he even had a mini O-scope in the damn box. Must've set him back the price of a good used car. Oh well, I guess everyone has their quirks. I just carried one of those all-in-one screwdrivers you can buy at any Wal-Mart. The way I saw it, if it couldn't be fixed with that, there was always a hammer handy somewhere. I wasn't one to stand on procedure when it came to other people's equipment.

"Why don't you start pulling the screws out of the hard drive panels while I go kill the power?" Randy suggested.

Randy definitely must have been in a hurry if he was willing to allow me to touch his precious tools while not in his presence. Either that, or he didn't trust me around a 220-volt lifeline in my current frame of mind. No matter, he was leaving me with the chore of crawling around on the floor popping screws while he got a quick tour of the unpopulated building.

"Hey, don't forget, if you see any good shit laying around--"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll scarf it up."

It was a hobby of ours, when in new environments, to scout for souvenirs and cast-offs. Normally I'm not one to haunt yard sales and garbage cans, but there's something about finding unexpected treasures in someone else's domain that makes you feel like Mel Fisher on a dive into the Atocha. Once, a few years back, we'd scored a sweet, if somewhat abused, calendar highlighted by pictures of Heather Locklear in a black leather bikini. It was beyond outdated now but still hung with pride in Randy's cubicle. He even continued to change the months. The way

he explained it was, if he kept it long enough, the days would eventually line up again. Besides, the artwork was timeless.

I held no hope for anything as rewarding as that today. CompTek proper, like its computer room, was a sterile environment, no doubt run by androids who discouraged any display of individualism or creativity. As far as I knew, all they did in the place was write and distribute software and the instruction manuals that were supposed to explain it. Most of the people who worked here probably had never even used the crap they developed, which wouldn't be surprising to anyone who had ever opened a Microsoft manual.

When Randy got back—empty-handed, as expected—I already had the damaged hard drives out and was working on installing the new ones. It took us the better part of an hour to wrap up the install so we could start formatting the drives and reload the software. By then we were both soaked with sweat.

“How the hell do they expect us to work in this heat?” Randy whined, wiping his brow on his sleeve.

“Guess they forgot we were going to be here.”

“I'll bet it's that piss ant guard's idea of a joke. If I'm going to sweat like this, I'd as soon be at the beach. I could be out on the water right now, a six pack of cold ones in the cooler.”

I'd been waiting for that one all morning. He hadn't mentioned his aborted junket with Barbara yet today, but I could feel it brewing. Like all this was somehow my fault.

“Oh, for Christ's sake, don't start that again.”

“What's wrong—you jealous?”

“Of what?”

“Oh, I don't know, maybe because I have a girlfriend I actually like. Something you'll never have until you grow the balls to tell Krystal to hit the road.”

“You know, I'm about over this subject, so could we just drop it, already?”

“Truth hurts, huh?”

I wanted to punch him. I wanted to just ball up my fist and watch it smash into his face. Talk about pompous. Jealous of him—ha! That was a joke.

Okay, so maybe I was just a little, though not for the reasons he thought. Maybe I resented the fact that all I had planned for the weekend was running up my Mastercard for a new monitor to replace the one I had destroyed because I couldn't sleep.

That, and finding a way to kill my father.

The suckage meter on my life was firmly planted in the red zone, and I was in no mood to have my nose rubbed in it.

“This heat is going to kill the computers,” Randy said, wisely changing the subject. “We're never going to be able to debug the system until we get the temperature down.”

“So go check the breakers. Maybe you turned off the air by mistake.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Fine, whatever. Maybe it's broken. Maybe you should go find a fan. Christ, you'd bitch if you got hung with a new rope.”

“You’re so full of answers, why don’t you go? And while you’re at it, flip the network power back on.”

I would have pressed the argument further, but right then I was glad for any excuse to get away from him. Sometimes I couldn’t help wondering if men who lived with women didn’t actually get PMS, sort of like a sympathy period. It would sure explain the way Randy acted half the time.

I could see the back door was wide open when I rounded the corner. Well, that certainly wasn’t helping matters. As my mother used to say—one of the few things I can remember her saying because God knows I got clubbed over the head with it enough as a kid—“what are trying to do, air condition the whole neighborhood?” I was secretly hoping Randy was the culprit so I’d have something else to rag him about.

I ducked into the maintenance room and flipped on the power for the network hub then looked around for the AC breaker. What a surprise—it was off.

“Dumb ass guard,” I mumbled as I pushed the lever back up.

There was a loud snap, followed by a buzzing sound, then a man’s scream erupted from somewhere outside. I ran out the back door and looked around.

He was lying next to the farthest of the three air conditioner units, his body twitching and fuming like a smoked mullet. His hand was still clamped to something inside the compressor while his eyes stared straight ahead in blank panic. “Shit!” I swore, running back into the building to flip off the breaker.

When I returned, the man had stopped twitching, though his body still smelled like a low-tide barbecue. I inched closer, poking him with my toe.

“Hey, buddy? You all right?”

No answer.

“Hey, come on, seriously. Can you hear me?”

I leaned over him, studying his face. He didn’t look so good. In fact, he was looking kind of, well . . . dead. I kneeled down and grabbed his wrist, feeling for a pulse. Never mind that I wouldn’t know a pulse if it bit me, but I figured I had to do something. After all, I felt kind of responsible for what had happened, though really, how could I have known the moron was out there?

At that moment, taking into account my limited experience with the subject—which was, well, none—I’d have to say the guy was dead. Not that it was my problem or anything, but I couldn’t just leave him laying in the parking lot like that. And calling the cops was out of the question—I could just imagine how many hours of Randy’s bitching I’d have to listen to then.

And there was the whole matter of my part in his death, though it really wasn’t my fault. I mean, what kind of idiot works on an air conditioner on a Saturday morning when the business is closed? Did anyone even know he was there? The guard had made a point of telling us he was leaving right after we got there. He didn’t say anything about the air conditioner needing fixing. So who the hell was this guy, and why was he poking around in someone else’s air conditioner? Far as I could tell, anyone who does that deserves to get the shit shocked out of him.

I noticed a name tag on his uniform—Stan. Well, I guess it was up to me to stash old Stan somewhere safe. I walked back inside to do some investigating. There was a storage closet next to the maintenance room; several boxes of toilet paper, mops and brooms, some buckets, and a couple of those industrial-sized plastic trash bins on wheels. Perfect place to hide a dead repairman.

I grabbed Stan by the feet and started to drag him into the building, a task that was a lot harder than it should have been because Stan was a BIG man. I managed to get him to the door of the storage closet, but that's when things turned tricky. There was just too much stuff in there, which meant there wasn't enough room for Stan without doing some major remodeling. I dumped the buckets and mops into one of the empty trash cans, creating a kind of plastic house of cards, then pulled Stan over to the corner and propped him behind the precarious sculpture.

By now I looked like I had taken a dive into the deep end of the pool; even my shoes were soaked. It wasn't bad enough that the air conditioners weren't working, but with all this pushing and pulling and temperatures outside climbing by the minute, the building had started to feel like a kiln.

I collapsed against the wall for a breather, feeling like I had just run the Boston Marathon. Who says computer repair isn't hard work? When my heartbeat finally settled back to normal, I fished some rags out of one of the cans and proceeded to wipe clean anything I might have touched before taking a last look around. Satisfied there was nothing to tie me to the scene, I switched off the light and shut the door

“Sweet dreams, Stan.”

Randy was coming down the hall when I emerged from the closet.

“Where have you been? Did you figure out what's wrong with the AC?”

“Yeah, it's not working.”

“No shit. So you decided to take a vacation and leave me to suffer in the heat?”

“No, asshole,” I shot back. “I was looking for a fan, remember?”

“Did you find one?”

“Do you see one?”

Randy sighed and shook his head. “Forget it. We're not going to get any more work done in this heat. The system gets much hotter, it's going to shut itself down.”

“Then what are you doing standing around here talking?”

“Same thing as you—fucking off.”

“I'm not fucking off. I told you, I was looking for a fan. I'm going to take a cruise around the offices; why don't you look upstairs.”

“Whatever,” Randy mumbled, turning and shuffling back down the hall. I waited until he disappeared around the corner before ducking back outside to see if Stan had left any of his tools lying around. That's when I spotted the van. Older model Ford with one of those magnetic signs on the side: B&J'S ELECTRICAL SERVICE.

I walked over and peeked in the window; no keys. Figures the asshole would have them in his pocket. I headed back to the storage closet and after pushing through the clutter, located the jumbled lump wedged in Stan's pocket. Jeez, did this guy have a key to *everything*?

I wasn't sure what I was going to do, just that I had to get rid of that van. I drove it around the building, heading towards an overgrown field adjacent to the parking lot. It looked like as good a place as any to dump a van.

After coaxing it through the line of scraggly hedges that bordered the asphalt, I steered into a clump of fledgling oaks and palmetto scrub. Even at the breakneck pace of fifteen miles an hour, equipment was bouncing and jangling all over the place, and more than once I had to dodge flying tools. I jerked the wheel to the right, skirting another clump of palmettos, then swerved left to avoid the rotting carcass of an old pine tree before gunning it to clear a small rise, heedless of the fact that I had no idea what was on the other side. The front wheels spun away from the ground, throwing off the lumbering vehicle's center of gravity. The shelves against the left wall pulled loose, sending tools and electrical parts crashing across the floor. I had a death grip on the steering wheel as the seat dropped away from me then bounced back up to hit me in the ass with a jaw-snapping thump.

All this happened in a matter of seconds. I was pumping the brakes like a madman, but with the wheels airborne, all that accomplished was to give me something to do. I looked up in time to spot a patch of sugar sand looming in front of me as the right wheels landed. It was like hitting wet cement. The van yawed for a split second, then rolled over like a dying cow.

It took a few minutes for the dust to settle. By then, I realized I was still alive, a miracle considering all the metal objects that had landed in my lap. I brushed them aside, wiped the steering wheel down with my sleeve, then cranked open the window and pulled myself out, looking around.

Yep, I'd buried that sucker good. There was a path of destruction marking the last fifty or so feet of my progress, but unless someone made an effort to track it, they'd never spot the van. A wave of euphoria swept over me. What a ride!

I was still smiling as I hiked back to the building, stopping to brush off my jeans and shoes before heading back inside to rejoin Randy, who I was sure would be bitching like a jilted drag queen.

"No fan, huh?" he asked. I shook my head, hiding my grin. "System shut down ten minutes ago."

"Well, I guess that means we can pack up and go home."

"I guess."

"So what's the problem? I thought that's what you wanted."

"Baxter's gonna be pissed."

Like I cared about what Baxter thought at a time like this. My blood was pounding through my body like a race horse on Derby Day.

"Fuck him," I replied, trying not to launch into giddy laughter. Randy was the one who was bitching about being here; the one who resented having his plans postponed. He should be ecstatic. It wasn't even noon yet, plenty of time for him and Barbara to load up the jet skis and get to the beach. He just wasn't getting into the spirit of this at all. I'd just saved his weekend and all he could think about was that prick, Baxter.

“You know what your problem is?” I told him. “You don’t know when someone’s just done you a favor. I say we get the hell out of here before they blame us for breaking the damned air conditioner too.”