

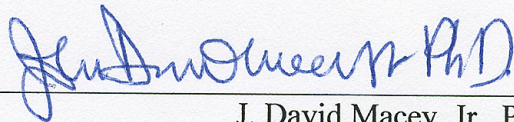
**Shadow Boxer**

A THESIS

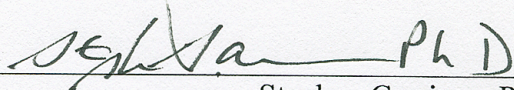
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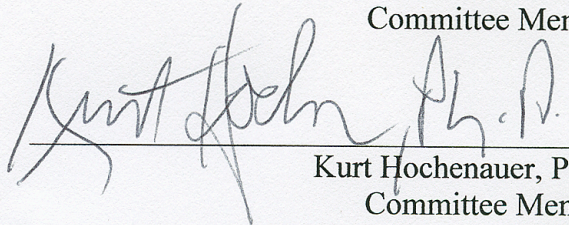
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## One

Guyles couldn't believe it. "No way, that can't be a man."

Hicks shook his head, a curious smile on his face.

"But she's got an ass like a woman."

"Padding," Hicks said. He spit tobacco juice into an empty *Diet Coke* bottle. The sick, sweet smell of snuff hung in the air. He wiped a drop of spit off his chin. "Well placed padding."

They had stopped their patrol car near a hedge of bushes down the street from a corner where prostitutes often gathered. Only one girl stood near the pay phone at 9<sup>th</sup> and Western, but she was an eye-catcher with a big black mane of hair, huge breasts barely contained in a tight yellow blouse. Country music boomed from the Western Lounge across the street. The odor of fried chicken rode a light breeze, igniting Guyles' appetite, but a sudden gust of wind brought the rot from the bottom of those long neglected grease

barrels stored behind a nearby Git-n-Go. The sky was fading to dusk, and the crispness promised the arrival of autumn, finally, after a long hot summer.

Guyles strained his eyes, studied the woman. She shifted her stance, offered her profile and struck a provocative pose - jutted hip, bosom thrust forward, head tilted back, luxuriating a tangled mass of hair. He forced a laugh and shifted in his seat, a swell in his crotch. His face felt warm.

“Look at those tits,” he gushed.

Hicks hawked another glob of snuff, observing Guyles with a sideways glance, the vague, mysterious smile still there. He opened the door, spooned out the snuff between his lower cheek and gums. This vulgar act contrasted Hicks’ otherwise polished appearance, a handsome kind of guy with a meticulous haircut sculpted with lots of gel. He checked the car mirror, reached up to finger-comb his hair but stopped short of actually touching it.

“The biggest tits around here,” Hicks drawled, “are on a guy.”

Guyles looked again. Her breasts did look impossibly firm, unnaturally large on her otherwise skinny frame.

“I’ll bet it’s wearing at least five pounds of silicone,” Hicks speculated. He held his hands in front of him, moved them up and down like a weight scale. “Probably, five on each side.”

Guyles was almost ready to concede the debate. “But still...”

The woman wore a short, white skirt, impossibly high, and she had shapely legs zipped into knee-high black vinyl boots.

“Then where does she, I mean he, put his... you know... his... jewels?”

Maybe she'd had a sex-change operation. The swell in his crotch tightened.

Hicks reloaded his lip, giving his face a puffy Neanderthal affect. He grabbed the *Diet Coke* bottle and spit another trail of slime into it.

"Jody's a man all right, a she-male." He squinted his eyes, stared at her with predatory intensity. "It's probably one of the most popular whores around."

"But where does she hide her balls?"

Hicks laughed and choked, opened the car door to spit. When he finally sat up, his face was red, a tear brimmed his left eye.

"It tucks them up the ass, holds them in place with tape."

Guyles winced. "That's got to hurt." His cheeks felt warmer than ever. "Then what happens if she gets a hard-on?"

Hicks howled this time, a deep bellow of laughter. Then he started coughing again, and between guffaws he started cussing, gasping for air. He finally got out of the car, stood hands on knees for a while.

"You've got to be... the most... innocent rookie... I ever trained."

Guyles laughed, tried to make it sound real, but he was embarrassed. He envied Hicks' experience and worldliness, wondered how long it would take to become a hardened street cop. Here, he felt ambivalence. He wanted to grow a shell of cynicism to protect him from his own emotions, so often in conflict, but he feared what might be lost in the process. He wanted to see the world as good guys vs. bad guys, right vs. wrong, but he wondered about the things in between.

Hicks finally calmed down, recaptured his distant, unaffected attitude. "I'm going to love freaking you out."

It occurred to Guyles that Hicks spent a lot of time working prostitutes, like he had a vendetta or something. They drove toward 9<sup>th</sup> and Western or down to South Robinson every time they were 10-8.

“Why do you like to work the prostitutes so much?” Guyles asked and regretted doing so immediately.

Hicks was silent for a moment, eyebrows plowed forward, jaw muscles clenched. “They’re filthy. They don’t give a shit who they screw, what they do. They cater to all kinds of perversity, and they spread disease: herpes, syphilis, AIDS.”

Guyles could only nod. He knew he’d started a tirade.

“Look at Jody over there. I’ll bet it’s given people the virus, laughs about it.” His face darkened, a deeper shade of red for a moment, but he shook it off, smiled, eyes widened. He’d had an idea. “C’mon, let me introduce you to Jody. I want you to see how disgusting people can be.”

Guyles grasped the steering wheel, fingers white knuckle tight, arms stiff. He tried not to tremble.

“I’ll bet Jody has warrants,” Hicks said. “I bet we get to take that thing to jail.”

Guyles drove toward Jody, stopped several feet away, just like he’d been taught in the academy. Hicks jumped out before Guyles had shifted the car into park. Guyles tried to bail, also but got caught in his seatbelt. He grabbed the column shifter and jammed it into park without first stepping on the brake. The transmission clicked several times, a grinding, sickening noise. Hicks glared at him. Another fucking ding, Guyles thought, another daily observation report all shot to hell.

Jody had started walking away, high heels clicking on pavement at a fast pace. Hicks gave pursuit, trotted toward the prostitute.

“Whoa, stop right there, *sir*.”

Jody stopped in her tracks, teetered on her heels. Guyles noticed a tremble in her hands, a quiver in her chin. But by the time she turned around, she was smooth as chrome, steely with practiced defiance.

“Yes *ma'am*,” she said, a murmur above a mumble.

Hicks spit at Jody’s feet, a large brown blob on faded asphalt. “Are you fucking with me?” He grabbed the hilt of his asp baton.

Jody sighed, rolled her eyes. “Yes, man. Yes **man**,” she enunciated. “Ooo, it’s so easy to ruffle your macho feathers.” She brushed some hair out of her face, placed hands on hips in a flash of flamboyance.

“You’re working,” Hicks accused.

Jody pursed her lips and clicked her tongue. “Of course, I’m working. A girl’s got to make a living, right?”

Hicks placed his hand on the butt of his pistol, unsnapped the retention strap.

“Do you possess any weapons or contraband?”

Jody brandished her finger nails and growled like a cat. Her bravado was as much a part of the routine as Hicks’ overly aggressive stance. Guyles couldn’t tell who was posturing the most.

“Search it,” Hicks commanded.

Guyles stood motionless, mesmerized by Jody’s brazen femininity. He’d heard what Hicks had said, but the command whizzed by him, didn’t register.

“Hey, partner, search the goddamn drag queen.”

Guyles approached Jody with caution, like she might be a dangerous, wild animal. She smiled at him. He tried not to look at her breasts, but there they were, eye magnets drawing his gaze. When he saw the edge of a lacy black bra sticking out above the plunging neckline of her tight blouse, he hesitated.

“We’re not supposed to search ladies, right?”

Jody giggled, eyes wide with exaggerated surprise. “Why, thank you,” she said. She winked at Hicks. “He knows a lady when he sees one.”

“Lady?” Hicks growled. “You call this a lady? She ain’t no fucking lady.”

Guyles approached Jody, and she raised her hands, signaling she was clean. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back,” he said, forcing his words to remain even, calm and professional. He probably sounded like a robot. He glanced over at Hicks, needing some reassurance, wanting to make sure Hicks wasn’t kidding, praying he was, but Hicks just smiled looking vaguely satisfied, amused.

Of course Jody had to turn around in a flourishing flutter, ever the performer. She stuck her ass at Guyles, moved it up and down. He told her to interweave her fingers.

“Like when you pray,” he explained. “Fold them together... you know, the church, steeple, people trick.”

Jody did what she was told, cupped her hands behind her back. She mumbled something that sounded like a prayer.

Hicks spoke up, “You’re wasting your time. God doesn’t hear your prayers.”

Guyles grabbed her interlocked hands and turned them over like he'd been trained to do. The procedure locked Jody's elbows, made her lean backwards, slightly off balance.

"Move your feet apart."

She widened her stance.

"Further, a little further."

She widened her stance more until she grunted with discomfort. He pulled down on her hands.

"Don't be so rough, honey."

After Guyles asserted his position he reached around to Jody's front, hesitating over her right breast. Hicks chuckled. He was really getting off on this, and for the first time since he'd been hired, Guyles had second thoughts about being a cop.

A call blared over the radio, the dispatcher's voice tense and urgent, "2 Adam 95..."

"Fuck!" Hicks said. He grabbed his hand held radio, keyed the mic. "Go ahead."

"2 Adam 95, shots fired, NW 16<sup>th</sup> and Virginia. Calling party reports hearing four shots."

A reprieve, Guyles realized, releasing his hold on Jody. He felt weak in the knees, a little dizzy.

Jody patted her bottom, adjusted her blouse and bra straps. "Some other time, then," she said, winking at Guyles, who looked down.

Hicks had already sprinted back to the car, was getting into the passenger seat. "C'mon," he shouted. "Let's go. You can have your date later."



Jody blew Guyles a kiss as they sped away.

“2 Adam 95,” dispatch continued. “Have another call. One down in front of 1801 NW 16. This will be a drive-by...Suspect vehicle is an eighties model Oldsmobile, blue in color. Last seen westbound on 16<sup>th</sup>...Unit to back?”

“Adam 95 is clear, enroute from 9<sup>th</sup> and Western,” Hicks said.

Guyles’ blood surged with adrenaline. Wow, his first Code-3 response. He sped through traffic while Hicks activated the overhead lights and siren. He accelerated north on Western, blew the red light at 10<sup>th</sup> street and managed the curve on 13<sup>th</sup> street with no problem. He negotiated the left turn on Classen and plunged north toward 16<sup>th</sup> street.

The radio erupted with voices; transmissions cut short by too many units keying their microphones all at once. The mayhem slashed the dispatcher’s voice several times as she relayed further information.

“Fucking rookies,” Hicks yelled.

Guyles thought Hicks was yelling at him. He winced, lowered his head like a turtle trying to hide in its shell. Hicks continued his barrage, punching the dashboard. “Get off the goddamn air! Let the dispatcher do her job!”

“2 Adam 95 and other units responding, read the message on the call.”

Hicks swung the mobile data terminal in front of him. He quickly pressed a series of buttons and read the information. “1801 NW 16<sup>th</sup> is the home of an AIDS patient. Universal Precautions apply.”

They were fast approaching the intersection at 16<sup>th</sup> and Classen when a vehicle stopped in the middle of the road. Guyles slammed on the brakes, indecisive about which way to go.

“Pass on the left!” Hicks shouted. “Pass on the left!”

Guyles bogged down behind the car, losing precious time.

“Cross the median! Jesus Christ! Don’t ever pass on the right”

When they passed the car in the middle of the intersection, Hicks rolled down his window, waved his middle finger at the driver who stared back wide-eyed at the maniac police man. She had grey hair, large glasses accentuating her astonished, confused expression.

“You’re supposed to pull over to the right and stop, you fucking idiot.”

Guyles made a tight left turn, tires squealing, the back end losing traction, nearly fish-tailing out of control.

“Fucking Fords,” Hicks complained.

Guyles wished Hicks wasn’t there so he could focus on the task of driving without the added stress of an out-of-control FTO getting angrier by the minute.

They came upon a red Camero in their lane of travel. It wouldn’t stop and pull over to let the police car go by. Guyles honked the car horn, which was really pretty useless since the sirens were over twice as loud.

“Okay, here’s another idiot.”

Guyles saw the crest of a hill coming up fast, just tall enough to obscure on-coming traffic.

“Pass him! Pass the son-of-a-bitch!”

The driver of the Camero was still oblivious to the flashing and screaming police behind it. Hicks glared at Guyles. His stomach tightened. His whole body tensed as he

accelerated and shuffle-steered around the offending vehicle. Luckily, the opposite lane was empty.

Guyles looked down at the speedometer. They were going at least sixty miles an hour on a street with a speed limit of thirty. It wasn't like the highway. Sixty felt much faster on a two-lane street with houses and businesses only yards away. The whole neighborhood flashed by in a blur.

Hicks grabbed the radio microphone, "2 Adam 95, dispatch, we're going 10-97."

Guyles saw a crowd of people on a street corner two blocks ahead.

"Stop the fucking car!"

Guyles jumped on the brakes, skidded a long streak of rubber on late summer asphalt. The tar was turning to oil, and they started to slide. There was a breathless moment when the brakes turned to mush and the steering totally failed. They were nothing but a projectile hurling toward disaster, but they finally did stop without colliding into anything. When they exited the car Guyles smelled the overwhelming odor of burning rubber and brake pads. Smoke filled the air.

Hicks was a few steps ahead of Guyles, who dallied behind to make sure he left the car shifted in park. After that he ran toward Hicks who was yelling at him, yet again.

"Cut the siren!"

Guyles back-tracked to the car, fumbled with his keys, unlocked the door, opened the door, climbed into the car and tried to find the switch to turn off the siren. The whole process seemed unnaturally slow, a dream of slow motion running. Heat squeezed his head; he could hear his breathing and the loud thump of his heart.

"Shit, shit, shit..."

When he finally found the switch and turned it off, the world went mute for a moment, unnaturally silent. Then he heard a voice, an anguished scream, “Ooohhh, My baby!” It penetrated his perception of time. Things sped up again, and he found himself running toward Hicks, who was physically pushing people back from the victim lying on the ground clutching his chest, legs writhing with pain.

A heavy-set, powerful black woman pushed through the crowd parting the people with supernatural ease. “My baby! My baby!”

“Push her back!” Hicks’ voice rose above the fray. “Don’t let her in the scene”

Guyles stared at the victim, a young black male, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. He had a big hole in his chest, a gaping, sucking chest wound. His eyes were wide with horror, and his skin went pale as he struggled to breathe, chest heaving. It looked like he’d been pinned down to the sidewalk like a giant insect, legs squirming a grotesque, involuntary dance. Guyles heard a hollow, wet sound emanating from the exposed chest cavity.

“My baby! My baby!” the woman’s voice was closer now, right on top of Guyles. He felt himself being pushed aside by an unstoppable force. Just as the woman began to kneel down next to the victim Hicks ran up and pushed her back. She fell on her ass and squirmed to get back on her feet.

Hicks glared at Guyles, mouth twisted with disgust, like he accidentally swallowed a glob of snuff. “What the hell are you doing just standing there?”

Guyles sprang into action and helped force the woman back toward the crowd. She fought desperately, tears streaming down her face, and she was babbling, “Help my baby. Please help my baby, please, please...”

When Guyles glanced back at the victim, time resumed its normalcy. He knew what to do.

The woman's scream diminished in volume, but she chanted intently. Foam appeared at the corners of her mouth. "Help my baby! Oh please, help my baby..."

Guyles grabbed a pair of rubber gloves from a pouch mounted on his utility belt. He gloved up, quick and professional, certain about what he needed to do. He moved with purpose and confidence, approached the victim, examined the wound, and pulled clothing away from the hole. Once that was accomplished, he heard air being sucked into the chest cavity. The lung couldn't inflate because the bullet burst the vacuum when it penetrated the body. Because of the lung's inability to inflate, the young man lay dying of suffocation.

"Secure the scene, Guyles," Hicks yelled. "Leave that shit to the paramedics."

Guyles paused for a second, listened for the wail of an ambulance siren. He heard the sound way off in the distance. Every second counted. He leaned over the victim, tore the shirt and wiped the blood away from the wound to gauge the size of the hole. It was the size of a quarter.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Hicks was livid. "You're a police officer, not a goddamn paramedic. Get your ass away from him."

Guyles ignored him. He scanned the gathering onlookers. "Someone get me a plastic bag, something that can make an airtight seal." The people in the crowd stood there, silent with hesitation.

Guyles singled out a young man, stared directly at him. "You! Go get a plastic bag!"

The young man's eyes widened, a blankness washed over his face. "Who me?" his expression asked.

"Get moving, now!"

The young man leaped to action and ran off beyond the crowd.

The victim's face blanched, losing another shade of color, appearing ashen and lifeless. His lips darkened, and Guyles pulled the flesh below the kid's right eye checking for cyanosis, a condition marked by a blue-grey color of the mucous membranes, indicating a lack of oxygen and a significant loss of blood.

The kid was going into shock. He gasped for breath, mouth open like a fish-face out of water. His face tightened from the pain and strain of asphyxiation. His tongue rolled back to the bottom of his throat.

Hicks nudged Guyles. "What the fuck?" he yelled. "What makes you think you can save this guy? He's a goner."

The woman in the crowd screamed, "Oh my baby! Oh my baby... Oh God, save my baby." Her chanting had fallen to a blubbering mumble "Oh God, save my baby..."

Hicks continued his tirade. The crowd refocused its attention on him, but Hicks seemed oblivious to their growing agitation as he persistently interfered with the one person who was trying to do something to help the young shooting victim.

"Have you considered the fact that this asshole got shot in front of an AIDS house? Do the words universal precautions have any meaning to you?"

Guyles was undeterred. He placed his gloved hand over the wound, attempting to make a seal, to restore the vacuum so that the lung could re-inflate. It was an imperfect

seal, but it was partially successful. The victim gasped a breath, his chest rattling with fluid.

Hicks moved closer to Guyles and spoke lower, though no less menacingly, as if he was beginning to comprehend the crowd's agitation with him. "What are you doing? Trying to die a hero?" he growled. "Except with AIDS, you'll die a freak. Ever thought of that?"

Guyles turned to face Hicks, stared at him. "I am trying to save this kid's life. Get out of my way, off my back!"

Something in him cringed when he told Hicks to back off, and then he felt a rush of disgust. He could taste it like bile rushing up the back of his throat. He wanted to spit fire at Hicks, but he refocused his attention on the victim; he didn't have time to dwell on his misgivings.

The man from the crowd returned with a discarded potato chip sack. He offered it to Guyles who snatched it out of his hand. He could still see the oil veneer on the inside of the sack. Though he momentarily lamented using an unsterile covering he knew that the victim needed what few precious moments an airtight seal could buy. He tore the sack to make a flat surface.

"This'll have to do," he rationalized as he covered the sucking chest wound. He pressed down firmly, holding the edges of the sack to keep it in place. The sucking noise ceased, and the kid's chest heaved when he inhaled with an astonished gasp. The lung filled with air, and he started to breathe deeply and quickly.

Guyles struggled to keep the sack in place. He said as calmly as he could, "Slow down. Slow down, buddy, or you're gonna hyperventilate."

He prayed to himself, hoping the ambulance would be just a moment away. “Hold on. Hold on,” he chanted in rhythm. “Just hold on.”

Another siren, slightly different in tone wailed above the other police cars responding to the scene. Guyles knew it was the ambulance. He gazed down at the victim and breathed a sigh of relief. The look on his face must have helped the kid calm down since his breathing, though raspy, began to regulate, his face relaxed. It seemed he was trying to smile, but Guyles decided it was another grimace of pain.

When the paramedics arrived they rushed to Guyles’ side and readied their equipment. “I got a sucking chest wound!”

Guyles kept his hands on the victim’s chest to facilitate as tight a seal as possible. He marveled at the thin surface of the potato chip sack, realizing that this guy’s life was preserved by such a very thin measure, that minuscule distances made the difference between life and death, distances less than inches, less than millimeters. Maybe the bullet hit a rib which deflected it away from the heart. Maybe it penetrated a place that would cause the kid to suffer for hours before he finally, and mercifully, died. He also wondered about segments of time, about how long it takes to make a decision that ultimately places someone in the path of a bullet. Perhaps the kid had done nothing more than walk a different way home. Maybe he was a gangster, or maybe he was wearing a blue shirt instead of a red shirt. That’s all it took these days.

He looked up at Hicks who was still pushing people back from the crime scene, shouting. He knew he’d defied his field training officer, and he knew there’d be consequences, both positive and negative. Maybe this is what they meant by the thin blue line of police work.



One of the paramedics nudged Guyles' right shoulder indicating he was ready to take over. He nodded at Guyles with admiration in his eyes, but there wasn't enough time to speak accolades. Guyles stood up feeling good about this small affirmation. He wanted to linger, felt a curious attachment to the victim, something compelling him to stay with the young man at least until he was stabilized.

"All right, hero."

The voice permeated Guyles' inner thoughts. The word hero resonated with deliberation, "hee-row." It was a mocking tone.

"Time to be a police officer."

"Yes, sir," Guyles replied automatically.

He stood up. It had gotten dark all of a sudden, and the world was bathed in a fury of flashing red and blue lights, a swirling chaos of voices: cries of anger, shouts of disbelief, and prayers. He wanted to stay with the victim, wanted to make sure the paramedics took good care of him even though they were obviously more qualified and better equipped than he.

It was hard to know where to be.

## Two

The gallery was full of women, black and white photographs and portraits of women, all shapes and sizes, all races, and a vast array of cultural expressions. One portrait featured a woman glaring defiantly from beneath a burqa, eyes layered with makeup. The black iris reflected a flash of bright light. Was it the camera light, or was it a spark of the insightful intellect of a woman, the flash of brilliance concealed by masculine ignorance, fear, disrespect? Obviously, this woman resented the pressure to suppress her intellect, but why was she still wearing the burqa? Why would she hide her

beauty like that?

Guyles felt drawn to the glaring eyes, felt himself spiral down into the black pupils where the spark flourished, but he also saw shadows manifesting at the core of the light, gulping the light like black holes.

Hypnotized by the image, he felt the gravity of entrapment, the narrow world view of a woman compelled to wear a burqa. No peripheral vision. She could only look straight ahead, march towards her destiny, fulfill her duty, perform her prescribed role.

Perhaps the eyes aren't glaring with defiance, more like resolution. Maybe she's accepted her destiny. Maybe she surrendered to the demands of her culture, woven herself into the tapestry of society – for her own sake and for the honor of her family. He respected that. Even so, there was a lingering sense of tragedy, something smothered beneath all that fabric.

“Oh, perfect,” a man's voice crooned with admiration. “Hold that pose.”

Guyles saw a flash of light, heard the snap of a shutter.

He glanced around the gallery housed inside a tiny Anglican church. He once heard the owner of the gallery had bought the building in Canada: New Brunswick or Nova Scotia, had it shipped back to Oklahoma City and had it rebuilt.

He wondered about the people who'd originally built the church, imagined twenty of them dressed in Victorian era clothing sitting in rough hewn pews listening to the dry drone of their middle aged priest. Sunlight blazed through gothic windows, causing them to squint, but they remained unmoved in their resignation. They sat with their feet firmly on the floor like fixtures of the building itself.

They could have never imagined the journey their sacred monument would

someday make. It had traveled further, perhaps, than they ever did in their own lifetimes. And beyond any grasp of reckoning, they couldn't have possibly foreseen that their church would be transformed into an art gallery where the pieces of art were pictures of women, mostly nude - pornographic to the eyes of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican Canadians.

Guyles laughed, and he wondered about the things that people think are permanent, fixed structures in life; things that would seem, by their very natures beyond transition or change.

“Okay. I like that. Lots of attitude,” the man's voice echoed through the gallery. Another simultaneous flash and snap.

Guyles checked his watch. It was past 4:30, and Dana was supposed to be finished with the photo shoot at 4:00. He huffed impatiently and stuffed his hands deep into his pockets, shuffled his feet, grumbled under his breath.

Then, another photograph grabbed his attention: a woman with porcelain white skin and shackled feet luxuriating on a bed, her arms reaching behind her tangled mass of shimmery brown hair, her back arched in sexual ecstasy. The woman's face tilted back with her chin jutting upward, her mouth open with surprise.

He could almost hear the repetitive gasping, “Oh, oh, oh....”

He saw a crucifix nailed to the wall just above the bed. “Oh... my... God...”

Though he couldn't see her eyes, he imagined the woman staring at the crucifix, which would appear to be hanging upside down from her perspective.

The photograph puzzled him. What's the point? He felt a rush of cynicism, bristled against the image as he stood there, legs flexed, ready to walk away.

He heard words swirling in his mind, a haze of static like a radio slightly out of tune. *What we have here is a femi-nazi-ist look at female sexuality. Feminists are always saying that women are enslaved by male expectations; by the church. But look at her, she seems to enjoy it. She's exactly where she wants to be.* He turned away.

But something made him look, again, and he saw a burst of light near the patch of hair just below her naval. He thought a ray of sunlight had penetrated the gothic windows to censure the woman's genitalia, but when he glanced upward at the skylight he noticed the sky had become gloomy with clouds. The light was part of the picture. He could not discern, though, whether the shaft of light was entering the woman or emanating from within her. There were three sunspot rings near the middle of the shaft, conjoined like the leaves of a clover.

He heard another series of shutter clicks, a groan of frustration. "I'm sorry, Ms. Dana," the male voice apologized. "We are running out of daylight. Perhaps we can resume, tomorrow?"

The sky brightened, sending a flood of illumination through the skylights. The inside of the church became bright again.

"Oh, just a minute, don't leave, yet. Hold that pose. We can get a few more."

"Great," Guyles mumbled, paced the gallery. He glanced at some of the other photographs until another one caught his eye, and he shuffled toward it like a sleep walker, mesmerized by the image.

This photograph depicted an African American woman with large, engorged breasts and a very round, pregnant tummy. She was looking down at the mound of life with soft eyes and a warm, expectant smile. Her breasts were long and conical, bursting

with nurturance, the nipples erect, ready to be suckled. She held her hand below her naval, embracing the life within, cradling the child that was soon to be born.

Guyles felt a twinge of envy, an unexpected, unwanted desire to know how it felt to hold a child like that. It was so intimate. He could not imagine being closer to another life, a life within a life, and he felt his chest ache, that mysterious phantom feeling of an amputee, nerve endings stretching impossibly beyond the body's own physical dimensions. He ached in the place where he would have had breasts were he female.

"Willie," a voice called through the distance, a woman's voice. She knew his name. The voice seemed to call him from Africa, the source of human life. "Wake up."

Then, he felt a nudge on his shoulder, felt a speeding rush back to consciousness, back to his own bodily dimension. The ache in his chest disappeared. He was standing in front of the photograph, both hands cradling his tummy, back arched slightly. When he looked down he was somewhat surprised to see his own feet. When he looked up he saw Dana grinning at him, her eyes wide with amusement.

"Are you okay, Willie?" she asked.

Guyles dropped his arms, straightened his posture, a soldier snapping to the position of attention. He felt his cheeks getting warm.

"Hi there," he said. "You're done?"

Dana laughed, pointing at the photograph. "You like it, huh?"

He was embarrassed. "It's very interesting. Pregnant women are beautiful."

Dana shifted away from him, only a slight distance, but it felt larger. "Well, I'm not ready to get off birth control, if that's what you mean."

Guyles stepped away from the photograph.

A male voice resonated from behind the dividers that separated the studio from the rest of the gallery. "Can you come back tomorrow?"

Suddenly, Guyles resented that voice. It occurred to him that since most of the photographs were of nude women then it was likely that Dana was posing in the nude, also. The photographer had seen Dana naked; not only that, he'd seen Dana posing erotically, sexier than she'd ever been at home. Soon, her photographs would be displayed in the gallery with all the others, viewed by anyone who happened by.

"You posed nude for him?"

Dana stood there wrapped in a red shawl, barefoot. He saw the white flesh of bare breasts through the mesh of colored yarn. His question, answered. She had black hair with spikes in front, not bangs, a prickly pear warning the one who'd fall in love with her to be very careful. She kept her skin pale, the antithesis of the wholesome, healthy, Oklahoma sun-glow of the girl-next-door types.

She disappeared behind the dividers. "Paul, have you met my boyfriend, yet?"

Guyles had imagined the photographer as some suave young dude with a penchant for style, one of those sensitive, sophisticated types. He thought the guy might even be gay. It was a good bet the artist exuded a palpable sexuality that attracted both women and men. He pictured him with curly hair, a Mediterranean Casanova with a meticulously trimmed mustache and goatee. Guyles decided that, if he needed to, he could kick the guy's ass.

But when Dana reappeared she was with a middle-aged guy in an automated wheel chair. He looked fragile, balding. He couldn't have been the photographer. How in

the world could he talk all these women into such provocative poses? His eyes, though, were sharp and piercingly intelligent, like he could see beyond the obvious.

The man extended a frail hand. “Hi. I’m Paul Richard,” he said warmly, the same voice Guyles heard directing the photo shoot.

Guyles gripped the hand, tentatively, expecting him to be too frail for a vigorous shake. Then, he pulled his hand away, too quickly.

Mr. Richard seemed to take it all in stride, probably all too accustomed to the awkwardness and ignorance people have around the disabled. Dana gathered her clothes and retreated to the dressing room, leaving the two men alone.

The artist coughed, cleared his throat. “So, Dana tells me you’re a cop?”

Guyles had assumed the guy hated cops. Don’t most artists? He braced himself for a story about how a cop in Texas or somewhere else really screwed over his cousin, brother, aunt, uncle, best friend, etc. And he started to recite his rehearsed response in his mind, “Well, I wasn’t there, and I only have your second hand side of the story...”

But Mr. Richard wasn’t concerned about unfortunate encounters with the police. “Dana’s a real beauty,” he said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I know.”

“It seems unlikely she’d be with a cop, but yet, here you are. How’d you two meet?”

Guyles and Dana met in a bar several months before while Guyles was still in the police academy. It was a place called Purgatory, one of Oklahoma City’s most popular night clubs which happened to be housed in a church, an old Episcopal church abandoned



by the rich, white people who fled the aging inner city two decades before. The liturgical floor plan gave the club a sense of decadence, a chance to embrace the forbidden fruit, a twist on the communion of the flesh. They were showcasing an Alice Cooper concert. Dana was there, all gothed out in her pale makeup and a lacy black wedding dress.

Alice was singing his song *Is It My Body* when Dana brushed up against Guyles. She bumped him with her ass, and their eyes met as Alice sang, “Have you got the time to find out who I really a-a-am, a-a-am...”

After that they hung out together for the rest of the concert, and then she went home with him. She ended up staying a few days before asking him if she could move in for awhile. His being a cop would send a strong message to her stalker ex-boyfriend that she meant business, she’d explained. Guyles couldn’t say no. After all, she was the best looking woman he’d ever been with.

After he graduated from the police academy, she talked him into getting an apartment in the Paseo so she could be close to the art scene. They settled in together without anything resembling a traditional courtship. They used each other, for the most part, to take care of certain needs. She needed a place to stay and a relative sense of security, and he needed a good looking girl friend. Her sexiness was an extra consideration.

“We met at a concert,” Guyles said.

Mr. Richard nodded, manipulated a joystick attached to the right arm of his wheelchair and rolled back toward his cameras. “Nice to meet you, William.”

After dinner, Guyles was bored, channel surfing through the sixty something channels available at his fingertips, sixty something portholes into the world. He couldn't find anything to watch. The exercise of flipping through channel after channel without focusing on any one thing seemed entertainment enough.

He listened to single words spoken in a range of voices as he rhythmically pressed the channel button. "Great abs...week after...tomorrow on...Oprah..."

Amused, he switched through the channels wondering if he could compose a coherent sentence, but he kept getting the same random garble.

"What are you doing?" Dana's voice sounded from the kitchen. There was a clatter of dishes and the sound of running water from the sink.

Guyles swallowed the last gulp of beer in his bottle and set it down heavily on the end table next to his worn easy chair. He felt the rumble of a belch rising in his stomach.

"Entertainment...call that number on the screen right now...the few, the proud...increase bra size..." He paused. He watched a woman posing hands on hips, breasts bulging through a tight red sweater. "The safe, non surgical way..."

"Willie?" Dana crooned.

He changed channels again and again, watching the images morph from one to the other, battle ships, gladiators, Rap music video, dogs, airplanes, super models with bright red pursed lips...

Suddenly, Dana stood before him, hands on hips, staring down at him. He craned his neck to get a glimpse of the television behind her. She blocked the signal of the remote control. The channel had settled on one of those perpetual news stations. A female voice was talking about the arrest of another celebrity.

“Hey, you’re not a window,” Guyles said. He pressed the channel changer on the remote out of habit, but the view remained the same.

Dana shimmied back and forth, hips gyrating. She mimicked removing a veil with a dish towel she was holding in her right hand.

“That’s right, I’m not a window. You can’t just see through me; you have to explore me.” She bent forward, pressed her breasts together with the insides of her biceps.

Guyles admired Dana’s cleavage, the scoop and shape of her breasts, the lacy edge of her black bra. He reached out, palming her breasts. She retreated, held the dish towel in front of her face revealing only her fluttery eyes. He leaned forward, mesmerized, reaching for her.

“What’s the matter, big boy?” she said, a seductive Mae-Westian drawl.

Now, he was aroused, standing to adjust his pants, but before he stepped toward Dana, she slapped him across the face with the dish towel. The wet edge of the cloth stung his cheek dangerously close to his right eye. He saw a flash of red, felt a surge of anger. His hands, which had been held up and open, grasping for her, became closed fists.

“What the fuck? Why’d you do that?”

For a moment he thought he saw a flash of fear in Dana’s eyes, a slight quiver in her jaw-line, but she steeled herself, sly, seductive, eyes mocking him.

She tossed him the dish cloth.

“Your turn,” she said. “It’s about time you got off your ass and dried the dishes.”

She stepped back toward the television. Without turning her back on him, she found the power button, turned off the television. There was a gulf of silence in the room, and they stood, facing each other, waiting to see what happened next.

Guyles squared his shoulders to face Dana, jammed the towel in his right front pocket. He wiped his fingers on his pants, let his hand hover over the towel and narrowed his eyes. He fingered the welt on his cheek and composed an exaggerated sneer on his lips.

“Go ahead,” he said, imitating Clint Eastwood, “make my day.”

Dana giggled, darted to the side trying to stay out of reach. Guyles withdrew the dish towel, grabbed the ends and spun it several turns to tighten the length. She danced back and forth, tried to fake one way and dart the other, but Guyles was too quick and had her cornered in no time. He twisted the towel again, snapped it forward with a quick jerk. The towel popped in the air with an explosion of moisture.

“Missed me. Missed me,” Dana chanted.

“Now you got to kiss me,” Guyles completed the schoolyard chant.

“Like hell.” She faked left, jumped right.

Guyles blocked her escape, yet again, and wound the towel for another strike. She laughed, but there was a nervous edge to it. He faked a snap. Dana pounced backwards, anticipating the impact. Then he let loose for real, jerked the towel to create a vicious pop, but this time the snap struck Dana on the back of her left thigh. The cloth curled around her leg for an instant, recoiled sharply.

“Oww!” she screamed. “That hurt, asshole!”

“Touché!”

He lunged forward, pushed Dana into the corner of the room and moved close, grabbing one of her breasts. “Tit... for tat,” he said, laughing.

She grabbed his crotch. “I never surrender.”

Guyles felt insecure, suddenly.

Should he kiss her, or should he back off?

Dana was so hard to read. Sometimes, he thought she was flirting with him, trying to seduce him, but when he responded, she’d laugh at him, accuse him of treating her like a sure thing. “Just because we live together, doesn’t mean you get to fuck me anytime you want,” she’d say. But then there were times when he’d stop pursuing her, wait for her to signal an invitation, and then she’d say something like, “I just love a man who scoops me in his arms and makes love to me, defying my protests.” He didn’t know how to proceed, and he wondered if their playful little game had really been some kind of argument about household chores.

She pushed him back, brushed him aside. “Dry the fucking dishes, Jeeves.”

Dana flopped down into the recliner, grabbed the remote control. She turned the television on and began flipping through the channels while Guyles retreated to the kitchen, grumbling under his breath.

“Bring me a beer, hon,” she called from the living room.

## Three

Guyles sat alone on the front row of a small amphitheater, behind the first of three long, slightly curved desktop platforms. The only rookie assigned to second shift Will Rogers Division, he wasn't allowed to sit on the back two rows, at least not until he finished the field training program. Lieutenant Bowman walked into the room, smiled at Guyles and stood behind a podium situated in the middle of the bottom tier, a blackboard mounted on the wall behind him. The lieutenant shuffled a stack of papers, checked his watch. Only two minutes until 1600, yet no other officers had entered the room.

Someone had drawn a schematic on the blackboard: the outline of a house, the property line, a list of officers' names detailing the order and responsibilities of an entry team. Apparently, IMPACT had been planning a search warrant the night before.

Guyles hated being a rookie, wished he could speed up time, maybe a year or two, so he'd be eligible to join the IMPACT team. He wanted to work undercover, find evidence of drug activity, fencing operations, prostitution, pandering - the hardcore stuff portrayed in movies, the fun stuff, the stuff of interesting war stories. He envied the IMPACT guys, how they could grow their hair, wear beards and street clothing, resembling the roughened characters they sought to arrest.

Guyles wanted to experience the adrenalin rush of a drug raid, imagined himself plunging through the front door of a crack house dressed in black, wearing body armor, weapon drawn, and shouting, "Police! Get down!"

He didn't want to be an ordinary street cop. No, he wanted to cultivate the poker face needed to set up drug stings, develop the nerves needed to maintain his cool when the world was going to hell in a hand-basket. He wanted to be among the brotherhood of men who live on the edge and aren't afraid to push it. These guys had to be highly trained, capable, and close, close enough to trust each other with their lives.

Laughter filtered into the briefing room through doors at the top of the amphitheater, the clomp of boots on tile. The officers were gathering for lineup.

"How's your rook?" Guyles heard a female voice inquire.

"You know..." Hicks answered. His words trailed off to a whisper, then a ripple of laughter.

But, right now, he was just a rookie, confined to the front row neither trusted nor respected, an unknown quantity, even to himself.

The lieutenant cleared his throat. He had a clean, pressed uniform, shiny brass, brand new shoes, the patent leather kind issued to recruits. The kind of shoes street officers hardly ever wore except at promotion ceremonies or funerals.

At exactly 1600 the officers of second shift trooped into the briefing room, found their seats and sat down. They weren't an orderly bunch, more like stragglers, loud and restless. Bowman stood behind the podium, both hands grasping each side. He stared down at his stack of paperwork, lips moving slightly like he was counting.

Finally, when the officers settled into place, Bowman checked his watch and frowned. He called roll, naming each officer instead of glancing at the lineup sheet and making a mental tally.

"Hey, lieutenant, are you going to be at the station all night?" Hicks said.

Bowman stopped fidgeting, glared at Hicks.

Hicks smiled. “The shoes, LT. Not planning on running anyone down...”

Bowman narrowed his eyes. “Who’s in Adam 9?”

Nobody answered.

Hicks pointed at Guyles. “You’ve got to know your district number by now, right?”

Guyles heard the click of a ball-point pen, the scratch of writing on a notepad. Ding number one for the night.

“We don’t have an Adam 10 car, tonight,” Bowman told Guyles. “So I need you to check the carwash at NW 39<sup>th</sup> and Barnes. Calling party is complaining about prostitutes and dope dealers. See if you can get a good arrest, and make sure you mark it down on your activity card.”

Guyles wrote the details of the assignment in his notebook.

Hicks grumbled something about fags and weirdoes. “We ought to just leave ‘em be, wall the place off. Hell, they don’t like the police anyway.”

“Yeah, like in *Escape from New York*.”

“And when we have to go in there, we’ll send in Snake Plisskin, here.”

Guyles felt a nudge from someone in the second row. It was Chapman, an officer out of the last academy class, practically a rookie himself. He smiled at Guyles, winked good naturedly. He was young but already balding and wore wire-frame glasses with small oval lenses. He didn’t look much like a cop, more like a music teacher, maybe a science professor.

“Hey Larry, can we call your rook Snake?”



Guyles didn't mind the attention. It didn't feel malicious, just fun. He hoped it was a sign of acceptance.

The lieutenant shuffled his papers, lifted them to a vertical position and tapped the bottom edge on the podium causing a loud, hollow knock. "I'm not finished," he said.

The officers got quiet, not a respectful silence, an impatient one.

"We have a letter of commendation," he announced. "Recruit Guyles, please stand up."

Guyles stood up, walked around the long desk platform and marched toward Lieutenant Bowman. He stopped a few feet from his supervisor, assumed the position of attention.

Some of the officers scoffed the announcement, some of them clapped. Chapman cheered. A couple of the veterans stayed silent, tightlipped. They actually looked pissed, especially Hicks.

Lieutenant Bowman read the letter with official resonance. "The Chief of Police wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Recruit William J. Guyles in the act of saving a human life. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, Recruit Guyles responded to..."

Guyles winced. The lieutenant had mispronounced his name, massacred it. *Guy-less*. Oh, God. Memories of grade school, kids taunting him on the playground, memories of boot camp, his drill sergeant calling him Guy-less until graduation day. He'd fought through his school years, had earned his real name in the military, and now, here it was again, time to prove himself. He gazed beyond the assembled officers in the lineup room, embarrassed to make eye-contact, but Hicks's glare pulled him in like a black hole. There'd be hell to pay. His stomach churned.

Though Guyles had always craved affirmations like this, it all felt wrong. It wasn't the letter itself but how the other officers received it. Was it apathy? Jealousy? Was he being awarded for doing something any one of them would have done in a similar situation?

But then he remembered Hicks yelling at him to abandon the kid, to stop acting like a paramedic. Damn it, he deserved this acknowledgement.

“Your actions reflect great pride on the City of Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma City Police Department, and law enforcement officers everywhere.”

Lieutenant Bowman handed Guyles the letter of commendation. He grasped it with his left hand, saluted with his right. He couldn't help it, he grinned, felt himself glowing with self righteous pride, a sense of vindication.

A snicker snaked its way through the crowd. “God, what a rookie.”

Guyles realized the salute might have been over the top; police officers don't often use military customs and courtesies once they complete the academy. He stood resolute, though, waiting for the lieutenant to respond. Bowman smiled, stood taller and returned the salute.

“Good job,” Bowman said. “Good job, Recruit Guy-less.”

After lineup Hicks stayed inside the station while Guyles got the patrol car ready. He waited in the fuel line, filled the gas tank, and checked the back seat. Hicks had hidden a knife in a crevice between the vinyl backrest and the doorframe once. Guyles had missed it, and, for punishment, he had to handcuff himself to the removable seat cushion and drag it around with him half the night. Usually, Hicks would be walking out

of the station by the time Guyles loaded his equipment: report forms, ticket books, a night stick, and an extra flashlight (one of those big wieldy ones some of the older officers liked to refer to as backup weapons), but tonight, he was late.

Guyles pulled the car up in front of the officers' entrance, listened to the radio as dispatch doled out calls: traffic accidents, burglary reports, a vandalism report and a domestic. He felt restless, turned on the FM radio and tuned it to one of Oklahoma City's Classic Rock stations, KRXXO, but there wasn't any music, just commercial after commercial, and when the music finally started, it was another Led Zeppelin song, Cashmere. Not that he didn't like Led Zeppelin, but they always played the same three or four numbers like they were all Led Zeppelin ever recorded. He switched the station, Journey. He hated Journey, too much bubble gum. He liked the real stuff, the gritty stuff, but he couldn't find anything satisfying until he caught the last stanza of Jumping Jack Flash on KOMA. He grooved to the tune for a moment before the station launched into another commercial break. Rush hour, shit.

It was inching past 1630, and day shift had begun returning to the station. The officers sat in their cars waiting for their lieutenant to call 10-19. Guyles tried to log into the mobile data computer, wanting to see how many calls were holding and for how long. Day shift Will Rogers had more than its share of slugs, and, typically, there'd be a half-dozen calls still holding from before three o'clock, a full two hours before the shift ended. The computer didn't accept his log-in, bleeped a series of three tones signaling non-acknowledgement. He tried again, no luck.

The day shift officers gathered around a picnic table near the entrance of the station, some smoking, some spitting tobacco, all of them bitching about one thing or

another. They seemed like an amiable bunch, mostly older officers, a young face or two, but you had to have at least five years on the street before you could get to Days. The female officers had frazzled hair, faded makeup and dark circles under their eyes. Some of the guys had sweaty brows, mud stains on their boots. They all looked tired. Maybe they worked harder than they were given credit for. Finally, Lincoln 411 called 10-19. They broke away from their little social circle and filed through the entrance, two big, black doors on the east side of the building.

At 1700 several officers darted out of the station, trotted to their take-home patrol cars and personal vehicles and sped out of the parking lot. Two-shift was now officially in charge. They had the streets all to their own until 2130 when Graveyards had lineup. The night shifts overlapped a few hours, usually the craziest hours of the night when people drank their fill in Oklahoma City's numerous bars, when the mostly nocturnal criminal element went on the prowl, and when prime time television ended and people couldn't ignore each other anymore, couldn't go to sleep without airing their grievances, arguing and fighting until someone called 911.

Guyles walked into the station, concerned about Hicks. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he quit, so mad at the lieutenant he had to resign. The thought made him buoyant. A new partner would be nice. How could anybody be worse than Larry Hicks?

He heard shouting. It was Hicks, "That's bullshit, lieutenant. He didn't do anything heroic. He failed to follow orders."

The shouts echoed down the hall, reverberated through a closed door. Guyles checked the conference room, the commander's office. It was after five, nobody else around. The major had already gone home, so had the secretary and the dayshift captain.

“I put him in for an award, and that’s final. You saw what he did. I want your witness statement, not your approval.”

“He placed himself in harm’s way, unnecessarily. He could’ve gotten exposed to the virus, you know, AIDS.”

“Did he glove up?”

“Yes, but...”

“So, then he did take precautions.”

There was a loud bang, probably a fist on a desktop.

“Sergeant Hicks, you’re out of line.”

“But, LT, he’s not qualified to be a paramedic. Think of the liability.”

Guyles stood outside the door of the lieutenant’s office wondering if he should enter, what would happen if he intervened. No matter what, he knew Hicks was going to be more pissed than ever, take it out on him all night. His stomach felt queasy, and he thought about taking some sick leave.

“What’s that award on your chest for?”

Hicks stopped arguing for a moment, a grunt indicating confusion. “It’s a life-saving bar, LT. What’re you getting at?”

“I remember when that happened. You got it for kicking the door of a burning house, for rescuing a child trapped inside.”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re no fireman, Sergeant Hicks.”

Guyles almost laughed, then retreated back through the station, through the back doors and took a seat behind the wheel of Hicks's patrol car. He tuned the radio to a country music station, listened to a woman singing about some incredible kiss.

Dispatch called. "2 Adam 95? Are you 10-8?"

Guyles reached for the mic, hesitated. He watched the station doors, waited for Hicks to burst through at any moment.

"2 Adam 95?"

Guyles grabbed the mic. "We'll be 10-6 for awhile."

Dispatch clicked the radio. "Sure," she said, unable or unwilling to hide her disdain.

After another ten minutes or so, Hicks finally left the station, walked with purpose toward the patrol car, opened the door and sat down. He looked at Guyles. "I hate this job," he said. "And I hate you."

Guyles stomach churned. It was going to be a long night.

"Are we ready to go?"

Guyles shook his head. He wanted to say, not yet, but the words got trapped in his throat. He sighed, resolved that no matter what he did or didn't do, he'd be getting an ass chewing, several of them, before the night was over.

Hicks swiveled the mobile data computer toward him. "You didn't log in."

"It's not..."

Hicks typed on the keyboard, several deliberate, forceful key-strokes. The computer vibrated. After a moment, a triple beep resounded through the car.

“Log-on rejected? Fucking piece of shit.”

Hicks’s mouth twisted. He repeated the transmission. Guyles held his breath.

Another triple beep.

Hicks punched the monitor. It bent back beyond its normal range. Some plastic cracked near the base. “Son of a fuckin’ bitch!”

“I think CAD might be down.”

Hicks grunted. “Just fucking drive, then. Seven-Eleven. Coffee.”

Guyles drove to the gated entrance of the police parking lot, waited for the security system to activate, some kind of weight sensor. The gate didn’t budge, not right away.

Hicks opened his door, was about to get out of the patrol car when the warning beep sounded, the mechanism engaged, and the pulling chain tightened. They waited as the gate slowly opened.

“I hate technology.”

Guyles took a left, headed toward Twenty-Seventh Street, stopped at the stop sign. Hicks started typing again, hissing through clenched teeth. Guyles winced. But the triple beep didn’t sound. He thought the computer might actually be working, hoped it would be. At least it would be one less thing for Hicks to be pissed about.

As they approached the light at Twenty-Third, near the I-44 on-ramp, the non-acknowledgement tones sounded, yet again. Hicks grabbed a nightstick he left mounted behind the passenger seat headrest. The black stick swung in a furious arc, just missing Guyles’ right temple. Hicks stopped the stick halfway through its trajectory, paused menacingly. It seemed he expected the machine to comprehend the threat and comply.

Hicks typed with one hand. "One more time," he said.

He hit the transmission button.

The machine's insides whirred and clicked, then an audacious, defiant triple beep.

Hicks slammed the nightstick into the keyboard, face red like a demon's.

"Goddamn piece of shit! Fucking ten thousand dollar clock..."

He smashed the keyboard three, four times. Letter and number keys exploded all over the place, one of them hitting Guyles' face.

Hicks jammed the nightstick back into its storage place, a satisfied smile on his face. He grabbed the radio mic. "2 Adam 95, headquarters, our MDC is 10-7 for the remainder."

Dispatch acknowledged the transmission. "Copy call."

Hicks punched the dashboard, clicked the mic but said nothing. Dispatch sent them a traffic accident, a non-injury, downtown near the Union Bus Station at Sheridan and Walker. Guyles started to drive south toward the I-44 on-ramp, the quickest route to the call, but Hicks pointed to the right.

"I said Seven-Eleven. Coffee. We ain't doing a goddamn thing until I have my cup of coffee."

Guyles turned right, drove two blocks to the Seven-Eleven at NW 23<sup>rd</sup> and Portland. He pulled into the parking lot. It was busy. He tried to turn the car around so he could take up a tactical position, situate the vehicle so he could leave the parking lot quickly if he had to, but Hicks grunted, pointed his finger at an open spot right in front of the store, a poor tactical choice if they got bum-rushed by an escaping robber.

Hicks got out of the car. Guyles followed suit.



“Fix it,” Hicks said. “Put all the keys back on the computer.”

Guyles searched the entire car for the missing type-keys. He searched under both front seats, behind the cage, the floor, the back seat, though he couldn't imagine how any of the keys could have made it all the way back there. He checked under floor mats, found a key behind a lip of plastic near the brake pedal, another one trapped in a nook near the hood release. It was meticulous work, demeaning. There he was, ass sticking out of the car, on his knees. Someone could come up behind him, yank on his weapon. Paranoia lengthened the unpleasant task, forced him to glance back every few seconds or so. A group of young women asked if he was okay, walked away laughing. He thought about telling the lieutenant but reconsidered. He didn't want to get a reputation for being a snitch. Finally, he managed to locate all the missing keys, or so he thought. At least he had a big handful of them.

He tried to remember the key positions. Is it Q,W,E,R,T or Q,W,R,E,T? He placed his hands on the keyboard, tried to remember the typing class he took in high school, the one he almost flunked. Home position. He struck the empty spaces with the middle finger of his left hand. Okay... Q,W,E,R,T. Now, the right hand... Y, I,U...?

Guyles looked up from the computer, saw Hicks inside the store smiling at the checkout clerk, a girl with short, dark hair. Or was it a guy, slightly built with fine features, a blushy face? Hicks was laughing, friendly and attentive instead of mean and detached. Guyles wondered if he'd ever get a chance to know that side of Hicks. Then, he reconsidered, realized he didn't need to see Hicks in a different light. The man was a bastard, hands down.

Guyles plodded his way through the keyboard, had found homes for all the keys he'd managed to find, but two keys were still missing: the F and the M. Shit. He searched the car, again, shined his flashlight into every nook and cranny he could find. Nothing doing. How could things just disappear like that?

He lay on his back, staring up through the bottom of the dashboard, the brake pedal smashed against his mouth. He smelled the rubber, could almost taste it. There was dried mud on the pedal, some of it flaking on his skin, infiltrating his nose as he breathed. He sneezed. The involuntary reflex created a spasmodic jerk, scraped skin against metal, a scratch. He felt blood pooling inside the abrasion.

“Fuck this shit,” Guyles grumbled. He rolled up from beneath the steering wheel, hoisted himself to a seated position on the asphalt outside the car. “Fucking asshole.”

He felt a nudge on his right boot, looked up to see Hicks standing there, grinning down on him through the window of the car door. Guyles flinched. Now he'd really done it - he'd spoken his true feelings. He stared up at Hicks, waited for another onslaught of anger.

Hicks laughed, extended a hand toward Guyles, a hand grasping a bottle of Coca-Cola. He grunted, somewhat awkward, sheepish. “You like Coke, right?”

Guyles didn't know what to say. He didn't drink regular Coke, preferred Diet Coke. He thought about refusing, wanting to lash out at Hicks, make him feel a sliver inadequate, revenge for all the bullshit he'd had to endure the last month or so. But, he'd never known Hicks to be magnanimous. He accepted the drink, twisted the plastic top and took a swallow. It tasted good, sweet, better than he'd remembered.

“I couldn't find all the keys,” Guyles admitted.

Hicks shrugged. "Fuck it. I'll take it to the radio shop tomorrow." He took a draw on his own bottle of soda, burped.

Guyles was glad to see Hicks in a better mood, even though he found the change somewhat disconcerting. Was he bipolar or something? A mental patient? Even so, he couldn't help feeling optimistic. Maybe he was going to make it through the field training program after all.

He felt an itch on his cheek, wiped it with the heel of his right hand. The smear of blood surprised him.

Four

She-male

Guyles typed the word into his Internet browser. He waited as the search results appeared on his computer screen. His apartment was quiet at four in the morning; he could hear the hum of his refrigerator and Dana's shallow breathing. She lay alone on the bed, covers tossed aside, naked, preferring to sleep in the nude.

The luminescent light of the computer screen cast a ghostly, green glow on the walls of his bedroom, shadows looming large, a crouching darkness waiting to overwhelm the feeble light. Guyles looked over his shoulder, wary of someone gazing down at the computer screen. He saw a dark form standing in the doorway, and his heart raced for several beats until he realized the dim light had played a trick on his eyes. He stifled a nervous laugh when he realized the form was actually a dark blue bathrobe Dana had hung on a nail protruding from the top of the door.

When the computer displayed the first page of search results, Guyles scrolled down the list, amazed that *she-male* had generated 4,540,000 hits. He wondered why there were so many hits on the word, a word that evoked a sense of otherworldliness where the accepted notions of sex and gender could not be taken for granted. He moved the mouse to the **next** button and scrolled through page two. The list referenced pornography sites: tranny sites, hot transsexuals, bizarre sex acts, Thai boy/girls, Brazilian she-males, and the abrasive and blunt *chicks with dicks*...

Guyles looked over his shoulder again, but Dana was still soundly asleep. He directed the mouse arrow to a listed she-male photo gallery, and his finger hovered over the left-click button. He had heard of police sting operations on some pornography sites, especially the ones that catered to people interested in seeing young child-like models or

actual child pornography, and he remembered the detective from the Oklahoma City Police Department's sex crimes unit who spoke to his police academy class.

The detective was an older, veteran officer with graying hair and dark circles under his eyes. He was slightly chubby with a blanched, puffy face; some of his blood vessels were visible beneath the thin white skin, and his nose was large, a drinker's nose. He spoke with conviction as he displayed some of the photos seized during search warrants delivered to the homes of suspected and convicted sexual predators. The faces were darkened of course, but the nudity and the positions of the bodies made it obvious that the subjects were performing sex acts. Guyles remembered feeling appalled, sickened at the displays of perversity. The whole class was uncomfortably silent as the detective ranted like a crusader about the progressive development of sexual offenders, of how a sexual predator becomes desensitized to certain stimuli and must progress to levels of higher intensity to achieve satisfaction, the movement from pornography to voyeurism, from voyeurism to sexual assault, from sexual assault to rape, from rape to murder...

Guyles felt a guilty stab of paranoia, but he continued to scroll down the search results. Time after time they made reference to bizarre sex acts and pornographic displays, galleries of chicks with dicks, and *well-hung* she-males... He felt sick, closed the search results window and logged off the Internet. When the desktop display of his computer popped up he hit the log-off button and pushed himself away from the computer desk.

The revulsion he felt compelled him to vomit three words, "That's not me."

The words echoed off the walls, and Guyles felt their mocking accusation. Right before the computer shut down a series of notes rang uncomfortably from the desk-top

speakers, then the screen blinked off and Guyles sat there feeling remote, detached. The sudden lack of light made his eyes perceive a much deeper darkness than actually existed, a living and breathing gloom that amplified the pounding of his own heart. He sat still, tried not to breath until the cloudy blackness dissipated, and when his eyes finally adjusted to the ambient light inside the room he stood up and looked around grateful that he was still living in the real world and not trapped in a dark corner of hell.

Guyles knew he wasn't going to be able to sleep for the rest of the night. He squinted at the glow of a digital alarm clock near the bedside: 4:45. As quietly as he could, he rummaged through the darkness and located his running shoes and sweat pants. Dana never stirred. He went into the living room and hurriedly changed clothes, slipped the running shoes on his feet. As he bent forward to tie the shoes he still felt the throbbing of his heart, the pounding at his temples. He opened the door to his apartment and stood on the balcony outside, gazed at the waning moon hiding behind misty clouds. He felt the stillness of the early morning, and he jogged down a flight of stairs to the court yard below. He heard the trickling of a man-made garden waterfall while he stretched out beneath a trellis full of vines and flowers. The fresh air and stretching calmed his heart, and he began breathing normally, though he felt the slight dread of something lurking in the shadows somewhere, something indiscernible as of yet, but something that was definitely a threat.

Guyles ran his normal route through the streets of the Paseo neighborhood just north of downtown. The arts district was one of the city's most vibrant places, but at nearly 5 AM it was vacant, even desolate, like a ghost town. He admired the Spanish

architecture and the pastel colors on the rows of buildings on both sides of the curving Paseo Drive as he ran north to 30<sup>th</sup> street. He then ran east toward Walker intending to go to Harvey Parkway where he would run north around the peaceful and beautiful Edgemere Park. The homes that bordered Edgemere Park were grand old houses, some of them mansions, all of them from a bygone era, an idyllic time in Oklahoma City's past before the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl days. He admired the towering oak, maple and elm trees that populated the park's interior. They had once been small, freshly planted trees resembling nothing of the grandeur they would eventually achieve. He thought it was slightly tragic that, as the park matured to its present beauty the homes around it had become increasingly neglected, some of them dilapidated. In the past decade people had begun revitalizing the neighborhood, but it still had a long way to go before it achieved its former status.

After Guyles had run a mile he felt the endorphin rush familiar to dedicated runners, and his breathing leveled off, not so laborious. He began to glide through the darkness, his mind empty of thoughts. He could have been flying, but the pounding of his feet on pavement reminded him of his corporeal existence. Each impact shuddered through his calves and knees, and he felt the stretch of hamstrings, the twist of hips. He felt the shaking in his stomach, the tightness in his chest as he breathed in rhythm with his running, the strain in his throat as he gulped air, the dryness forming around his lips, the burn in his nose, the stretch of his forehead as his eyes scanned the path in front of him, and the wind blowing through his hair. He hummed along like a revved engine on cruise control, steady, steadfast, a finely tuned machine only months away from active military service, only weeks away from the physically demanding police academy.

Sometimes when Guyles ran he felt himself becoming empty, like a hollow bone permitting the universe to flow through him. He felt the union of spirit and flesh when he clicked into automatic, and he understood that the body and spirit are not separate entities but aspects of a whole. In those moments he couldn't discern where he ended and where his environs began. He glided through the early morning air as the twilight slowly illuminated the sky. He wished he could run indefinitely, a marathon of marathons.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Substance always wants to invade emptiness, and as the sky became subtly luminescent something began to dawn on Guyles, and he felt suddenly violated, invaded by an obscure image...Jody...the knee length boots... the crowded bosom....

The easy glide of a few moments before became the futile slow motion movement of nightmares, the urgent, desperate, running from something terrifying. He shook his head, flinging the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead. The dam broken, sweat began to invade his eyes, the salient solution stung, and he grunted with frustration. As his path became more visible he saw the road of his life stretching before him. It was all uphill. A twinge of despair, but he kept running, leaned into the hill, feeling the burn in his legs, the ache in his chest, his lungs twisting like sponges squeezed of their moisture. The pain caused him to gasp, and the shallow convulsions prompted an urge to regurgitate. He kept running at this insane pace, pushing his body beyond the limit, becoming dizzy with lack of oxygen. He lost his balance, his body hurling forward with the uncoordinated flailing of a rag doll.

He hurdled a street curb, stumbled into a field of wet grass at the edge of the park. He slipped on the dew covered grass, overextended his stride, and he felt his right



hamstring seize in painful protest. He grabbed his right knee and fell, rolling onto his back. He slid a few feet, and even through the pain of his cramp, he felt the shock of cold water, a refreshing surprise to his over-exerted body. He lay on the ground holding his right knee to his chest, trying to extend his right leg, working through the cramp. When he finally relaxed, he just lay there for awhile breathing deep, resting his eyes, his mind empty once again. He shivered. The cold moist air permeated his skin raising goose flesh.

He stood up and shook the stiffness from his legs, concerned that he might have injured himself. His right hamstring was still sore, and he knew it would ache for a couple days at least. He was still about a half mile from home, and he hoped he could manage a brisk jog so he wouldn't get too cold.

A streetlight shined down upon him, casting a shadow against a small outbuilding near a modest playground with the usual assortment of apparatus: a sliding board, a swing set, and a merry-go-round, all of them slightly over used and needing paint jobs. He walked toward the shadow, and it got smaller as he approached, finally becoming a conventional size when he was about 10 feet from the cinder block wall on the west side of the building.

The right hamstring seized again, and Guyles groaned with pain and frustration. "Shake it off," he coached himself. "Just shake it off." He was worried that an injury would delay his progress in the Field Training Program. He began to bounce up and down to get his muscles moving again. The shadow moved with him, and he started to throw jabs with his left hand, followed the jabs with a right cross. He faded, ducked and exploded upward with a right upper cut.

He sparred with the shadow, slowly increasing the intensity. He knew that no matter how skilled he was as a boxer, he could never out-spar his shadow, that it would always keep pace because, after all, he was really just sparring with himself, but he imagined being able to outwit the shadow, to slip in a move here and there to get it off balance. He was about to set the shadow up with a powerful right hook when a new light suddenly brightened the area around him, and, as it moved closer and closer, the shadow got larger and larger until it was almost taller than the wall. Guyles dropped his arms, helpless and frustrated. The shadow had tricked him.

The light wavered but did not diminish, and then Guyles heard a grunt of annoyance and a softly muttered curse.

“Shit,” the voice whined. It was a deep masculine voice. It sounded rough, perhaps strained from too much coffee and cigarettes. “You’re pretty big.”

Guyles turned around to find the light shining directly in his eyes. It was painful. He turned his head to avoid the glare, and he moaned with frustration on the edge of anger. Who was this asshole?

The deep voice groaned with amusement on the edge of a laugh. “You’re lucky it’s me.”

Guyles followed the beam of light with his eyes to its source. It was a flashlight, one of those big, long, black flashlights police officers carry on duty. He glanced beyond the flashlight and saw a black and white patrol car in the street at the edge of the park.

“I was just...getting some exercise,” Guyles explained, trying to sound amiable.

The police officer laughed gruffly, a cynical edge to his voice. “Whatever you say.”

He studied Guyles, surveying him from head to toe, obviously scanning him for any possible evidence of a weapon. “You got some ID?”

Guyles shook his head and raised his arms palms out to show the officer that he was unarmed and empty-handed. “I was running. I didn’t bring my wallet,” he explained. “I was just catching my breath.” Sweat dripped down the side of his face, and he shivered slightly in the cool air of an early autumn morning. He noticed his t-shirt was soaked, sticking to his chest.

The police officer grunted. He lowered the flashlight, and Guyles noticed the brightening sky. The world had begun to glow in the twilight, the darkness dissipating. The officer’s right hand came down off the butt of his weapon, and his demeanor seemed more relaxed though professionally distant.

“Why are you running in this neighborhood at this hour?” the officer asked.

Guyles would have asked someone else the same question had he encountered this situation while on duty, and he answered sheepishly. “I couldn’t sleep.”

The officer moved back, close to his patrol car. He opened the driver’s door and tossed his big flashlight on the seat. He stood behind the door and leaned against it, arms draped over the top. “Do I know you from somewhere? You seem familiar to me.”

Guyles almost answered that he was also an Oklahoma City police officer, but he stopped himself, worried about Hicks, wondering what he would say when he found out Guyles had been found shadow boxing in a closed park.

“You’re Hicks’ pup,” the officer asserted. He laughed. “The terminator. Ooh I feel sorry for you.”

Guyles had heard about Hicks' reputation as an FTO who often terminated rookies, ending their careers before they really began.

"He's a hard-ass, all right. But don't worry," he said consolingly. "You're doing all right. I heard about what you did to save that guy on 16<sup>th</sup> street the other day. You did good."

Guyles was relieved to hear admiration in the voice of the veteran officer. He examined the man. He had a large, handsome face and dark, perfectly combed hair. He also had a trim mustache, a thick neck. He had large shoulders, thick biceps, and a belly protruding over his utility belt. The officer had the look of a salty veteran, the no bullshit eyes, the set jaw, but he was not beyond the ability to appear friendly, even jovial.

"Thanks," Guyles said, feeling grateful but awkward, not sure how to receive a compliment from a veteran. It was the kind of affirmation he needed. He began swimming up through his self-doubt, rising to the surface. He took a deep breath, exhaled a long, loud sigh, the tension in his chest suddenly gone.

"You okay?" the officer's voice broke Guyles' jubilant spell.

Guyles yawned, finally feeling weary enough to sleep. "Yes sir, I'm just tired."

The officer stepped away from the door of his patrol car and walked toward Guyles, right hand extended, offering a handshake. He had a bemused smile on his face, "Does your FTO make you call him sir?"

Guyles thought it was normal for field training officers to make their recruits call them sir or ma'am, to keep things professional. "Sergeant Hicks isn't so strict on the sir, I guess." He offered his hand, grasped the hand of the friendly officer, who returned the

grip firmly, like a vice, but the grip wasn't so much a test as it was rough with affection. Guyles imagined the man with a small wife who he bear-hugged all the time.

“The name's Ron,” the officer introduced himself. “Ron Duncan. I've been on the force seventeen years.”

“Willie, uh, Bill Guyles.”

Guyles imagined what it would be like if Duncan hugged him like he hugged his wife, winced at the thought. Feeling suddenly exposed, he jerked away from the handshake.

The look on Duncan's face lost some of its warmth. The smile faded, and his eyes blinked question marks. He shook his head, slightly.

Guyles examined the man's face like he was trying to focus on a blemish that had appeared on his own face while looking in a steamy mirror, except Duncan's face was the mirror. Guyles held his breath until Duncan's face returned to its jovial sense of welcome.

He sighed, almost a swoon which turned into a yawn, a yawn so hard his eyes welled with tears.

“You need to get some rest,” Duncan scolded, and he roughly patted Guyles on his left shoulder.

Guyles felt warm, grateful for the friendly contact. Without thinking, he reached out and patted Duncan's belly. “And you need to do some running.”

Duncan kept smiling, but his eyes betrayed discomfort. He stepped back, kind of quick.

Guyles started mentally scolding himself again, very aware that he'd been presumptuous, too familiar.

“When I get through the FTO program, how about running together?” He didn't know what else to say, but he knew he needed to close the gap widening between them, assure Duncan he wasn't a weirdo. “I like to box, was a Golden Gloves boxer when I was younger.”

“A boxer?” Duncan nodded, his mustache twisted with consideration. He patted his gut. “I need to get my butt out there again.” He laughed, apparently with self amusement. “Been working nights too long...too much coffee...too many pancakes...too many cigarettes.”

Guyles smiled, relieved Duncan hadn't been offended at his awkward attempt at being friendly.

“You know, kid,” Duncan assumed a fatherly tone. “This job can kill you in more ways than you think.” He rubbed his belly again, nodded thoughtfully. “We always talk about getting shot or getting killed in pursuits. We constantly stress officer safety, but we hardly ever talk about good living, sleeping right, eating right...living right. Cops aren't good at living right. We're so damn uptight all the time, looking over our shoulders. We forget how to trust anybody. Our marriages fail. We become distant from our friends outside the job. We get post traumatic stress disorder. We get divorced. We get cynical. We have heart attacks. We become statistics, marks on someone's chart.”

Guyles began to imagine how the profession of law enforcement could affect him over the long haul, after a dozen years of carrying a gun and wearing a badge, trying to be

a hero. He wondered if he could be as friendly as Duncan when he was close to his twenty. He nodded, not wanting to interrupt.

Duncan paused, looked at Guyles searchingly. “You’re a good guy,” he said. “Don’t become a statistic. Take care of yourself.” He sat down in the patrol car and pulled the door closed. He shifted the vehicle into gear, waved at Guyles and drove away, forgetting to turn off the amber flashers on the light deck mounted on the top of the car.

Guyles walked the few blocks back to his apartment, limping at first as he worked through the cramp, grateful he hadn’t actually injured himself. By the time he got back to the apartment his teeth were chattering. He’d become cold, freezing inside his soaked sweats and t-shirt.

The sky was bright, now, a deep autumn blue streaked with lazy red clouds. When he heard the waterfall in the courtyard garden, he knew he was home. The droning trickle was a comfort, and he felt very tired suddenly. He wanted to plunge into bed and curl up to Dana’s warm body, spooning himself to her, falling asleep in a deep embrace.

When he entered the apartment Dana was already awake. Even in the twilight Guyles could tell she was staring at the ceiling restlessly, thoughtful, like she was trying to think of something to say. He removed his shoes and socks first then the wet t-shirt and running shorts, let them fall on the floor in a wet thump. He stood in front of Dana with a growing erection, a reaction to the temperature change more than arousal.

Dana giggled sarcastically. “You wish,” she said. “I have to get going. Big day you know.”

Guyles wasn't sure why this was supposed to be a big day. Dana had been looking for a job the past few weeks so she could help with the rent, her share of the household expenses. Maybe she had a big job interview or something. He suddenly felt lonely, afraid Dana would leave him if she got her own job.

"I just want to cuddle," he said. "Just a few minutes?"

Dana had a cruel smile, a hard, spiteful grin. "Sorry," she said. She sat up and got out of bed.

She grabbed a t-shirt draped over the desk chair. Guyles watched her breasts, the way they swung, the weight. When she plunged the t-shirt over her head he admired the nipples protruding through the cotton fabric, the swell beneath, the contour of a female body.

"What?" Dana whined.

"Please?" his voice echoed off the ceiling. "Dana?"

Her lips twisted with annoyance. "Willie, get some sleep."

Guyles lay down on the bed, stared at the ceiling, and sighed heavily. "Can we cuddle?"

She groaned. "You are such a woman."

He wondered why he tolerated this female creature, this self-absorbed, manipulative girl who played with his emotions like a black widow spider plucking the strands in her web. She could pluck him really well, he thought, and this angered him. He felt violence pulsating through his veins, but he suppressed the unwanted emotional upheaval.

"Fuck you!"



Dana quivered a chuckle. “Yea, you wish.”

Guyles was wide awake, now. Newly energized, he couldn't rest. He left the bed and stumbled a few steps into the twilight outside the bedroom. He began shuffling toward the television when his right heel stepped on a small blunt object. His weight made the object drill into his flesh.

“Ah, fuck!”

He collapsed into the easy chair which slid on the tiled floor and collided into the end table. The train wreck of commotion slammed against the wall, and the lamp wobbled back and forth. A quick hand kept it from crashing to the floor. He fumbled for the neck of the lamp, pressed the tiny switch to illuminate the room. Then, he twisted his leg and bent forward to inspect the bottom of his heel.

“What the hell is going on?” Dana yelled. She stumbled into the living room blinking, unaccustomed to the light.

Guyles found a rounded, black plastic object protruding from the skin at the bottom of his foot like a tiny monolith on the surface of an alien planet. He carefully grabbed it with his thumb and index finger, gingerly pulled it from the crater of skin surrounding it. Blood oozed from the wound and dripped onto the blue fabric of the easy chair, a deep crimson purple.

“What is that?” Dana's voice echoed his thoughts.

He studied the object for a moment. It was a key, a typing key, a keyboard key. Inscribed on the concave surface of the key was the letter “F.”

*When Willie got home from school he saw a man's legs sticking out from beneath the family car. He recognized the scuffed, brown, steel-toed boots his dad wore to work.*

*“Goddamn son-of-a-bitch!” a voice growled. Though contained in a cage of metal, slightly muffled, it was still scary. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”*

*Willie knew his dad was really mad when he said the f-word, and then he heard the tinny clatter of a wrench striking concrete as Dad scooted out from under the car. When he sat up Willie saw his dad’s forehead covered with a thick liquid, oozing down his face, dripping on his shirt. His heart jumped. Dad’s hurt! His mind raced, frozen in place, not sure what to do or say.*

*Dad wiped the right side of his face with his shirt sleeve, and he sputtered, trying to spit the liquid from his mouth. That’s when Willie noticed the thick oozy liquid wasn’t red but black. Oil! He finally exhaled.*

*But then Willie clenched up again when his dad continued the tirade. His curses burst out of him like a smoker’s coughing. Dad was really, really mad, and he started to wish his dad was hurt instead of just angry. When Dad got mad he broke things.*

*Dad finally noticed his son standing there, staring at him. “Get me a towel,” he ordered.*

*Willie ran into the house, grabbed one of Mom’s dishtowels on the kitchen counter. Despite Mom’s protests, without a word of explanation, Willie ran outside, back to his dad. He held the towel out to him like a lion tamer offering a piece of meat. Dad grabbed the white cloth embedded with red stripes of varying thickness, growled as he tried to wipe his face clean. The black gore was gone, but Dad’s face still looked slippery, and his hair was matted down, all slick and shiny. Willie briefly wondered if that was why so many car mechanics had greasy hair, wondered if they used engine oil for hair gel. Yuck!*

*Dad held the towel out to Willie, gesturing for him to take it. Willie stood there a moment looking at the dirty piece of fabric which no longer resembled a dish towel. Mom was going to be mad, now.*

*“What’s the matter, son? Afraid of a little dirt?”*

*Willie stepped forward, examined the towel like it might be diseased. He saw a white spot as yet unstained by the corrupting intrusion of motor oil. He twisted his right hand, maneuvered his thumb and index finger to pinch the small island of fabric. He held the towel up and away from him so he wouldn’t accidentally smear himself.*

*Dad laughed, one of those disgusted guffaws. “Yep,” he said. “I just know, my son is going to grow up and be a faggot.”*

*Willie had heard that word before, faggot, but he wasn’t sure what it meant. The guys in the neighborhood sometimes called people faggots, but they used it so often he could never discern to whom it applied. Sometimes they called the quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers a faggot, and sometimes they called their music teacher, Mr. Klein, a faggot. They laughed at his soft voice and meticulously combed hair. But nobody had ever called him a faggot. He just knew it had to be something bad. Why did Dad think he was going to grow up to be a faggot?*

*He took the towel into the house, was planning to throw it in the trash, but Mom was still in the kitchen smoking a cigarette and working a word-search puzzle, one of her favorite pastimes. When she saw the dirty dish towel, she got up, strode across the room and opened the cabinet door under the sink. She motioned for him to toss the offending cloth into the small trash can nestled near the sink’s network of plumbing.*

*“Just drop it in there,” she said. “You guys ruin more of my dish towels that way.”*

*Willie didn't like the way she implicated him in the problem. Dad was the one always doing dirty work. He gratefully dropped the soiled towel into the trash and immediately washed his hands. When he was sure he'd gotten all the oil off his hands, he grabbed a fresh towel to dry his hands. This done, he neatly folded the new towel and placed it on the counter.*

*Still curious about Dad's comment he asked his mother, “Mom, what's a faggot?”*

*Mom bristled. A look of extreme distaste twisted her lips. “Don't you ever say that word around me.”*

*Willie felt distressed. “But, what's it mean, Mom?”*

*Mom recovered some of her former composure, lifted her head and looked down her nose at him. “Faggots are those little white worms you find at the bottom of trash cans,” she explained. “You know, baby flies.”*

*Now, Willie wondered why in the world his dad would call him a worm, a worm that eats trash. It didn't make sense.*

## Five

For Guyles, the first week of November was always a dreary time. Perhaps it was the valley after the peak of Halloween, perhaps it was the end of Daylight Savings Time when the world darkens an hour early, hastening the yawning onslaught of night. All too soon, the weather becomes volatile, unpredictable, lots of clouds and wind, mist and rain, snow flurries as the first blast of cold weather announces the beginning of winter.

Guyles drove west on 23<sup>rd</sup> street, passing the Oklahoma City University campus. The air was thick with moisture, fog descending from the sky, shrouding the university bell tower. The street glistened with mist, expanding the meager light into a patchwork of water colors, a blotchy phosphorescence. When he approached Pennsylvania Avenue he steered right and signaled a turn.

“What are you doing?” Hicks clapped his cell phone shut.

Guyles had remembered Lieutenant Bowman’s extra patrol assignment. “I’m heading for that carwash on 39<sup>th</sup> street.”

Hicks grunted, shaking his head. “Not now. We don’t go up there unless we’re called there. 39<sup>th</sup> and Penn is the freak zone. You know, fag land?”

Guyles nodded. "But we were assigned an extra patrol."

Hicks took out his notebook, a small folder containing a legal pad where he scrawled observation notes about Guyles' performance. He clicked his pen and began to write. Guyles turned north on Penn, passed the *Buy For Less* grocery store, the *Mazzio's Pizza*. He struggled to suppress his frustration, wondering how Hicks could ding him for trying to complete an extra patrol assignment. Hicks finished writing, thrust the activity card at him, a tally sheet where they recorded their calls, tickets, and arrests.

"Look," Hicks demanded. "We just did it."

Guyles glanced at the activity card; Hicks had recorded the extra patrol.

"You see? That's how you do it. When it comes to 39<sup>th</sup> and Penn, the more hands off, the better. They don't want the police up there, anyway."

Hicks clapped the folder shut, end of discussion.

Guyles patrolled 30<sup>th</sup> street near the Uptown Square Apartments, a block of town houses fashioned to look like Mexican Villas complete with shattered ceramic shingles. The property owner had installed a twelve foot fence around the entire complex several years before, an attempt to keep the surrounding neighborhood from spoiling the relative peace inside the apartments and their once opulent court yard gardens, but the truth was the apartments themselves were corrupt, filled with hustlers and gangbangers, drug dealers and addicts. The fence had been breached: bent bars, shattered locks, broken gates, and the infection had spread throughout the area, a once modest working class neighborhood bordering the north edge of the Oklahoma City University Campus.

He stopped at 30<sup>th</sup> and Blackwelder, noticed a group of juveniles gathered near the intersection, Hip Hop reverberating from the wide open doors of a pimped out Chevy Blazer. They'd been having a good time, but the appearance of a police car subdued their demeanor, now suddenly wary and self conscious. They tried to act nonchalant, tried to discreetly disburse, but they walked a little too fast, eyes a little too wide, hands jammed deep in their pockets.

A car approached from the north, stopping at the stop sign.

It was time for the police car to proceed, but Guyles felt a twinge of indecision. He wanted to check those not-so-cool juveniles trying too hard to mind their own business, but he couldn't think of a reason to confront them. In the Police Academy the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment expert asked over and over again, "Can you articulate your suspicion?" Guyles was trying to do just that as the police car remained immobile, lingering at the intersection, creating a stalemate with the other car.

Hicks hummed a tone of impatience, boredom. He waved at the other car, a signal to proceed, but the car didn't move. Though the streetlight at the intersection was dark (shattered by stones - a bullet, perhaps), there was enough ambient light for Guyles to see the driver staring forward, yet another guy trying too hard to act inconspicuous.

"Black and white fever," Hicks said.

He leaned forward, staring at the other car, an 80's model Oldsmobile Cutlass, silver with chrome wheels. He opened his notebook, fumbled through some papers, pulled out the day's hot sheet, and pointed to one of the listed vehicles.

"I bet that's it!"



Guyles felt a surge of adrenaline. He writhed in his seat, gripped the steering wheel, hands churning, squeezing the dense, plastic foam like it was made of Nerf. His foot ached to press the accelerator, but he waited for something to happen: a word from Hicks, the other car to move, the driver to bail and run, something...

They simmered in place, Guyles feeling the heat of anticipation, hands beginning to sweat, loosening his grip. Then, the Oldsmobile finally lunged forward, fish-tailed through a left turn, wheels spinning on slickened asphalt.

“Jackpot!” Hicks yelled. He grabbed the radio microphone. “2Adam95 , Dispatch, we’re behind an unconfirmed 10-29, eastbound on 30<sup>th</sup> from Blackwelder.”

Guyles floored the accelerator, heard the high-pitched whine of spinning wheels, the back end getting light, floating to the right until rubber finally grabbed the pavement.

“Tag is QBC-444, Oklahoma, occupied one time.”

The Oldsmobile blew through the stop sign at 30<sup>th</sup> and McKinley, continued east.

“Headquarters, we’re approaching Classen,” Hicks reported.

He activated the overhead emergency lights, the siren. The Oldsmobile gained speed, plunged toward Classen, a six lane boulevard running north and south, divided by wide, tree-filled medians.

Guyles struggled to grip the steering wheel, hands sliding from the recommended two o’clock-ten o’clock position for effective control. Even so, the police car careened down the street, somehow staying on the road. He slammed the brakes at McKinley, slid through the intersection, thankful no vehicles were approaching from the left and right. Hicks yelled something, but to Guyles, it blended with the garble of the siren, the clicks

and whistles of urgent responders crowding the radio, overwhelming the periodic, unsettling emergency tone.

Hicks leaned forward, staring ahead, rocking back and forth like a child trying to make a go-cart go faster. Guyles pressed the accelerator, almost closed his eyes as he jammed through the intersection at Classen Boulevard. His luck held, and he cleared all six lanes without having to slow down, without having to alter his direction of travel. He closed the distance as the Oldsmobile slid around a stopped vehicle near 30<sup>th</sup> and Military, only one block away.

“Hang back! Hang back! Give him room to fuck up.” Hicks said. Then he let out a hoot, a rebel yell, “Yaahooo!”

The scream startled Guyles, adding to the terror enveloping his thoughts as he realized a pursuit wasn't the same as a code-3 response where there's a known destination, a quick calculation to determine the shortest route from point A to point B, the nimble negotiation through traffic. A pursuit has more variables, and the pursuing officer must avoid focusing too much on the fleeing vehicle, lulled into a fatal case of tunnel vision. Nonetheless, the whole world seemed to narrow down to the back end of that Oldsmobile, everything else a fast and furious blur. The siren and flashing lights added a surreal quality to the whole experience, framing time into a slow motion sequence.

“Headquarters, still eastbound on 30<sup>th</sup>, approaching Western,” Hicks reported, his voice assuming a more professional tone. “He's signaling to turn right, possibly southbound on Western.”

Guyles couldn't believe it. “He signaling?”

The Oldsmobile slowed to make the turn, allowing the patrol car to gain ground, but the wet pavement caused the vehicle to slide through the intersection, too fast to make the turn.

“Cancel that. Eastbound on 30<sup>th</sup> from Western... gaining speed... fifty in a thirty mile per hour zone.”

Guyles’ stomach tightened as he approached the red light at Western. It was a blind intersection north and south, but, luckily, the light turned green at the last second, allowing him to make it through without mishap, loss of control.

“Coming up on Shartel, looks like he’s going to go southbound on Shartel,”

This time the Oldsmobile turned south, sliding wide to the left and striking a stopped northbound vehicle with its left rear bumper.

As Guyles topped the hill near 30<sup>th</sup> and Shartel he saw the flashing lights of a westbound police car two or three blocks away. He rode the brakes, slowed to make the right turn, which he managed better than the Oldsmobile had. He was getting his confidence, hands no longer sweaty, the surge of adrenaline reduced to a series of percolations, noticeable but less distracting. He nimbly avoided the crashed car, felt the crunch of accident debris beneath spinning tires.

“Headquarters, be advised, suspect collided with a civilian vehicle, appears to be a minor seventy-six.”

The silver Oldsmobile hurled down Shartel, gaining speed, weaving erratically, on the verge of losing control.

“Whoa, hold back,” Hicks warned. “This kid’s gonna lose it.”

Guyles took his foot off the accelerator, and the patrol car lost momentum. He was a good two blocks behind the fleeing vehicle by the time it hit an S-curve near 26<sup>th</sup> street. Due to the speed, the car slid on the pavement, slammed into the curb at the apex of the curve. A slight incline kept the car from flipping on its side, the impact causing an explosion of dirt, chunks of rubber from a blown tire or two.

Guyles slammed the brakes, retaining control of the police car as the Oldsmobile, incredulously, started moving again.

“It’s still moving! Southbound on Shartel from 26<sup>th</sup>.”

The Oldsmobile couldn’t regain its former speed, the blown tires making the car difficult to steer. Regardless, the determined driver continued to flee, steel rims throwing sparks. The vehicle tried to turn east at 24<sup>th</sup>, but it lost control, slid to a stop in front a thrift store called The Hippy Shop.

“They crashed, 24<sup>th</sup> and Shartel. Looks like the driver’s trapped inside. Start Fire and EMSA.”

Guyles stopped two car lengths from the Oldsmobile. He and Hicks threw their doors open, drew their weapons. Suddenly, the passenger door on the Oldsmobile flew open, and a second subject, previously unseen, jumped out and ran. Guyles crouched behind his door for cover, pointed his weapon at the trapped driver.

“Hands!” he shouted. “Show me your hands!”

He saw a blur of movement in his peripheral vision. Glancing to the right, he saw that Hicks had disappeared. Then, he heard a shaky, breathless voice on the police radio. Hicks was pursuing the passenger suspect on foot, leaving him alone with the driver.

“Goddamn it, I said show me your hands!”

The driver kept struggling to get the door open, and Guyles felt overwhelmed by indecision. He heard his partner's voice on the radio, "...white male...six foot...185..." saw the two runners plunge into an alley just south of his position, into a bramble of shadowy branches and tangled bushes. When he lost sight of his partner, he didn't know what to do - leave the driver for backup officers? Run after Hicks?

"Eastbound at...Guernsey alley... Blue jeans...grey sweat-shirt."

A second police car slid to a stop behind Guyles. The officer turned off the siren, opened his door, brought out his weapon and crouched for cover.

"Hands! Show us your hands, asshole!" the officer shouted.

Hicks' voice blared over the radio, shaking worse than ever, his breathing shallow.

"He's in...the...houses...lost sight...just east..."

The driver finally rolled down the window, raised his hands through the opening. Guyles and the other officer advanced on him, weapons high, aiming for a head shot.

"Hold your position, asshole! Don't fucking move!"

They grabbed the driver, pulled him through the window and dropped him to the ground where they twisted his arms behind his back, slapped handcuffs on both wrists.

"Oww that hurts, motherfucker!"

The backup officer, a guy named Channing stomped the suspect's back, right between the shoulder blades. The driver coughed, gasped for breath, groaned, now suddenly at a loss for words.

The radio got quiet. Hicks' heavy voice ceased reporting the foot chase, a scary string of moments stretched like out like pulled taffy.

“2Adam95? Update...” Dispatch inquired.

No response. The police radio’s emergency air tone expressed a hollow, electronic beep, adding gravity and urgency to Hicks’ lack of response.

Guyles trotted toward Guernsey alley, a narrow street running north and south for one block east of Shartel. The alley was full of shadows, quite a contrast from the flashing red and blue world just around the corner. The echoes of sirens and police radios were somewhat muffled here, monotone. He walked into the shadows, gun and flashlight in hand. When he came to the edge of a building he clicked off his flashlight, pried the corner, glimpsing slice by slice the scene on the other side of the obstacle. All clear.

He hugged the wall, advanced with caution. There was a vehicle in the alley, all four wheels missing, the frame resting on cinder blocks. The doors were gone, the seats, too.

BEEP!

Guyles jumped. The emergency tone had sounded again. He’d heard it in the mic clipped to a strap of cloth on his shoulder, but he also heard it echoing down the alley from another source close to the ground. He imagined Hicks lying on the ground, dead from a head shot, a growing pool of blood.

“2A95...10-90?”

Guyles heard pounding feet on the street, saw erratic beams of light cutting through the shadows. Police officers running, looking for Hicks.

BEEP!

“In his last transmission he reported the suspect going through the houses, just east of Guernsey alley,” dispatch reported.

Guyles checked the abandoned car, found it empty. He crouched near the front of the car, saw that the hood had been removed, also the engine.

BEEP!

He located the source of the sound several feet south of the car. He swept a beam of light, saw a handheld radio on the ground. Hicks' radio! It had to be...

"2Adam95-B, dispatch," he quaked. "I found his radio in the alley. 2A95 does not have his radio!"

He put the radio in his back pocket, the weight of which made him feel responsible. He should have stayed with his partner, running behind him, matching stride for stride, leaving the driver to Channing. But, dammit, shouldn't Hicks have stayed with him? After all, Hicks was the FTO and he was the rookie.

BEEP!

He resumed the search, discovered a break between flimsy panels of a wooden fence. He broke through the gap, saw a beam of light darting through a vacant house, an opened door in back, a yawning chasm of darkness beckoning him to enter.

BEEP!

Guyles heard the voices of cursing officers, now at least a half dozen or so, saw crisscrossing flashlight beams flitting through the back yards of adjacent houses. He wanted to give his location, wanted to direct them to the vacant house he was about to enter, but he was a little disoriented, had lost his bearings.

BEEP!

Guyles thought he heard Hicks yelling. He ran to the open door, paused to listen and heard heavy footsteps on a groaning wooden floor, a thud, a loud thump. They were

fighting. He entered the house, advanced through the kitchen. Once inside, he heard Hicks more clearly.

“What the fuck? You fucking Asshole!”

Guyles pried the corner leading from the dining area into the small living room where he saw Hicks kicking the fallen suspect in the ribs. At this point the guy wasn't resisting, and he'd already been handcuffed, curled into a fetal position on the floor.

“Did you think you could get away from the police? Huh?”

He kicked him again, pushed the barrel of his weapon against the guy's head, near the temple above his right eye.

“I could blow you away right now, asshole.”

BEEP!

Hicks reached to the back of his belt, hand grasping emptiness, realizing, for the first time, he didn't have a radio. He glanced around the room, wide eyes seeking a threat. When he saw Guyles he didn't look relieved, rather frustrated like a kid caught doing something naughty. He shifted his feet and glared at Guyles, suspicious and distrustful.

“How long have you been there?”

Guyles didn't know what to say. He stared at the suspect, a lump of flesh and clothing lying on the floor. For a moment, time stood still between them, a large, painful silence, an ambiguous void of indecision.

BEEP!

“You got my radio?”

Guyles reached his back pocket, recovered the radio, and gave it to Hicks.

“2Adam95, headquarters... you can 10-64 the air. Suspect... in custody.”



“All units, 10-64. Suspect in custody.” The dispatcher relayed, voice jubilant with relief.

Hicks grabbed the suspect’s shirt collar and yanked. “On your knees, asshole.”

The shirt collar bunched up around his throat, and he started to choke and sputter, a spray of blood. Hicks jumped back, released his grip on the suspect’s shirt, letting him fall forward. His face smashed the floor, a loud thud, an audible crunch.

“No, you didn’t...” Hicks yelled. “You didn’t just spit blood on me.”

He stomped in a circle of rage, raised his right foot, suspending it above the suspect’s vulnerable neck.

Guyles winced, unable to move, unable to speak.

“Police!” a voice yelled near the back of the house.

“Guy-less? Hicks? You guys all right?”

Hicks backed away from the suspect, danced in place for a moment like a boxer trying to defuse built up adrenaline. He tilted his head from side to side with a clear, sickening snap, and he pumped his arms, twisted his trunk. He stopped prancing around when he saw the blood on his hands.

An ambulance arrived, and paramedics rushed into the house toting a gurney. The gathered officers stood back, watched while the paramedics tended the beaten suspect. One of the paramedics, a guy with a long ponytail, an earring in his left ear, kept glancing at the officers, shaking his head.

“I... can’t...breathe,” the suspect complained.

Hicks glared at him. The paramedic with the ponytail caught the exchange, frowned.

“He ran from me,” Hicks offered.

The paramedics lifted the gurney, carted the suspect through the house and out to the ambulance, officers following. Already they were joking, snickering so the ponytailed guy wouldn't hear them.

“I can't breathe,” a short officer, a guy called Mighty Mite, whined in jocular falsetto.

Another voice muttered, “You sure kicked his ass, Larry. LT ain't gonna like this...”

As they walked out of the house, Lieutenant Bowman was arriving at scene, pulling up next to the ambulance. When he got out of the car, the ponytailed paramedic intercepted him, pointed at the gathered officers with an adamant backwards thumb.

“Oh, shit, Larry, hear it comes,” Mighty Mite whispered. He and the other officers, three of them, stepped away from Hicks and Guyles.

Bowman walked toward Guyles, a frown on his face.

“What happened?”

Guyles felt trapped, exposed, guilty, even though he hadn't done anything wrong. He thought he might melt. He couldn't say anything.

Bowman shifted his attention to Hicks. “What happened?”

Hicks looked up, shook his head. “This was a rough one, boss.”

Bowman stepped back, eyes wide. “Are you all right?” he said, his tone softening, wilting from accusation to concern.

Hicks stared at Guyles, his voice monotone. "I chased the guy into the house...and... the guy jumped me." He shook his head, inhaled deeply. "Almost had me down... but my partner saved my ass." He nodded at Guyles. "Ain't that right, partner?"

Hicks had never referred to Guyles as a partner, before. Despite the ruse, he liked the affirmation.

Bowman frowned, a considerate nod.

Guyles couldn't believe it. Was Bowman going to fall for this? The suspect was pretty beat up, and Hicks didn't have a mark on him, maybe some dirt on his trousers, but no injuries. Guyles had been on the street long enough to learn that anyone who ran from the cops was free game for a cheap shot or two, but Hicks had really worked the guy over.

Bowman smiled, slapped Guyles' upper left arm, the affectionate thump of teammates, football players celebrating in the end zone. "Good work, Guy-less!"

Guyles nodded, vacantly. He imagined the snake hissing in the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve with the knowledge of good and evil. Things were never as clear as they looked at first glance. The snake hissed, inviting him to take a bite of the apple. The comradery, the brotherhood he craved had a price. He shivered.

"Are you okay?" Hicks inquired.

Guyles nodded, shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Hicks hugged him with one arm, jostled him. It got a little darker. Had someone turned off his overheads? Had a street light gone out?

"Are you okay?" Hicks asked again, a deliberate enunciation of each word.

Guyles shook away from Hicks' embrace, wanting to walk away, but he couldn't. He felt trapped by the smile on Hicks' face, the insinuating tilt of his eyebrow.

"I'm okay."

Bowman went to the other officers on the scene, slapping shoulders, offering congratulations, asking questions. The officers smiled at him, shook his hand and parted ways as soon as possible, retreating to their patrol cars.

Hicks stepped toward Guyles, eyes serious, staring at him, studying him – another nudge on the shoulder, a tad harder than playful. "Maybe you don't understand.

Are...you...okay?"

Guyles tightened his lips, something upsetting his stomach. He swallowed hard.

"I'm... okay..." he vomited.

Hicks chuckled.

*The house was empty. Well, not exactly empty, just unoccupied. No people. Willie heard the television in the living room, smelled the smoke from Mom's cigarettes, saw the billowing clouds of smoke hugging the ceiling, the curling line of smoke emanating from a smashed butt in the ashtray next to her chair, so he knew she'd been there.*

*He called out to her. No response.*

*He ran upstairs hoping to find her in the bathroom. Empty. He checked his parents' bedroom, his bedroom. Finally, he checked the other bedroom, the one reserved for his new brother or sister. Mom was going to have a baby*

*The other bedroom was spooky. It had weird wall paper, the kind with pictures of stars and the people and animals in the stars: twin boys, a beautiful woman, a crab, a bull, and some guy with a huge jug on his shoulder pouring water. And worse than that, the wall paper was pink. Mom had picked it out, spent a whole weekend putting it up. But the worst thing about the room was the closet door. When you opened it, you didn't see clothes hanging from a bar or a bunch of stacked boxes, what you saw was a steep staircase going up into the darkness.*

*Willie stood outside that other room, listened for his Mom's voice. He strained his ears so hard the silence seemed to hiss, a snake telling him not to enter, but then he heard Mom's voice, the sound of her humming a familiar tune, a lullaby she used to hum to him when he was little.*

*He entered the room, took three steps and stopped. Nothing happened. He felt a little safer, took several more steps, peaked around a corner. The closet door was open, standing slightly ajar, Mom's voice a little louder than before. She was up in the attic.*

*"Mom?"*

*Mom didn't answer, just kept humming. He wondered if Mom had been swallowed by a spirit, smuggled up into the attic where all that was left was her voice.*

*"Mom, you there?"*

*The humming stopped. He heard something sliding across the floor, a grunt, a heavy sigh. "Willie is that you?"*

*Willie felt a rush of relief. He wanted to bound up the stairs, but he hesitated. What if it wasn't really Mom up there? What if it was a trick?*

*"Mom, is that really you?"*

*"Yes, who else?"*

*"If it's really you, then..." He tried to think of a great test question, something only his Mom would know, but all he could think of was, "What's my middle name?"*

*"Willie, don't be silly."*

*"Please, Mom..."*

*"Your middle name is Richard."*

*Willie took a step upward, climbed the stairs tentatively trying not to make a bunch of noise, but the more he tried to be quiet, the more the old wood creaked and groaned. When he reached the landing he saw the roof, the rafter beams spreading above him like the rib cage inside a giant whale, the whale that had swallowed Pinocchio. He smelled something chemically, not quite like a swimming pool, but it stung his nose just the same.*

*"What's that smell?" he said.*

*"Mothballs."*

*She beckoned him to climb the last four steps. He saw the back of her hair, the long blond tresses she'd tied into a ponytail. It wasn't flippy like the girls' ponytails at school, more like silk gushing out of the back of her head, languishing across her neck, drooping down between her shoulders. Mom had the prettiest hair, ever. He couldn't see her face, though, and he wasn't about to take that last step until he knew absolutely and for sure it was her.*

*"Mom, look..." He raised his arm, curled his hand toward his elbow and flexed his bicep.*

*Mom turned around, smiled at him. It was her.*

*Mom opened a box, one of those department store boxes made of white cardboard with indented fold lines. She reached inside, took out a dress made of white lace with a shiny blue bow around the waist. It was a small dress, a dress for a little girl.*

*Willie felt his face getting hot.*

*"Who's that for?" he asked. His tongue felt twice as thick all of a sudden.*

*Mom smiled, a glow in her face. She lifted the dress high, gazing on it fondly.*

*"Well, it was mine when I was a little girl, my confirmation dress."*

*"What's confirmation?"*

*Mom frowned a little. "It's when you make a promise to God and join the church. Your Dad..." She trailed off, forced a smile. "Maybe one of these days you'll find out. Maybe you'll be confirmed someday."*

*Willie imagined wearing the dress at church, kneeling before the father and getting blessed. He felt warm, excited at the thought.*

*Mom took the dress, hung it from a nail protruding from a rafter beam. It was wrapped in shimmery plastic that reflected the light coming in from the windows. It looked like a shiny apparition, more like a ghost than an article of clothing.*

*Willie noticed a stack of clothing on the floor, all kinds of little dresses and blouses, pairs of shorts and pants, some of them with flowers embroidered on the pockets, all of it girl's clothes.*

*"What's that stuff?" Willie said, trying to act disinterested.*

*Mom patted a pile of clothes. "They're my clothes from when I was a little girl." She patted her tummy.*

*Willie noticed Mom's tummy looked a little bigger than it used to. "Are you going to give those clothes to the new baby?"*

*"Yes."*

*"But how do you know it's going to be a girl?"*

*Mom looked down thoughtfully, smiled at her tummy. "Because I made a wish."*

*Willie looked at the dress, suspended over his mother like a guardian angel. "Did you wish for a girl when I was born?"*

*Mom's eyes got wide, her cheeks red. She looked away from Willie.*

*"Of course not," she said. "I love you just the way you are."*



## Six

Insomnia. Guyles couldn't sleep. He groped the space next to him, arms embracing emptiness. Dana wasn't home.

His bedroom window glowed faintly, brightened by the dawn. He listened through the hiss of silence, staring at the ceiling. In the semi-dark he saw ridges in the plaster texturing, random patterns in the lines, cracks, and swirls. The timid light cast long shadows, adding depth to the ceiling surface. He stared for a long time, eyes fixed on a form coalescing in the dark like smoke trying to solidify. It looked like a triangle, an upside down triangle, but in the shadows he wasn't sure if the shape actually existed. He closed his eyes for a moment, allowed the darkness to erase the canvas of his thoughts. When he opened his eyes again, the ceiling was different, the terrain altered, the triangle gone.

He saw the moon in the ceiling, its chaos of craters, the barren landscape. He scrutinized the strange terrain like a tired astronomer staring intently into the heavens looking for meaning in the random display of space. Another shape began to form, emerging like a blemish, just a bump at first, isolated in the middle of a vast, flat plain, but it seemed to grow rapidly.

He blinked his eyes trying to rearrange the terrain, but the shape was still there, refining itself - a mask caught between comedy and tragedy. It had a circular mouth, an expression of surprise. The apparition reminded Guyles of that mysterious face on Mars photographed by the Viking orbiter, and he couldn't help wondering if the face emerging before him was male or female.

Guyles abandoned sleep, sat down in front of his computer. He listened as the tiny electric motors powered up, listened to the scratch and grind of the hard drive looking for data. The screen flickered, a bright splash of blue then a photograph of a pastoral landscape, rolling hills and velvety grass, a tree line in the distance, a blue sky with only the faintest swirl of white clouds. He imagined running through the pasture, feeling free, breathing the fresh, warm air, thankful for the bright warmth of summer. He wondered if the photograph had been taken in Oklahoma, realized it very well could have been. He'd seen land like that during his excursions from Ft. Sill to Oklahoma City when he was still in the Army. Then, he remembered the times he spent in the field training for war, running through grass like that: the holes, the stickers (goatheads, they called them) that stuck to his pants, to his boot strings. He remembered the relentless heat of an Oklahoma summer.

Before he realized it, Guyles had typed the word "transvestite" into the internet search engine. Page one posted the first ten of over 4,430,000 posted results. He wondered about the shadowy undercurrents of society, the realities existing beneath the façade of civilized behavior like bugs squirming beneath rocks and trash, dashing away when exposed to light.

Hands hovering over the keyboard, he tried to suppress his shame and glanced over his left shoulder to make sure nobody was there. The arrow pointer on the computer screen moved toward one of the responses, *So... you're a transvestite, now what?*

The left mouse button clicked, and there was a corresponding audio effect. The screen blinked, and another page of listings appeared. He read the first response, *Molly's*

*Play Palace, a haven for tranny queers, transvestites, and boys who want to be girls.* He caught his hand just before he left-clicked the bold blue lines.

His logical mind told him to turn off the computer, but he continued scrolling down the page reading the website descriptions: *Sissy Sally's Romper Room, Baby Billie's Play Pen, Miss Veronica's School of Charm, Transvestia, The Double RR Raunchy Ranch, Diva's Dungeon, and Lady-Like.* He leaned toward the computer monitor like he wanted to glimpse this other world, comprehend it more clearly, trying to convince himself it was only a sense of intellectual curiosity, that acquainting himself with alternative lifestyles would make him a better cop, but he couldn't deny his growing sense of titillation. He clicked the **Next** button.

Page 2 had more of the same lurid descriptions, enticing titles. Near the bottom of the page, though, he saw a new word, Transgender. It was associated with a website that provided a forum for people who were exploring their gender identities.

At the top of the page 3 he surrendered to curiosity, clicked on the website, *Pandora's Parlor.* The screen blinked, and he held his breath as the loading line appeared, becoming incrementally longer with each passing moment. The home page appeared, a female figure – a voluptuous, big breasted beauty with shiny black hair, dark, mysterious eyes, arms spread wide like a bird bounding into flight - escaping a partially opened box. Her legs were missing, yet unformed from the waist down, wispy smoke trailing into the box. The website had an audio effect, some music, a Hard Rock song. The singer's voice sounded familiar, Aerosmith.

*Sweet Pandora  
Good-like aura  
Smell like a flora  
Open up your door-a for me*

Guyles followed the curve of the genie's breasts with the mouse arrow, caressing them. In a spasm of excitement, he clicked the image exactly in the middle of her cleavage. The screen blinked again, the loading line, this time, getting longer faster.

The new page displayed a boudoir with an array of opulent furnishings: a canopy bed dripping with pink silk and satin, a parchment white armoire, a vanity with a large oval mirror, all Victorian style. Next to the bed, an occasional table and a lamp draped with wispy red fabric.

Guyles moved the mouse arrow from place to place. When the arrow touched the bed, a dialogue bubble appeared, "Pandora has sweet dreams every night. Click here to read her dream diary."

The arrow touched the vanity. "Do you want to look fantastic? Check out Pandora's vast assortment of wigs, breast forms, make-up, jewelry and accessories." The armoire message invited the visitor to view an online catalogue featuring a selection of dresses, shoes, and lingerie fitted for men.

Guyles navigated the arrow toward a door in the middle of the room, a closet door. The bubble displayed an enticing message, "Come In and Step Out."

He clicked the closet door.

The new screen had a first-person motion effect, a walk down an aisle crammed on both sides with dresses, boas, and fur coats, a line of high-heeled shoes and boots beneath the outfits. At the back of the wardrobe he found a long dresser with opened drawers crammed with lingerie, a wig-stand displaying a luxurious mane of long, brown hair, a vanity mirror and a neat assembly of cosmetics and application brushes. Drapes of pink and lavender silk framed the mirror. When the motion animation stopped, a female's

head and torso appeared in the looking glass. She had long blond hair, a pearl necklace dropping between large breasts, but the face was blank, just a flesh-colored slate.

Words appeared on the face like blue blemishes, “Imagine your face here.”

The image faded, and more words scrolled down the mirror, “Lady Pandora’s Transformation Boutique offers the ultimate feminine experience. Satisfaction guaranteed. Her salon is located in the Dallas metroplex not far from Los Colinas. E-mail her for more information.”

Dallas...that’s perfect, he thought, not too far, not too close.

Guyles clicked the *lady\_pandora.com* link. An e-mail box appeared, his own e-mail address, [suprcop26@yahoo.com](mailto:suprcop26@yahoo.com), already inserted in the sender box.

Nothing to do but take the plunge, he thought, heart pulsing as he contemplated the trip.

He typed a single sentence.

“How much will it cost?”

After work, another long and boring winter night, Guyles was excited. He’d been preoccupied with anticipation ever since he sent that e-mail to Lady Pandora, and he hoped to find a return message when he got home.

He zoomed down NW 23<sup>rd</sup> street thankful it was so empty after 2:00 AM. When he came to a red light near 23<sup>rd</sup> and Villa, he glanced around. The parking lot was empty at the old Shepherd Mall except for a white security truck with flashing amber lights. The driver shined a spot light into the JC Penney building and got out of the vehicle; it looked like one of the glass doors had been shattered. Guyles felt the tug of duty, feeling

obligated to drive over there and assist the security officer. He wanted to keep his blinders on, act like Mr. Joe Public minding his own business.

Thankfully, a police car pulled into the parking lot. The driver snuffed out the headlights, got out of the car and greeted the security guard. Air One approached from the north, hovered over the mall, shining its spotlight down on the roof.

For some reason, the traffic light didn't change, probably a malfunction. Since traffic was clear in both directions on Villa, he stomped on the gas and pushed through the red light, thankful, for once, he didn't have a take home patrol car. He thrilled at the whine of the finely tuned engine as he gained speed, proud to have such a nice piece of machinery, imagining that he could outrun and outdrive a pursuing police car if necessary.

Guyles bought the car after returning from Operation Desert Storm. If there wasn't anything good about the war, at least he'd had the opportunity to accumulate a stack of money. Combat pay wasn't all that great, pretty meager really, but there was little or nothing to spend it on unless you smoked cigarettes. The Army had supplied all the essentials, care of the 24th Infantry Division.

A day after his homecoming he went car shopping, bought a badass car, a brand new Camero Z-28 with a 5.7 liter 275 horsepower LT1 V8 engine, a 6 speed manual transmission, black leather interior and chrome wheels. It looked like it could haul ass, and it really did haul ass. Guyles liked to romp on the gas, roast the wheels, showing off to the guys in his platoon. He'd won a drag race one time on a lonely road in Western Oklahoma just north of the Wichita Mountains, shortly before leaving Ft. Sill to return to civilian life.

When he got home, he bounded up the stairs, stood on the balcony outside his apartment and breathed deeply the cold air. The four buildings of the apartment complex faced inward toward a large courtyard lavishly decorated with a trellis and thoughtfully planted trees. The staircases to the second floor units were strung with white lights, and red, blue and green lights flashed in the trees. It was Christmas time, and though he'd been feeling all bah-humbug for the most part, he was now excited. The apartment courtyard offered a sanctuary from the surrounding neighborhood, a respite from the screaming sirens all too common to city life. Since it wasn't cold enough for a freeze, Guyles heard the trickle of water from a fountain at the east end of the complex, such a soothing sound.

When he turned toward the door of his apartment, he saw a light in the windows. The spell of cheerfulness dimmed into suspicious caution. He'd left his place at 3:30 the afternoon before and hadn't returned, and he wasn't one to leave the lights on when he left. Not usually, anyway. He tried to remember if he'd forgotten to turn them off, and then he wondered, with a tremor of hopefulness, if Dana had returned back home to him.

Well, home wasn't exactly right. Dana didn't really live there. She stayed there. She'd been staying there for six months coming and going as she pleased, no notes, no explanations. It began as a one night stand stretching into a weekend that stretched into a week, then two. The weeks stretched into months.

Dana didn't have much. She didn't need much. Her smoldering beauty and seductive charm could buy her almost anything she wanted. She had medium-length auburn hair with blond streaks and flirtatious brown eyes, and she tended toward the

gothic look with her heavy use of dark make-up. Guyles thought she was the epitome of feminine freedom: beautiful, artistic. Wild.

He'd fallen under her spell (just like a lot of guys), and he wondered, at times, why she opted to stay with him, expecting to find her gone for good any given night. Often, he imagined her falling for an artist, travelling to New York or San Francisco, someplace more exciting than Oklahoma.

When he inserted his key into the door lock, he saw a shadow moving from the kitchen toward the bedroom, a lithe female form.

She'd come back.

Guyles announced his presence. "Dana? Is that you?"

She didn't answer. He heard laughter in the bedroom, rather a squeal of delight.

"Dana?"

"Oh, Willie," she crooned. "You're finally home."

Guyles tried to muster the resolve to sound angry. "Where were you last night?"

"Oh, come on. Get over it."

She emerged from the bedroom wearing only a pair of black panties and a matching black camisole. One of the straps dropped seductively off her left shoulder revealing the upper swell of her left breast. He could see her nipples extended through the silky fabric.

"Come here." She grabbed his right hand and tugged gently. "I want to show you something."



“Dana...” Guyles struggled to remain stern. He snapped his hand back away from her.

Dana’s eyes widened for a moment, and her lips pouted. “What’s the matter, Willie Boy?”

“Dana. I’m not in the mood.”

He wanted her to leave him alone, watch television while he checked his e-mail. He was certain Lady Pandora had already responded to his message, and Dana’s presence was both unexpected and unwanted at this particular moment.

Dana laughed. “I know why.”

She danced toward the computer desk in the corner of the bedroom, and she positioned her arms like one of those showcase girls on game shows. “Voila.”

The monitor had been turned on, and he recognized the website displayed on the screen. It was one of those transvestite pages.

He held his breath, utterly horrified, frozen in place. His pulse hammered in his mind, and he wished to the depth of his soul his heart would just stop. His life was over, or at least, life as he had known it.

Someone else knew.

He felt weak in his knees, and a wave of nausea enveloped his entire body. His stomach churned, and his abdominal muscles contracted. He covered his mouth with his hands and retreated hastily into the bathroom where he plunged toward the toilet.

“Willie? Are you okay?”

Dana’s voice had a note of real concern, the first time he’d ever heard it.

Guyles finished retching and stood on wobbly legs. He wiped his mouth with a towel hanging on a bar next to the bathtub, flushed the toilet, momentarily mesmerized by the swirling water, vaguely satisfied by the cleansing vortex. Dana approached him from behind, hugged him. Her strength steadied him until the wave of nausea subsided. When the weakness left his knees he turned around.

“Willie?” She reached up, brushed his hair above his right ear with her black fingernails. “Are you all right?”

Guyles couldn't speak. He walked to the sink, turned on the cold water, filled cupped hands and splashed his face. He sucked the water into his mouth and spit it out at least three times trying to get rid of the vomit after-taste. After that, he walked stiffly back into the bedroom where he sat down on the bed and collapsed backward. He stared at the ceiling.

Dana hopped on the bed, straddled his waist, and leaned forward. The satin fabric of the camisole brushed against his chest, and he saw her chirpy breasts dangling above him. Her hair tickled his face as she leaned in close. He thought she was going to kiss him, but she moved past his lips, past his cheek, and whispered in his right ear.

“It's okay,” she said. “I think it's cool. This could be a lot of fun.”

Guyles didn't know how to read her laughter. Was she simply amused, or was she being scornful? He tilted his head back, looked up at the ceiling, studied the terrain. He closed his eyes.

“Willie, why didn't you tell me? I'm cool with stuff like that. Once, I dated a guy who wanted me to...”

Guyles didn't want to hear about it. He didn't want to discuss it. “Just, shut up.”

Dana shot up suddenly, jumped off the bed and plopped down in front of the computer. She hit the space bar. The transvestite page reappeared. “So, you’re a transvestite, so what? It’s not like you’re the only one.”

“I’m not a trans-ves-tite.” The word felt foreign when he said it aloud. It even tasted funny, like bile.

Dana maneuvered the mouse arrow, clicked on a page that displayed various catalogue items: lingerie, breast forms, wigs, dresses. She turned around and looked at him directly. “Do you want to order something?”

Guyles stood up and started to leave the room. He felt his heart racing, a headache pounding his temples as he tried to figure out what to say and do. Should he tell her to leave? But then, she’d be angry and armed with enough knowledge to damage his reputation. He wanted to beg her not to breathe a word about this to anyone, worried she might try to take advantage of him. Not knowing what to do, he froze, and his mind went numb.

“Do you know your dress size?” She clicked on a sexy white dress not unlike the dress Marilyn Monroe wore in the movie *Seven Year Itch*, that famous grate scene. “This one is so...delicious.”

Guyles sat on the bed, back toward Dana. He wished he could retreat like a turtle into a shell, go some place where he could be impervious.

“Are you giving me the silent treatment?”

He didn’t respond.

She got up, walked around the bed and stood in front of him. He couldn’t look up, staring down, unable to make eye contact. He noticed Dana’s toe-nails were painted a

dark red, crimson. He saw her ankles and her shapely legs, smooth and hairless. He closed his eyes.

Dana nudged his chin, lifted his face. "Talk to me. I'm not the enemy."

When Guyles opened his eyes he saw a face that showed real concern, maybe even understanding, and that helped him to relax.

"How did you know I was looking at those websites?"

Dana laughed briefly, stifled it. "Silly boy, haven't you learned about the history button? I was trying to find a website I checked out last week. I saw all those tranny sites you surfed. Man, you're obsessed."

"Well, I was doing research." He remembered Jody, and his mind started working again. "There's this prostitute. Uh, she, I mean he, might be part of a whole network. We heard that they use the internet to make connections." It sounded plausible to him.

Dana moved close, rubbed cheeks with him and kissed him briefly, a sweet kiss. He knew she didn't believe him.

"Research, huh?"

Guyles nodded, tried to look her firmly in the eye, but his gaze melted away. After a moment, he was staring at the floor again.

Dana lifted his face, again. "You have nothing to be ashamed of..."

Guyles felt like he was being interrogated. To stall the line of questioning for a moment he threw out a tidbit of truth. "I like to wear pantyhose." His mouth felt dry, throat constricting, "But only when I'm making love."

"To yourself... right?"

"What?"

Dana laughed. “You must have been doing it by yourself because you’ve never mentioned it to me.”

Guyles nodded. “Uh...yes.”

“So where do you keep your pantyhose?”

She rubbed against him, pressing his face against her breasts. The satiny fabric of the camisole was cool and soothing, exciting.

“I don’t have any pantyhose.”

Dana danced away from him, swayed her hips, shimmying back and forth seductively. She raised her arms above her head, interweaving hands, hypnotic like a cobra.

“I’ll loan you a pair.”

Guyles wanted to run away, but he wanted to stay put. The indecision froze him in place, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to think.

Dana went to the dresser, opened a drawer and pulled out a package - a large, padded envelope, a pair of sleek, feminine legs on the cover. She opened the envelope, pulled out a pair of white tights. She held them up, alluringly, waving the legs in the air, dancing serpents enticing him to come closer. She wrapped the tights around the back of his neck, and pulled him toward her.

“Take your pants off.”

Guyles unbuckled his belt, opened his pants and let his jeans fall to the floor. He stood there, waiting, his pulse hammering inside his head. His breath came in rapid, deep gulps like he’d been running. Then, a rush of endorphins, intoxicating excitement.

Dana turned off the light. For a moment, the room swelled with darkness. The computer monitor blinked another cycle, a screen saver - pipes connecting, building an intricate network of lines and elbows. The light emanating from the monitor was curiously psychedelic, erotic, dim enough to enhance the mood.

When Dana returned to Guyles she rubbed her hand against his crotch, moaning with pleasure, a sensual giggle. "Oh, there you are," she whispered in his ear. "Now, drop your undies."

Guyles hooked the elastic waist band with his thumbs, pulled the boxers down beyond his buttocks and let them drop. He knew he was on the roller coaster ride now, no turning back. The only thing he could do was surrender to momentum.

She pulled him closer, face to face, kissed him with real passion. He jerked back, surprised, wanting to look into her eyes, wanting to see if she had fallen in love.

Dana pouted, eyes soft with desire...for him.

She pulled his neck like she wanted to resume the kiss then deftly pushed him aside. He fell against the bed, rolled onto his back. She moved closer, looking down at him, smiling. She jerked the tights, slid them away from his neck and gathered her fingers around the panty, bunching the legs into her hands. She stretched the waist band.

"Legs up, snookums."

Guyles lay back, offered his legs to Dana who began placing his feet inside the tights. He felt the fabric around his ankles, reveled in the cool, shimmery sensation as the tights swelled past his calves, up to his knees.

"Stand up."

Dana pulled the tights around his thighs. He felt weak, delirious with excitement, leaning on Dana as she pulled the tights around his groin, up his waist to the bottom of his belly. She massaged his legs, rubbed his groin. He collapsed, surrendered to ecstasy.

After a while, Dana moved away, stood at the foot of the bed and removed her black camisole. The silky sheen caught the moonlight as she lifted the garment above her head, revealing round, smooth breasts, nipples firm. She turned to the side, offered her body in profile, arched her back. She stroked her hips, removed her panties, standing naked, white skin glowing in the moonlight, an ethereal presence before him. She seemed to hover there, gazing down at him with acceptance, benevolence, love.

Dana grabbed Guyles' ankles, forced his legs apart, and crawled between them until she was on top of him, torso to torso. He felt her breasts, their weight on his chest, and he moaned with deep abandon. He ran his hands over her body, caressed her soft, smooth skin. She straddled his waist, bent forward and kissed him.

Guyles collapsed his defenses and inhibitions, seized her in a full embrace. He squeezed her, wishing he could enter her completely, become totally enveloped in her body.

## Seven

Guyles drove east on I-40 near May Avenue mesmerized by the huge lit crosses on the 1<sup>st</sup> National Bank and Kerr McGee buildings in downtown Oklahoma City. They'd

been displaying the crosses on all four sides of each building since Thanksgiving, a boast about the faith of a dusty little city on the prairie or beacons beseeching God's blessing, maybe both.

Traffic was light, a promise of another long, boring night. The radio, silent: no disturbances, domestics or calls for service. Peace on Earth, so it seemed. Guyles clicked the mic, checking to make sure it still worked. He heard the rush of static after the brief transmission, more silence.

Guyles didn't want quiet; he wanted something to do, some action. The action kept him focused, without it, all he thought about was white tights and Pandora's Parlor. Plus, it was his first night without a Field Training Officer, his first night on his own. The empty seat next to him was a testimony to his ability to do the job, yet he felt inadequate, wanting to prove himself more than ever.

Guyles exited I-40 at Walker Avenue, got caught at the red light beneath the Cross Town Bridge. He saw a shabby figure stumbling down the street a block to the west, a veritable zombie: sunken eyes, gaunt face, impossibly thin. He drove north, beneath the highway bridge, turned west.

"I'll be going out on a white male...? long gray coat, skinny, Signal 87... South Walker and 2<sup>nd</sup> street," he spoke into the mic. Dispatch acknowledged the transmission.

Guyles stopped the patrol car, shined his spotlight into the shadows beneath the bridge. The figure wasn't there. He saw some tall grass and a tangle of vines at the foot of a rusty old dumpster, the husk of a stripped automobile. An eighteen wheeler roared overhead, and he felt the rumble vibrating down the concrete columns, reverberating through the ground. From beneath the bridge, the passing vehicles approached and



receded in strange waves of thunder, the high pitched wine of something coming fast and the low moan of something moving away.

When he left the patrol car, a swirl of cold snaked through the opening in his partially zipped jacket. He yanked the zipper, tucked his head, determined to find this zombie and take him to Detox. It would be his first arrest of the night, his first arrest on his own.

He stepped beneath the bridge, noticed how quiet things had become. The metal beams overhead still hummed from the recent traffic, but this, in comparison to the previous thunder, seemed silent, eerie. He heard the flap of wings, just one or two at first, but then a cacophony of fluttering madness, a cooing legion of pigeons. He saw a mass of shadows sitting on the edges of I-beams, shined his flashlight at the rows of stirring pigeons, red eyes glowing in the light. A glob of white appeared on the dark blue sleeve of his jacket.

Guyles moaned with disgust, felt the bile of revulsion rising at the back of his throat. “Ah, shit.”

Then he noticed he was walking on a strange gooey surface, a veneer of bird excrement spread thinly over the mud and dust beneath the bridge. Birds took wing, flew in circles around him, swooping close. He’d invaded their sanctuary. Afraid he might be covered in bird feces, he retreated.

When he was beyond the edge of the overpass, he breathed a sigh of relief, checked his uniform, his hair for particles of bird shit, feeling a rage of hostility toward the zombie who’d disappeared mysteriously in the dark, like a ghost.

“Okay, sleep in the shit if you want,” he shouted.

His words echoed off the bridge, mocking him. He heard the gathering roar of another truck approaching from the east and retreated to the safety of his patrol car, only to find a huge white glob on the windshield. When he activated the windshield mister, the wipers streaked a white glaze of loathing all over the glass.

By ten o'clock Guyles still hadn't made an arrest, and he was frustrated, irritable. He drove down street after street running car tags, looking for a stolen car. He typed the numbers into his MDT, one after another until the computer seemed bogged down with data, the responses taking longer and longer. He drove by known drug houses, checking for short-term traffic: the meet and greet in the street, the furtive hand-to-hand exchange of money and dope. When those things didn't pay off, he drove by convenient stores: the Seven-Eleven on Classen, the Circle K at 10<sup>th</sup> and Penn, the Total at Sheridan and Western looking for cars backed into parking spaces – a classic sign of a robber preparing a quick escape. He patrolled Bricktown looking for drunks passed out in allies. Nothing.

Finally, he stopped across the street from the Road Runner Club at Reno and May, parked his car in the shadow of a scrub oak and turned off the lights. A portable marquee outside the bar displayed a message with missing letters, *\_old beer, ho\_ women*.

Guyles laughed at the sign. "Old beer and ho's, truth in advertising." But the joke fell flat, not so funny without a partner.

He watched the dilapidated building, an old gas station enclosed with planks of plywood, the blue paint fading, flaking away. A mannequin dressed in Santa clothes had been placed on the roof where it teetered slightly off balance, looking too thin, emaciated, a Santa Claus on crack.

"Ho, ho, ho," Guyles snickered. "Here a ho, there a ho... ho, ho, ho."

He looked at the empty seat next to him, imagined Hicks sitting there scowling at him, scolding him to be more serious. Then he felt lonely.

Dispatch broke the silence. “Need a unit to start for a silent intrusion alarm, 330 SW 25<sup>th</sup>. The Southside Boxing Club, activation on south entrance.”

A boxing club? Cool... “Headquarters, 2 Adam 55 will start.”

“Unit to back?”

There was a moment of silence long enough for Guyles to wonder if the whole shift had fallen asleep, but then a third shift unit keyed up, “3 Adam 54 will back.”

Guyles didn't know who Adam 54 was, but he hoped they'd become friends.

Guyles was the first to arrive. He stopped at the corner of 25<sup>th</sup> and Hudson, turned on his rear blinkers and exited the patrol car. He stood there for a moment, acquainting himself with the sounds of the area: a train whistle about a half mile off, the beat of loud club music down the street, and the skid of tires on asphalt, someone making a quick get-away.

He crouched in the shadow of a street light, moved to the front door at 330 SW 25<sup>th</sup>. Secure, no glass breakage. He moved along the west wall of the building, flashlight in his left hand. He heard the crunch of shoes on broken concrete, retrieved his weapon from his holster and held it before him as he walked quickly, as quietly as he could to the back of the building. He paused at the corner.

The smell of cigarette smoke wafted in the breeze, and he heard someone grunt, a raspy cough. Guyles turned the corner, activated his flashlight to blind whoever it was standing in the alley behind the business. He swept the beam left and right until it found a

man huddling against the cold, the lapels of his coat concealing his face. The coal at the end of his cigarette glowed through the darkness around his face, a single, mad eye.

Guyles noticed a bulge in his coat, hip level. It had the contour of a pistol grip.

“Hands!” Guyles shouted. “Let me see your hands.”

The man inhaled, the cigarette coal glowing brighter for a moment. He expelled a lung full of smoke. The breeze carried the smoke to Guyles’ face, and he felt the stirring of a sneeze. He twitched his nose, widened his eyes.

“Hands!”

The guy raised his arms, revealing gloved hands. He turned toward Guyles. “It’s me, Pat... Pat Brummel.”

“So?”

“I’m the owner.”

Guyles didn’t believe it. Brummel looked more like a transient than the owner of a boxing club. Plus, he was a smoker. What kind of boxer smokes?

“Open your coat.”

Brummel didn’t argue. He carefully, slowly opened his coat, revealing a pistol stuck in his waistband.

“On your knees.”

Brummel shuffled his feet, placed his hands on his head. “I’m an old man...”

“I said, on your knees.”

Guyles heard footsteps behind him, felt the presence of a sizable person. For a moment, Guyles thought he was a dead man stuck between two assailants, one of them

armed with a pistol. Guyles focused on Brummel, was about to move his finger inside the trigger well of his weapon when he heard a police radio, not the one on his hip.

“He’s okay,” the man behind him said. “I know him.”

Guyles glanced over his shoulder, saw a police officer, a big guy with a bald head. He looked familiar, that Duncan guy he met in the park a month or so ago.

“That’s Pat Brummel,” he said. “An Oklahoma City legend...”

Guyles holstered his weapon, stood there for a moment. He reached down to the handheld radio on his gun belt, found the volume knob, twisted it to the right, realizing for the first time he hadn’t turned it on when he got out of his car. His face felt hot, and he clenched his teeth. Stupid. Rookie.

Duncan walked up to him, patted him on the shoulder. “Relax, man.”

Guyles expected an ass chewing, but Duncan hadn’t noticed his mistake. Guyles exhaled a long sigh of relief, but the churn in his gut told him he wasn’t done kicking himself. He tried to comprehend his lapse in judgment. Distraction. He’d been distracted. All this shit about Pandora’s Parlor, the night of white tights, had dulled his edge. Luckily, he hadn’t been hurt.

They checked the back door. It was a good alarm; someone had been trying to get inside. They found pry marks on the lip of metal overlapping the gap between two steel doors, a crowbar on the ground nearby. Brummel must have frightened the suspect before he made entry. He opened the doors, invited them in.

The Southside Boxing Club wasn’t much different than any other boxing gym Guyles had seen: the boxing ring with ropes and turnbuckles, a line of heavy bags along one wall, a line of speed bags along another wall, jump ropes, boxing gloves, sets of

protective headgear. Cinderblock walls, unpainted, unadorned, gave the place the feel of a cave, something primal about that, something savage. Brummel turned on the lights. A row of fluorescent ceiling lamps illumined the place, revealing details like blood stains on the canvas floor of the boxing ring, heavy bags bent in the middle like doubled over opponents, speed bags leaking stuffing. Guyles smelled the sweat in the place, tasted it like tears. It felt like coming home.

While Brummel and Duncan shot the shit, slapping shoulders like old buddies, Guyles checked out the place. It'd been awhile since he'd been inside a boxing gym, hell too long. Though he was in reasonably good shape for a cop, he was in poor shape for a boxer. His abs had melted into a single lump of flesh, the hardened six-pack he once sported gone, but it wouldn't take long to get it back, not if he started working out again. He didn't have dreams of making it big as a boxer, not anymore, not since he'd lost the All Army Championship a few years back.

He took some punches at a heavy bag, a few taps, duck and step, a right hook. It felt good. He walked over to the speed bags, tapped a bag, watched it bounce back and forth against the overhead platform, and he felt the old familiar rhythm: rat-a-tat-tat, like riding a bicycle.

Guyles fell into a groove, his mind going blank. Here was the answer, here was the refuge. Too bad he had to sleep and eat, sit in a patrol car outside a broken down bar on a slow winter night. If only he could box twenty-four/seven, then he wouldn't feel haunted.

Someone tapped his shoulder, Duncan. He was smiling, a crease in his eyes showing assessment, admiration.

“Impressive,” he said.

Brummel stood behind Duncan, a crease in his forehead. He looked thoughtful.

“Not bad, kid. I can see you know your way around a speed bag, but can you box, go toe to toe in the ring?”

Guyles felt sweat running down his neck, down his back. He wasn't sure how long he'd been punching the speed bag. Embarrassed, he grabbed the bag, stilled it. “I'm sorry, sir. It's been awhile.”

Brummel extended his hand, introduced himself. “If you're ever on this side of town, stop by, have a workout.”

After clearing off the alarm, Guyles and Duncan met in the parking lot behind the Oklahoma Opry across the street from the gym. Officially, they were setting up to watch the back door of the business to make sure the suspect didn't come back, but really what they were doing was milking a call, playing it out as long as possible. Guyles was beginning to realize that the way officers work on their own is quite a bit different from how they work while training. He was a little nervous, wanting to hit the **Avail** button on his MDT, telling dispatch he was 10-8. He gripped his steering wheel, churned his fingers, and kept looking at the computer monitor expecting a call to appear at any moment.

Duncan noticed his antsy demeanor. “Take it easy. You can't do it all in one night.”

Guyles sighed. This is true. He had twenty years to go, at least. But still, he needed to do something.

“Ole Pat used to be a contender for the middleweight championship of the world,” Duncan said. He spoke with a degree of reverence, the kind of reverence men have for other men who’ve obtained the notable distinction of becoming a certifiable badass. He went on to give a brief history of Brummel’s boxing career.

Pat Brummel was an old time boxer, a through back to the era of Floyd Patterson and young Cassius Clay, but back in those days only the heavy weights commanded the big ticket fights. The smaller guys did it for the love of the sport or because they had to have some place to fight legitimately, otherwise they’d end up in prison. Brummel was the latter sort.

Low on cash, he got lured into a bare knuckle brawl, winning the fight easily, but the sore loser ambushed him later that night, hit him on the head with a lead pipe and smashed his eye socket. He didn’t go to the hospital, so it wound up getting infected. He lost his eye, and after that none of the promoters would touch him.

Brummel worked as a bouncer and bodyguard after that, but he succumbed to depression and alcoholism, staggered through the second half of the 1960’s and through most of the 1970’s in a drunken stupor. He finally hit bottom in 1978 when he was arrested for manslaughter after a fist fight at the W & W Lounge on 33<sup>rd</sup> and South Robinson. He did 13 years in prison, most of it at the Granite State Reformatory in Southwest Oklahoma, a prison built back in 1909 from inmate labor. They had carved the granite blocks from a nearby mountain.

Prison was good for him. It dried him out, and he rediscovered boxing, this time as a coach. He became beloved by inmates and staff alike. When he was released from state custody, he returned to Oklahoma City and founded the South Side Boxing Club.



Guyles was impressed, even envious. He couldn't tell if he envied Brummel for his tough and interesting life, or if he envied Brummel because of the awe that Duncan had for him. Guyles wanted to measure up someday, as a man larger than life, someone whose manliness was without question. He had gone to war in Operation Desert Storm, but the victory was so lopsided that he never got to experience the full brunt of combat. He came home feeling like his courage hadn't been adequately tested, and, ultimately, that was one of the reasons he became a cop.

Perhaps out of jealousy, Guyles felt the urge to knock Brummel down a notch. Duncan's adoration of the old boxer seemed excessive all of a sudden. "He's a convicted felon, right?"

Duncan stared at Guyles like he'd been slapped out of a dream. "Yeah, I guess that's right." He frowned, wrinkling his brow, like he was considering something for a moment.

"He's carrying a gun," Guyles argued. "He's a convicted felon, and he's carrying a gun."

Duncan shrugged his shoulders and breathed a heavy sigh. "Rookies..."

"We should've arrested him."

Duncan bristled, anger flashing in his eyes. "You go ahead and arrest him, then. I don't want anything to do with it."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

Finally, Guyles broke the standoff. He didn't see any advantage in pushing this any further. Duncan was probably right. Brummel was just trying to have an extra measure of protection. In this neighborhood, who could blame him?

“Sorry, just kidding,” Guyles said.

Duncan didn’t say anything, stared at him. He grabbed the gear shift lever.

“Just kidding.”

Duncan finally smiled, took his hand off the gear shifter and relaxed. Guyles realized that some things among men transcended legal matters. Oh, to be in that fraternity.

“Anyway,” Duncan said. “You’re a boxer?”

Guyles slumped in his seat, tried to relax. “Yeah, I was...”

“Was?”

“I boxed when I was a kid, made it to Golden Gloves,” he explained. “I did okay, but I gave it up after high school when I joined the Army.”

“You box in the Army?”

“A little,” Guyles said, downplaying the point. He’d boxed in the Army, all right. He’d made it to the All-Army Championship, had dreams of making it to the Olympics, turning pro, but he was knocked out in the first round and lost interest, too humiliated to compete again.

Duncan laughed. “A little, huh? Maybe it’s time you start boxing, again. You looked at home in there.”

Guyles nodded, forced a smile. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

Duncan yawned, checked his watch. “Time for a coffee break, you want to join me?”

Though he tried to act nonchalant about the invite, Guyles felt like turning cartwheels. “Yeah, that’d be cool. Thanks.”

“I’m headed to the Skyline Truck Stop at 15th and I-35. Good food, pretty waitresses, and they give cops discounts.”

Duncan pushed a small gift box across the table. It was one of those jewelry boxes, covered in red velvet with hinges. The waitress standing at the end of their table blushed. She sniffled briefly and wiped her glossy eyes.

She was the epitome of the American waitress, practically a character in a Norman Rockwell painting with her institutional black dress and white apron. Her blond hair was thick and curly, pinned up behind her head with an assortment of stray hairs springing out all over the place. When she stood near the bright lights behind the counter she had a halo. She was attractive and young, but her makeup looked pale and strained. The name tag on her apron said Carla.

“Open it,” Duncan urged, smiling, “Merry Christmas.”

Carla blushed, the emotional tint enhancing the waning rouge on her cheeks. Her general weariness faded. She opened the case, smiled with great appreciation, fishing a bracelet out of the box. She held it up, let it sparkle in the light.

“Oh, Ron,” she gushed. “It’s beautiful.”

It was a gold chain with several small icons dangling from its links, a charm bracelet. The charms included things like a rainbow, a triangle, a yin-yang symbol. One of the charms was a fusion of the male and female symbols, a single circle with the cross at the bottom and the arrow on the top.

“What’s this?” She pointed at the male/female charm.

Duncan laughed. “Well, honey, that’s the symbol for man and woman together.”

Carla snickered. “Is this some kind of proposal?”

Duncan moved his left hand nervously on the table top. His wedding ring made a hollow tap, an erratic, rapid movement. “Uh, that’s not what I was thinking.”

Carla frowned, just for the shadow of a moment. She resumed her smile, winked. “Yeah, Ron, with you it’s got to be about something sexual. No entanglements, right?”

She was trying awfully hard to make a joke, but the ambiguity in her behavior was lost on Duncan. He just returned the wink. “What time do you get off? Or should I say, what time do you want to get off?”

Carla playfully slapped Duncan on the head with a menu.

The cook emerged from the back of the kitchen and shouted through the food port, a pudgy-faced kid wearing a floppy white hat, the Pillsbury Doughboy. “Hey Carla, I got your cowboy western, a shingle with a shimmy and a shake.” He grabbed a ticket from the order carousel and disappeared.

“Okay, Alan, I’m on the way.” She looked at Guyles for the first time. “What’s this, Ron? Got another pup?”

The cook reemerged. “Carla...? C’mon.”

Guyles introduced himself, slightly embarrassed for some reason. “I’m Bill,” he said, looking down. He was still intrigued by the male/female charm.

Carla nodded, smirked at Duncan. “He looks like a nice kid. Don’t you corrupt him,” she said, making her retreat.

“Look at that ass,” Duncan said, glancing backward, turning halfway around so he could watch Carla from behind.

Guyles was already there. He appreciated how attractive Carla was in her waitress uniform, examined Carla from the ground up, noticing her cute white shoes, the opaque industrial hose rising up past her thighs to disappear behind the swish of the black dress edged with a thin ribbon of white lace. Her shapely behind was framed between the white lace and the white apron strings tied in a neat bow behind her back. He liked the way she tied her hair, a gush of blond springing from the back of her head. He wondered how someone could do that without seeing what she was doing. Double mirrors?

“So you’re kind of awkward around women, huh?” Duncan’s voice cut through Guyles’ thoughts.

Guyles felt the red rising in his cheeks, tried to avoid Duncan’s amused gaze. He turned toward the large plate-glass window next to their booth, gazed out at the parking lot, the line of trucks outside. The cab door on a red Peterbilt swung open, revealing a pair of skinny legs shod with spiked heels, a short blue-jean skirt draping the thighs. When the legs found the bottom rung of an access ladder they formed a sensuous angle for a moment, straightened as they were with the woman’s bottom sticking out prominently. She climbed down, revealing an emaciated torso, visible rib cage stretching taut skin, saggy breasts concealed by a loose halter. Her hair was stringy, greasy strands falling in front of a gaunt face.

“Lot lizards,” Duncan said, unable to hide his disgust. “Which reminds me... I was training a rookie once, took him here to eat dinner one night.”

Guyles heard the ring of a war story in his voice, saw a mischievous sparkle in his eye, and wondered how much of this story was going to be bullshit. Yet, he listened with

interest, glad to see Duncan had dropped the question about his awkwardness around women.

Duncan was already laughing, a sure sign of a high bullshit factor. “He was so green.”

“But rookies are always green, right?”

“No, this guy was more green than usual. He came from a small town somewhere.” Duncan continued. “He was so green...”

“How green was he?”

“He was sooo green... When the security guard asked him to do something about all the lot lizards hanging out at the truck stop, he got on his radio and asked dispatch to notify animal control.”

Duncan chuckled a little too loud, a little too amused with himself, the kind of guy who wore Hawaiian shirts in the summer and smoked cigars, always telling jokes. Guyles wondered if Duncan was really telling a veiled story about himself as he might have been years before. As corny as he was, Guyles couldn't keep from laughing, overwhelmed by Duncan's charm.

“So you're kind of awkward around women... right?”

Guyles stopped laughing, stared down at the table. No comment.

Carla walked by carrying a tray stacked high with orders and drinks. She winked at Duncan. He turned toward Guyles with the attitude of a mentor toward a novice. “You just got to understand something,” he said. “Women, they're like starving deer.”

“What?” It had to be another joke. At least, he hoped it was a joke, but Duncan seemed serious.

“Now hear me out, all right?”

Guyles nodded. “Okay...”

“Women are like starving deer.” Duncan said, speaking in a low tone like he was imparting highly esteemed knowledge, signaling to Guyles that he was being serious.

“Women are content to nibble on the meager grass on a dusty plain. But when you toss them a bale of the freshest alfalfa, they just eat it up. They totally consume it.”

He let the statement marinate in a pause of silence. “That’s why I can’t be a one-woman man.”

“I don’t get it,” Guyles said.

Duncan frowned. “Listen, I’m trying to do you a favor.”

“All right, I’m all ears.”

“Okay, Bill... A good man, to a woman who is content with mere shrubs, is like alfalfa. She can’t help herself. She utterly consumes him, sucks him dry, and then he has to move on because he has nothing left to give.”

Guyles nodded. His thoughts ran with the metaphor. So deer are wild animals but have the potential of being tamed, or maybe they’re more valuable as animals to be hunted. He imagined Duncan baiting deer with a bale of alfalfa, to set them up for the shoot.

Duncan leaned forward. “Bill, I’m alfalfa.”

Guyles didn’t know what to say. He tried not to laugh, but a chuckle escaped.

Duncan stared at him, no laughing matter. He was being completely serious.

“Okay, alfalfa.” Guyles said. He tightened his lips, looked away.

He was looking out the window again, examining his reflection in the dark glass. When he gazed past the reflection, back to the line of trucks, he saw the lot lizard climbing into another cab, shutting the door on a blue Kenworth. There was a curtain behind the front seats, a vertical line of light between the flaps. Shadows moved back and forth for a moment, and then someone turned off the light.

He gazed at the eyes in his reflection, feeling transparent. Then, suddenly, the reflection of his face became encircled by a halo of blond hair. He saw long hairs springing from his head. Shocked by the vision, he turned away, closed his eyes.

Carla returned with their food, leaning toward Guyles as she placed his order on the table. He looked at the window, saw their mingling reflections.

“Pancake sandwich with bacon,” she said. “You want some more coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Carla filled his cup, patted him on the shoulder. “Stay nice,” she said. Then she grimaced, vigorously wiped her hand on a dishtowel folded around her waistband.

“Honey, you got something on your jacket.”

Guyles stood up, took off his jacket and examined the back where he saw a white blotch. He remembered the birds under the Cross Town Bridge.

Duncan laughed, always joking. “Do you ever get the feeling the world just shits all over you, my friend?”

Guyles went to the men’s room to wash the stain away.



*Willie watched leaves falling from trees, swirling in the breeze until they hit the street, scraping across the asphalt. He chased the leaves, pretending they were pieces of alien protoplasm sent to earth to propagate a new species that would overwhelm the planet. It was his job to hold the alien invasion at bay. When he caught a leaf, he jumped high into the air, crunched it underfoot.*

*“Die! Die! Die!” he yelled.*

*The wind stirred the treetops, marshalling more invaders which spun downward in a gathering vortex, whirling around Willie, taunting him. There were too many. He snatched, grabbed and stomped, reducing many invaders to nothing more than specks of debris, but the harder he tried, the more futile his efforts. Soon the neighborhood would be covered with aliens transforming the landscape, turning the grass brown, making the earth barren and cold.*

*A girl’s voice burst this bubble of pretense. “What are you doing, Willie Guyles?”*

*The girl, Susan Fraley from down the street, stood near some bushes at the edge of her front yard. She held a rake in her hand, her hair wrapped in a red bandana, errant blond strands wisping around her chubby face. She smiled at him.*

*Willie felt embarrassed, at a loss to explain what he was doing. He must have looked like an idiot dancing in the street, and he expected her to start making fun of him.*

*“You want to rake up a bunch of leaves and jump in them?” she said.*

*“Yeah, that sounds cool.”*

*Susan had already raked a huge pile of leaves almost as tall as him. He crouched slightly, ready to run headlong into the tree debris, but Susan grabbed his arm.*

*“Not yet,” she warned. “We need to make another pile so we can jump into them at the same time.”*

*Willie grabbed handfuls of leaves while Susan raked a tumbling wave, pushing it forward. It was quick work, and soon they had a second pile that rivaled the first. Willie twisted his feet, getting ready to run*

*“Last one in is a rotten egg!”*

*“Not yet.” Susan walked across the yard, leaned the rake safely against the house and returned to Willie’s side. “On-your-mark-get-set-go,” she said in quick cadence, catching Willie off guard. She plunged into the first pile, disappeared in a flurry of colors: red, yellow, orange and brown.*

*“Hey, no fair,” Willie protested. He ran to catch up, jumped feet-first into his pile.*

*Susan laughed, screamed with delight the way girls tend to do. Willie echoed her screams, pure joy pulsating through his body like an electric wave. Soon, he found himself immersed in the leaves, felt them scratching against his face, smelled their crisp, sweet decay.*

*He stood up, stepped forward. When he moved, the leaves moved with him, the vegetation clinging to him. “Hmmm, Mmmm,” he moaned like a recently revived long-dead mummy. He stepped through the pile, legs and arms taking shape, feet and hands. When he was a little boy again, he turned around.*

*Susan had disappeared.*

*“Susan?” he called out, a little bemused but not really upset. She was playing a game, perhaps hide and seek. “Susan? Where are you?”*

*He listened for a moment. A strong wind blew through the tree tops, a vague roar just before hundreds of leaves leapt from their lofty perches, swirling to the ground in a shower of color. It was suddenly a little cooler, and he shivered, noticing for the first time that afternoon the smell of wood burning, chimney smoke.*

*“Susan?” He was getting impatient, now. “Come on. Let’s rake up some more leaves.”*

*He heard a giggle beneath the carpet of leaves covering Susan’s yard. She’d been there this whole time.*

*“C’mon, Susan, let’s do it again.”*

*She giggled louder, so loud Willie saw the leaves quivering above her. He grabbed the rake and poked the place that moved with her breathing.*

*“Ouch! That’s my head, bozo.”*

*Willie wanted to unbury her, but he was afraid of what he might find. Hearing her disembodied voice from beneath the ground made him nervous. Maybe she’d been transformed by the aliens, turned cold and barren like a dead body, a zombie.*

*“Susan,” he pleaded. “Let’s do something else.”*

*“Not yet. It’s time for me to make a wish.”*

*“Okay?”*

*“But what should I wish for?”*

*“A brain?”*

*“Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny.”*

*“Sorry, just teasing...” Willie wanted Susan to get on with it. “So, what do you wish for?”*

*“I wish I had a horse.”*

*The statement shot through the leaves, spoken with conviction and purpose like she really believed it would happen. “I wish I had a horse, like Black Beauty.”*

*Finally, she stood up. A bunch of leaves had stuck to her sweater and head scarf, revealing only her face. She smiled at Willie, looked at him thoughtfully.*

*“Your turn,” she said. “Lie down in the leaves and make a wish.”*

*Willie fell backwards, arms spread open like the guy on that Nestea Plunge commercial. When he hit the ground, Susan pushed a bunch of leaves over his head and body, totally submerging him in the colorful foliage. A damp, musty smell tickled his nose. He almost sneezed.*

*“Make a wish. It’s got to be a real wish. It’s got to be something you want more than anything else.”*

*Willie lay in the leaves trying to think.*

*“I know these wishes come true. I wished for a bicycle last year, and that’s what I got for Christmas. It’s got to be a real wish, though.”*

*Willie knew what he wanted, but he was afraid to say it out loud. He lay motionless for a long time, holding his breath, his eyes closed tight.*

*“When you make your wish you have to rise up out of the leaves like a dead body coming to life, rising up out of the ground,” Susan continued, “because after this, your life will never be the same again.”*

*He was afraid to even think about his wish. He didn’t want his breath to escape his body while he tried to erase it from his mind, but he started to believe in what Susan*

*said, started to believe that this really was a magical moment. What if it did come true? What if he did rise up out of the leaves changed forever?*

*“Willie?”*

*His chest ached, ready to burst. He tried to make it go away, but the idea kept getting stronger and stronger. The wish started to take shape, the words on the edge of his lips. When he couldn't hold his breath anymore, he breathed out, expelling something he'd been containing for a long time.*

*“I wish I was a girl!”*

*The truth spoken, the words reverberated in the air, and he knew they would resonate, forever altering the course of his life.*

*He sat up.*

*“What?” Susan laughed. “You want to be a girl?”*

*Willie looked down at his body. He was still wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt and a blue windbreaker. His hair was still short, and he knew he was still a boy. It hadn't worked, and he felt his cheeks glowing red with embarrassment.*

*“Get in the house,” an adult male voice growled from the front porch.*

*Willie jumped with fright, stood up, ready to run.*

*“But Daddy,” Susan whined. “We were only playing.”*

*Susan's dad sat at the top of the stoop smoking a cigarette. Oh, my God, Willie thought. How long had he been there? Did he hear me say it?*

*Mr. Fraley, stood up, strode toward Willie, glaring at him.*

*“What are you, a little queer?” he said. Susan ran to the porch, face contorted like she was about to cry.*

*Willie brushed the leaves from his clothing, shook them out of his hair.*

*“Mr. Fraley, I didn’t...”*

*“Get your fairy little ass off my property, you queer.”*

*Willie stumbled. His legs didn’t work right, but he managed to make it back to the street, to the other side of the bushes.*

*Mr. Fraley turned toward Susan. “Get your ass in the house. How many times do I have to tell you?” He smacked the back of Susan’s head.*

*“But, Mr. Fraley...” Willie pleaded.*

*“Get the fuck out of here!” He jumped off the porch, ran toward him, arms raised, fists clenched.*

*Willie ran all the way home without looking back.*

## Eight

Guyles didn't mind working Christmas day. It was a nice distraction. Since he'd moved to Oklahoma City after separating from the Army, he'd been cut off from his family back home in Akron, Ohio. He didn't have the money or leave time to go home for the holidays.

Dana had abandoned him. He came home from work earlier in the week, found the apartment empty and quiet like he often did, but since it was Christmas, her absence was magnified, his isolation a torment. Too much time to think, nobody with whom he could talk.

Guyles had always felt isolated, an existential dread that he was the only person in the world, the only consciousness in the universe. Nobody else existed except as symptoms of his maddening loneliness. All other people were manifestations of himself, like characters in dreams. He wished he could wake up, not in the Buddha sense of enlightenment, but really wake up to the truth, whatever it was.

After sleeping as late as he could, he drifted toward the computer like it had a gravitational pull drawing him into its orbit. When he logged onto the Internet, he saw a number of e-mails, messages from family back home, buddies from the Army, subject lines bearing holiday greetings. He didn't bother opening the messages, knowing they

were mostly impersonal products of generic mass mailings from various lists servers, but one message did intrigue him. It was from Lady Pandora.

*Do you want to make an appointment?*

He stared at the monitor for a long time, a stir of emotions freezing him in place as he tried to comprehend his desires, his motivations. There was a sense of promise in Lady Pandora's response - a lack of judgment, perhaps - that made him feel a little better. Just business, nothing personal.

But try as he might, he couldn't provide an answer. An answer meant committing to something he'd rather not think about. He moved the mouse arrow toward the delete button, ready to trash the message, but what he did instead was save it, tabling the issue until another day.

Christmas night, third shift broke lineup at ten o'clock, and Guyles listened to the officers go 10-8 over the air. It was the first radio traffic in almost an hour, disturbing the silent night, if only for a few moments.

Guyles had driven his patrol car to the top of a parking garage near the Bank of Oklahoma building NW 23<sup>rd</sup> and Classen. He'd gone up there to take a break, backed his car into a shadowy corner where nobody could walk up on him from behind. The domed roof of the bank loomed over him like a planet, and he wondered why such a thing existed in a city that went out of its way to be ordinary. At one time, the geodesic dome must have been the pinnacle of architectural style in Oklahoma City, but the building was showing its age, gold had turned to brass years ago, the sheet metal showing rust. A skyscraper towered over the bank just to the south, irregular in shape, a diamond with



uneven edges, gold panels, like fins, jutting beyond the window-glass, a stack of concrete blocks at the top – another attempt at cutting edge design decades in the past.

“3 Adam 54 is 10-8,” Duncan’s voice announced.

Guyles had suspected Duncan would be off for the holiday, was pleasantly surprised to hear his voice. He hoped they might go back to Mama Lou’s, say hi to Carla. Maybe just maybe, she had an attractive friend who’d be interested in him.

“3 Adam 54,” dispatch called.

Duncan clicked the radio, sighed. “Yes?”

“3 Adam 54, domestic 119 NW 18<sup>th</sup>, teenager arguing with her stepfather.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you...”

Guyles keyed his mic, “2 Adam 55 will back.”

A domestic disturbance on Christmas night, all that good cheer wearing thin, Guyles thought. Stepdad’s getting drunk and mouthing off at the kids. He’d only been on the street five months, and it seemed like he’d answered that call dozens of times. It was almost predictable, almost, except that domestics can turn into a shit storm real quick. He found himself hoping this one would turn violent, maybe a fight, maybe a shooting – a chance to prove himself as a competent street cop, cool under pressure, a hero. And three days off, routine leave. He thought about Dallas. Lady Pandora.

“Goddamn it.” He pounded the steering wheel, tried to focus on the task at hand, backing on a domestic.

He sped east on 23rd street, flashed his overheads through the intersection at Walker to clear a red light. He saw the Tower Theater, the mangled marquee out front.

Some of the posted letters had fallen off, “\_lose \_\_\_r \_\_\_\_\_ eason,” it said. But in the blur of speed, it seemed to read, “Lose your reason.”

Despite his urgent response, Guyles was the third officer at scene. Duncan was already out of his car standing in the front yard talking to a tall black man dressed in blue jeans and a University of Oklahoma t-shirt. He waved his hands in the air, a gesture of exasperation. A teenage girl stood on the porch yelling while the other officer, O’Connell, rounded the corner, approaching the stairs. Guyles headed for Duncan, stood behind him, rested his arms on his Sam Brown belt, right hand close to his weapon, trying to look as menacing as possible.

“I’m tired of dealing with this shit,” the man complained. He stared beyond Duncan, acknowledged Guyles, grinned and nodded a nervous greeting. “I try to love that child, but she...”

“You don’t love me. You just fuck my mama.” She said, twisting her neck, punctuating her remarks with a pouty-face and rolling, dramatic eyes.

“That ain’t no way to talk about your mother,” the man scolded.

“I can talk any way I want to.”

The man nodded toward Duncan, forehead wrinkled in dismay. “You see what I got to put up with?”

A second female burst through the front door, and with her, the cacophony of a blaring television, the incessant drone of a video game soundtrack, the vacant thump of Hip-Hop music. She was older, old enough to be the girl’s mother. They certainly looked alike. The odor of cherry incense wafted out of the house, the kind often used to mask the smell of marijuana.

“Who called the cops?” she yelled, glaring at her daughter.

The girl turned away from her mother. “Officers,” she said. “He’s got warrants, and he drives without a license, and he’s drunk. Smell him...”

The man’s eyes bulged out, Adam’s apple quivering on his long, thin neck.

The mother grabbed the girl’s shoulder, tried to spin her toward the front door. “Get back in the house. It’s Christmas. Don’t you ruin my Christmas.”

Duncan stepped toward the man, all calm and smiling, but he had his hands up, ready to block a punch. Guyles bent his knees in a semi-crouch, ready to run after the guy if he tried to make a break for it.

“You got ID?” Duncan asked.

The guy offered his palms, shrugged. “Please, officers...”

By now, Hicks would’ve had the guy on the ground, handcuffed and spitting grass, but Duncan was different, refreshingly different. He placed his left hand on the guy’s right shoulder, urged him toward a patrol car.

The guy stiffened. “I got warrants. Just tickets, that’s all.”

Duncan nodded toward Guyles, winked. “Check him through Unit 800, verify the warrants.”

Guyles pulled the guy aside. “What’s your name?”

“Earl Jackson.”

The girl twisted away from her mother, hopped down the steps. “That’s not his name,” she said. “He goes by Earl Johnson.”

Earl looked at Guyles with pleading eyes. “Officer, I swear...” He slouched, submitting to inevitability. Guyles walked him to his patrol car, performed the customary pat-search. He was about to handcuff the guy, but Duncan shook his head.

“I think Mr. Jackson will be cool,” he said.

Guyles opened the back door, offered Earl a seat. Earl, a tall man, had to squeeze himself into the car like a circus clown, twisting his feet between the edge of the backseat and the cage insert. Guyles got behind the steering wheel, switched the radio to channel 13, the Crime Information Unit.

He checked Earl for warrants using both Jackson and Johnson for last names. After a few minutes Unit 800 advised he had two city warrants: public drunk and disorderly conduct, both misdemeanors. They also advised he had an old ticket out of Pittsburgh County, another public drunk charge.

“Do you want me to call Pittsburgh County to see if they want to extradite?”

“10-4.”

Earl twitched in his seat, the vinyl covering squeaking from his efforts. Since they were inside the car, a self-contained environment, Guyles could smell the liquor on Earl’s breath, the heavy odor of cherry incense and a faint trace of weed.

“I hadn’t been to Macalister since ’91,” Earl said. “I can’t believe they still have a warrant out for me.”

Guyles looked out the car window, saw Duncan and O’Connell walking toward the porch, interceding between mom and daughter who were getting close to trading blows. A couple of smaller kids stood behind a storm door watching the melee, one of them close to crying.

“Merry fucking Christmas,” Earl said. He sighed and dropped his head.

Duncan grabbed the girl’s arm, dragged her across the front yard to talk to her separately. Though he was adamant about making the girl comply, he maintained a serene, friendly look on his face - so different from Hicks. The girl yelled at him, but he shouted back, bringing the force of his authority down on the unruly teenager. The girl shut her mouth but stood rigid, hands on hips, shoulders back, glaring at Duncan. Her mouth quivered as she struggled to stay quiet or to keep from crying.

“Heh, the little bitch is getting hers,” Earl laughed.

Unit 800 came back on the radio, advised that Pittsburgh County didn’t want to extradite for the public drunk charge.

Earl smiled into Guyles’ mirror. “Happens every time,” he said.

“You still got the Oklahoma City warrants,” Guyles reminded him. “You’re still going to jail tonight.”

Earl nodded. “Yes sir.”

Guyles watched as Duncan walked the girl back to the front porch where he summoned the mother down the steps. He expanded his arms magnanimously, pushed mother and daughter together, supervising a hug. Duncan smiled. Mother and daughter smiled. Hell, even O’Connell smiled, breaking his normally rigid, unemotional posture. He adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses, the kind they call “birth control glasses.” Guyles half expected the four of them to start singing Christmas carols.

Guyles exited the patrol car, walked toward Duncan. “He’s got two AW’s, public drunk and disorderly.”

Duncan smiled at him, nodded toward the girl who walked up to Guyles arms open wide. Guyles stepped back, right hand jutting toward the butt of his weapon. He bladed himself against the girl, weapon turned away from her. She was stocky, thick, yet curvy with prominent breasts and a round bottom. She looked strong, capable of a fight, a situation made more difficult because she was juvenile and female, someone whom Guyles did not want to hurt. It'd look bad, something he'd have to live down for a long time.

The girl stopped, giggled. "Oh, Mr. Officer," she said. "I just want to wish you a Merry Christmas."

She stepped toward Guyles, moved into his personal space and clasped her arms around his torso, squeezed him. He didn't know what to do, just stood there for a moment as the girl held onto him, pressing her breasts against his chest, the shock-plate of his body armor. The gray of her Eskimo Joe's sweat shirt bumped the gray of his uniform shirt, and in the dim light he imagined the bulges of flesh were part of his body. He could almost feel them, their weight. He tried to push her away, but she held him in place, anchored herself.

He felt trapped, started to think about his self defense training. He imagined the technique, the sharp strike on both forearms, the knee-strike to the groin, the twist and push to gain distance.

"Merry Christmas, Officer Guy-less," she said, reading his brass nametag.

Guyless raised his arms, encircled the girl's shoulders and grabbed her in a tentative hug. Satisfied, she released her hold on him, and he took three quick steps back. The guys were laughing. The mother laughed, also. Then the girl laughed.

Duncan walked toward the patrol car, opened the door and let Earl out.

“Hey,” Guyles protested.

“Earl, I’m letting you go tonight. Merry Christmas.”

Earl smiled, then laughed. His whole composure relaxed. He walked toward the porch.

Duncan walked over to the girl, gave her a hug. She hugged him back.

Earl stopped in his tracks, looking jealous. “Now where’s my hug?”

Duncan released the girl. “Well, all right,” he said. He embraced Earl, gave him a hearty bear hug, lifted him off the ground. “There you go. Feel better?”

Earl spun away from Duncan, a shocked look on his face. Everybody laughed, everybody but Guyles who stood there trying to understand what had happened. It was the damndest thing he’d ever seen.

Duncan slapped him on the back. “Lighten up, bud,” he said. “It’s Christmas.”

Dispatch made a call.

“All units, Signal 87 at 800 N. Classen at the Classen Inn Motel. Calling party is the manager. He says one of his guests has stayed past his time and refuses to leave.”

The all-units call was up for grabs for the nearest unit or the most motivated officer, whoever responded first. Guyles was near NW 30<sup>th</sup> and McKinley, probably not the closest, but he jumped on the radio.

“2 Adam 55 will start.”

He was happy to get a call likely to end with an arrest. Trespassing, public drunk, they might be misdemeanors, but they’re good activity nonetheless. He tuned the car

radio to 100.5 FM, the KATT, which billed itself as Oklahoma City's premiere rock station. He liked having a soundtrack while he worked, liked even better having the freedom to listen to whatever radio station he chose without getting shit from a field training officer. Riding solo definitely had its perks.

But the KATT was in the middle of a long commercial break, so he switched over to KRXO, which specialized in classic rock. The music from Queen's *We are the Champions* filled the car. He'd tuned in too late for the *We will Rock You* stomp, but he sang with gusto, anyway, trying to match pitch with Freddie Mercury.

By the time he got to NW 23<sup>rd</sup> and Classen he had the volume turned up high enough to drown out the police radio. Hell, it was already past 1 AM, less than an hour before the end of shift. This call was going to take him home, maybe even snag a little overtime.

Guyles turned east on NW 9<sup>th</sup>, rounded the block at N. Francis. The song had ended, and he reduced the volume. Now silent as he prowled the area, wanting to glimpse a prostitute, maybe even Jody, the she-male, but the streets were empty, quiet, nobody walking around, nobody at all. Even hustlers took Christmas off.

He cruised past derelict homes, broken windows yawning vacancy like the eye sockets of skulls. A dim street lamp lit the north end of the motel's parking lot, a wavering glow of light growing brighter in brief flashes, then dimming to the point of darkness. Most of the other street lights had been shattered, offering the comfort of shadows for the furtive business of drug dealers waiting like vultures for the prostitutes to finish their tricks, come looking for a fix.

Guyles keyed the mic, "2 Adam 55 is 10-97."



The manager at the Classen Inn Motel was a dusky man from India or Pakistan, bearded, the smell of fish and curry on his breath, reeking through his clothing. He greeted Guyles with bloodshot eyes, a sleepy demeanor.

“This man, this Meester Flint. He pay for the room two days, and now he should go, but he is still here. You understand?”

Guyles nodded.

He led Guyles up a staircase, metal bars loose in their concrete footings, steel steps flakey with rust. It swayed under their weight. When they got to room 28 they found the door ajar. Guyles urged the manager aside to keep him from blocking the doorway as he entered the room.

“I’ll take it from here.”

The manager smiled, bowed his head and retreated back to his enclosure, a small cubicle surrounded by bullet glass, illuminated by the feeble green light of a miniature television.

Guyles entered room 28, overwhelmed by the sickeningly sweet odor of medicinal mouthwash. The derelict man lay on the bed, fully clothed yet uncannily exposed, vulnerable. The smell oozed from his pores, the sweat beading on his forehead. Strewn about the room were a half dozen empty bottles, the plastic, economy-sized monsters containing a half gallon of mouth wash. He’d been drinking, had drank them all in a binge of drunkenness.

Guyles retrieved his asp baton from the leather sheath on his utility belt, expanded the lightweight metal tubing with a sweeping downward motion. He used the baton to nudge the man, not wanting to touch his filth with his own hands. The man’s eyes

opened. Straining to focus, he glanced around the room like he was trying to congeal what he saw into one, unified image.

“What time is it?”

“It’s past one o’clock in the morning. Time to go.”

Flint smiled, spreading a satisfied look on his face. He laughed quietly, a sort of subdued expression of victory, like winning a game of cards.

“I did it.”

“Yes, you certainly did, Mr. Flint,” Guyles answered. “You certainly managed to make a mess here.”

Flint shook his head. “No. I **did** it.”

He moved his legs to the side of the bed and sat up, tapped his feet on the ground like he was testing its resilience. When he was satisfied the ground was solid enough, he set his feet firmly in place.

“I did it.”

Guyles encouraged Flint to get moving, to get his ass up off the bed and down to his scout car. He wanted to get this guy to Detox as soon as possible.

“I slept through it,” Flint said, gaining coherency. “I slept through Christmas.”

Now, that was something he hadn’t heard before. Guyles looked at Flint, his shabby clothes, his defeated eyes and the scruffy beard. It seemed like Flint had been sleeping much longer, something like years or decades, a living Rip Van Winkle, but Guyles doubted Flint’s ability to really wake up, so lost in drunkenness.

Then, he felt a deep emotional ache in himself. Why did Dana leave him? Why did he always feel alone? He felt a sudden affinity with Flint.

When he got Flint to the patrol car, he hesitated, decided to disregard his training, just this once, and skip the cursory frisk for weapons. Oh, the guy was nasty, with crusty clothing, caked with dirt, especially his trousers. He smelled like sour milk and shit mixed with a splash of mouthwash.

Flint collapsed in the backseat of the car, tried to twist his legs into the gap between the security cage and back seat. He ended up getting stuck. Guyles nudged Flint's foot with the toe of his work boot, allowing Flint to fold his left leg into the car.

Just before Guyles slammed the door shut he heard Flint chanting, kind of singing, "Everywhere is freaks and hairies, dykes and fairies..."

Guyles thought Flint was trying to insult him. Was this asshole, this waste of a man calling him a fairy?

"Hey shut the fuck up," he shouted.

If Flint had been trying to find a button to push, he'd certainly hit pay dirt. Guyles considered opening the back door, considered slapping the man across the face, a knuckle heavy backhand, but he restrained himself, not wanting to emulate Hicks.

When Guyles got behind the steering wheel and shut the door, Flint's odor overwhelmed the small, self-contained space inside the patrol car, strong enough to make Guyles gag. He activated a power switch, rolled down the back windows to let in fresh air. It helped, but not much.

"Can you crank it?" Flint said.

Then it occurred to Guyles that Flint was singing a song, singing along with the radio. "Population keeps on breeding, Nation bleeding, still more feeding economy..."

Guyles grabbed the microphone on his police radio, “2 Adam 55 to dispatch. 10-15 Detox one time.”

“10-4, enroute to Detox at 0125.”

When Guyles had navigated the car to the street, Flint repeated his earlier request, “Crank it man, I love this song.”

Guyles turned up the volume on the car’s FM radio.

Flint sang louder, “World pollution, there’s no solution, institution, electrocution...”

After a few more beats, Guyles finally recognized the tune, a song by the group Ten Years After, a band from the late 60’s and early 70’s. He remembered hearing that song when he was growing up. It had been a long time since he heard it.

Flint kept singing. “I’d love to change myself, but I don’t know what to do, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

Guyles heard the radio, realizing that Flint had substituted part of the lyrics. The song actually went, “I’d love to change the world, but I don’t know what to do...”

But somehow, Flint’s version seemed more appropriate.

By the time Guyles turned the corner on 4<sup>th</sup> and Walnut, pulling into the parking lot in front of Detox, he was singing, too - his voice harmonizing with Flint’s in an off-key but sincere duet.

“I’d love to change myself, but I don’t know what to do... but I don’t know what to do.”

*Dad got mad a lot, lately. Mom said he was getting ready to be laid off at work, and he was worried about having enough money to support the family. She asked the boys to give their father some space, try to understand how much pressure he was under.*

*Even as a nine year old, Willie understood that nobody really talked to Dad when he was angry. He just shouted whatever came to mind and allowed absolutely no*

*backtalk. Sometimes, he broke things, smashed his fists through the wall, threw things across the room. Once, he kicked the television with his steel-toed boots, stomped it useless, a toxic cloud of glass and dust mingling in the air. But mostly, he went to the basement, to his work shop where he hammered at pieces of metal clamped into the vice on his work bench.*

*Mom had supper ready, and the family gathered at the kitchen table in silence. Mom cooked what she called hamburg-gravy, again, and she spread the stuff over mashed potatoes this time. Sometimes she put it on toast, but the last time she did so, Dad complained, "Oh no, shit on a shingle again?" For their vegetable she heated canned peas, and she served watered-down glasses of iced tea for their drinks. She was trying to save the milk for their breakfast cereal.*

*Dad brought a clock radio to the dinner table, plugged it in and tuned it to a station that played classical music. The music sounded like it came from a tin box, no stereophonic affect here, and Dad leaned his left ear toward the radio, listening closely, a tense, determined look on his face. He was deaf in his right ear, had lost his hearing a few years before when he had an accident at work. The radio announcer said the music being played was from a composer named Bach, and it seemed to have a calming effect on Dad, reminding Willie of a Bugs Bunny cartoon where this ape character becomes meek when he hears music but enraged when the music stops.*

*Mom sat quietly, picking at her food. She was always talking about how fat she was, about how much she needed to lose weight, but she looked thin to Willie. She never finished a whole plate of food, which seemed unfair, since Mom was always after them to make "happy plates," having to eat every bit of food before they got up from the table.*

*Danny sat there making faces at a pile of peas on his plate. He wouldn't eat anything green, not without bribes and threats, anyway, but on this evening, the family was silent, the tinny music a morbid soundtrack.*

*"Brrrrrrrp!" a belch erupted from Danny, a noise that seemed too deep and resonant to come out of a small, five-year-old child. Danny glanced at Mom and Dad nervously, but when they seemed to ignore him his eyes narrowed mischievously. He smiled and swallowed a gulp of air.*

*"Brrrrrrrp!"*

*Mom glared at Danny. "What do you say?"*

*Danny looked around the room. "Thank you?"*

*Mom smiled, smacked hand to mouth trying to conceal it, but a giggle slipped out nonetheless.*

*Willie held his breath, but when Mom laughed he couldn't keep it in. Mom dropped her hand, looked down at her youngest son with affection, and she smiled, really smiled for the first time in weeks.*

*Dad coughed.*

*Mom and the boys stifled their laughter, a collective, uncertain pause.*

*Dad squinted his eyes, brows furrowed with resolution, thin lips set in a frown. He looked grim, displeased with the antics of his undisciplined family, but his poker face faded. He actually smiled, a chuckle rattling in his throat. The family erupted with uproarious laughter.*

*It felt good.*

*After a while, the laughter faded to whimpers and snickers, and again to silence, but a fog had been lifted. Dad turned off the clock radio, looking at the family for the first time since supper began. He scooped a bunch of peas with his fork, mixed them with his mashed potatoes.*

*“Look, son,” he said to Danny. “Eat them this way. You’ll hardly notice.”*

*Danny glanced at Mom.*

*Mom nodded, still smiling. “No eats, no treats,” she said.*

*Danny’s face brightened. “Treats?”*

*Willie watched his father, who nodded slightly, affirming that they’d have treats tonight if everyone made happy plates.*

*“That means you, too,” Dad told Mom.*

*Danny laughed. “Mom never makes a happy plate.”*

*“She will tonight. Right, hon?” He winked.*

*Danny and Willie looked at their mother expectantly. “C’mon, Mom,” they urged, watching as their mother shoveled a fork of food into her mouth.*

*Danny plowed potatoes and gravy into his pile of peas, mixing them vigorously. He stacked his fork with food, pinched his nose, closed his eyes and took a bite. After a hasty bit of chewing, a deliberate swallow, he looked up and smiled.*

*Dad finished quickly, and Willie followed suit, watching as Mom and Danny struggled to finish their suppers.*

*Willie, who usually tried to avoid talking to his father, felt suddenly reassured, even confident. They felt like a family, again.*

*“Dad?”*



*“What is it, son?”*

*“Dad?” he struggled. “Dad, what’s a queer?”*

*Dad frowned, lips clamping shut. That thin, pensive look returned. His eyes narrowed.*

*Willie felt sick to his stomach.*

*“Who called you a queer?”*

*Willie wished he could erase his question, but there was no escape.*

*Mom winced. Danny stared down at his food.*

*“Talk to me,” Dad threatened. “Who called you a queer?”*

*“Uh, Mr. Fraley...”*

*Dad rubbed his hands together, interlocked fingers, flexing forearms. His knuckles popped. “Well, let’s see who the pansy is,” he said, mostly to himself. He marched out of the kitchen. A door slammed.*

*Mom frowned at Willie. He thought he saw a flash of hatred in her face, but then she blinked, trying to suppress tears. She inhaled sharply, held her breath.*

*“You boys stay here,” she said.*

*She ran out of the house. “Daryl,” she screamed. “Daryl, please come back.”*

*Danny ran to the kitchen sink, opened the cabinet door underneath, and spit a mouthful of food into a trashcan. He grabbed his plate, scraped the contents into the trash.*

*“Don’t tell,” he said.*

*Willie didn't care. Dad was really mad again, and it was all his fault. He ran to the door, ran after his mother. He wanted to see what Dad was going to do. By the time he was out on the street Dad was already down at the Fraley's house..*

*"Tom Fraley," Dad shouted. "Get your ass out here."*

*"Daryl," Mom pleaded. "Stop it. This doesn't accomplish anything."*

*Some of the neighbors were already looking out their windows, stepping out on front porches to see what was happening. Mr. Fraley walked out of his house, yelled at someone inside.*

*"Hey, Fraley, what's a matter, you scared?"*

*At this Mr. Fraley walked to the edge of his porch, toed the steps. He bowed his chest and flexed his arms, clenched his fists. "You calling me out?"*

*Dad laughed bitterly, "What do you think..."*

*Mr. Smith, the Fraley's next door neighbor left his porch, walked towards Dad.*

*"Daryl," he warned. "If you don't simmer down, I'm going to call the police."*

*Dad leveled his gaze at Smith. "Fuck you, Jeff. This ain't your concern."*

*Smith nodded at his wife who went inside the house.*

*"Daryl," Mom pleaded again. "Don't do this."*

*Dad walked up to the Fraley's porch steps. "I just want everyone to know who's the real queer here."*

*At this Fraley launched himself toward Dad, attempting to grab him in a bear hug or some kind of headlock. Dad twisted out of his grasp, jabbed a fist at Fraley's face.*

*Fraley ducked, and Dad hit the side of his head with a glancing blow.*

*Fraley reared back and swung one of those huge Hollywood punches.*

*Dad blocked the punch with his left forearm, slammed Fraley with a hard right, hitting him just below the left eye.*

*Fraley stiffened, and Dad followed with a left fist to his gut. Fraley bent forward, and Dad grabbed handfuls of hair, was about to smash his face with a knee strike.*

*Mom jammed herself between the fighting men. "Stop! Stop!" she screamed.*

*Fraley fell backward, flopped on the ground and curled into a ball, quivering.*

*Mrs. Fraley rushed out of the house, leaped over the front steps and kneeled next to her husband, cradling his head in her lap. Fraley tried to get up, but he started coughing, unable to catch his breath. Susan stood next to the front door, crying.*

*"Daddy," she burred. "My daddy, he hurt my daddy."*

*Mr. Fraley retched, got on his hands and knees, and vomited.*

*The police arrived.*

*Two officers approached Dad. One of them, a slightly overweight white guy, gripped his night stick, ready to swing, while the younger, thinner man spoke.*

*"Hands on your head."*

*Dad glared at the officers, stepped forward like he was about to take another swing, but the thin officer's right hand shot to the gun in his holster. He brought it out, held it down, pointed to the ground. Dad stopped, raised his hands in surrender. The officer holstered his gun, grabbed a pair of handcuffs from a pouch on the back of his belt. He handcuffed Dad, patted him down and walked him toward the police car.*

*Mom screamed, "Please officer, don't take him to jail."*

*Willie started to cry, wondering if Dad was going away forever. And it was his fault, all of it. He followed the officers to the patrol car, moved in close as they opened the back door. The fat one grabbed him, dragged him away.*

*“Dad, I’m sorry, so sorry...”*

*The thin officer pushed Dad’s head down, nudged him into the backseat. Dad stiffened, stared at his son.*

*“Willie, sometimes you have to fight for your honor, even if you end up going to jail.”*

## Nine

After lineup Lieutenant Bowman approached Guyles, smiling.

“Go back, change into your civilian clothes. LT Virtue wants to see you.”

“Yes, sir!”

Guyles ran back to the locker room, excited, hopeful. Here it was, his chance to work undercover, and if he did well, he might get a spot on the IMPACT team, get out of the normal routine of police work, the call-to-call lunacy of regular patrol where you're too busy putting out brush fires to go after the real bad guys.

Guyles had always wanted to work undercover, had always wanted to step into a different identity, learn what it was like to be relatively free of rules. That's what it seemed like, anyway. As an outsider looking in, the undercover cop got to play the part of a bad guy, got to taste forbidden fruit, was immune to the consequences of the law. That is, as long as he kept his head on straight.

The door to the IMPACT office was painted gray, made of fortified steel, a small window of thick glass embedded with wire mesh. It was more than a barrier; it was a passage into a place where things weren't always as they appeared. For one thing, the IMPACT office was located in the old detention section of the briefing station, in a place where they used to house criminals. Now, it was home to a detail of police officers who worked sporadically, who drove unmarked cars (many of which were the products of

drug asset seizures), and who grew their hair long, sporting beards and goatees, earrings and tattoos.

The first thing Guyles noticed when he walked across the threshold was the huge bulletin board bedecked with press clippings about the unit's exploits: drug busts, fugitive apprehensions, officer involved shootings, high speed pursuits. Since the unit worked undercover, none of its officers were ever photographed or mentioned by name, making LT J.D. Virtue the public face of IMPACT operations. He seemed to enjoy the limelight, often smiling, even joking with the press. He was a hero, the kind of cop Guyles wanted to be.

Even rookies knew about J.D. Virtue, the man who'd been shot in the head during a drug raid back in the early 1980's. He was the number one guy, the first to make entry after the rammer battered down the door. On this particular raid they were taking down an operation in the upstairs half of a two-story duplex. As Virtue bounded up the stairs, one of the suspects appeared on the landing with a gun, fired two shots, one of them hitting Virtue in the middle of the forehead.

Some officers called it Providence while others called it luck, but nobody disputed that Virtue survived the ordeal in a miraculous turn of events. The round, a .32 cal bullet, struck his head, but instead of penetrating the skull and scrambling his brains, the round plowed a path halfway around his cranium. The impact knocked him dizzy, and the resultant wound left a scar, but other than that he was relatively unscathed. His real wounds didn't show until a few weeks later when his hair turned white. He also succumbed to wild rages, like epileptic seizures in that he never seemed to remember what he'd done while under their raging influence.

Virtue's office was inside one of the old jail cells, festooned with raid artifacts, a virtual museum of the criminal underworld. Behind his desk he displayed a huge blanket adorned with a giant marijuana leaf, one those kitschy items found in roadside markets alongside velvet Elvis paintings and rows of t-shirts beatifying Tupac Shakur. He had a table lamp shaped like a bong and a poster of Bugs Bunny sitting in the lotus position, wide-eyed and bloodshot instead of the half-closed serenity of a Buddha. The stainless steel toilet in the corner of the office was overflowing with lengths of panty hose stuffed with shredded paper and tied off at the ends to resemble big sausages with mug-shots of criminals taped to them. He was reading a High Times magazine, feet propped up on the desk.

Guyles stepped in front of Virtue, hands behind his back like he was standing at parade-rest, an old military habit.

"A few of my favorite turds," Virtue said, pointing at the toilet. He put his feet on the floor, tossed the issue of High Times toward Guyles. "Research."

The magazine fell to the floor, but Guyles remained rigid, waiting for the command to stand at-ease. Virtue eyed him, looked him up and down, smiled. His pale blue eyes sparkled, the corner of his brown mustache twisting into a smirk.

"Have you ever had sex with a prostitute?"

Guyles didn't know what to say. He felt a twinge of paranoia, thinking about the ramifications of an honest answer. Then, he realized his hesitation spoke loudly, an answer in itself.

Virtue brushed a hand through his shock of thick, white hair, revealing a horizontal scar running from the middle of his forehead into the edge of his hairline like a dirt road disappearing into a forest. He grinned.

“This ain’t an interview question. I just want to know if you know how to play the game. It might help.”

Guyles nodded, shrugged his shoulders like a kid caught stealing cookies. “I went to a place after boot camp...”

Virtue opened a desk drawer, withdrew a notebook, grabbed a pen and started taking notes. His affable demeanor diminished, looking the part of an interrogator.

Guyles backed away. “Maybe I should leave.”

Virtue laughed. “Just fucking with you,” he said. “I don’t care what you did after boot camp. All I want is a new face. We’ve been working the John traps, but we need to get some of the prostitutes off the streets, scare them away for awhile. The mayor’s been making a fuss.”

“So you want me to work undercover?”

“Well, just for the night, for starters. We’ll see how you do.”

They taped a microphone to his chest, wrapped wire around his torso and plugged the cord into a transmitter mounted on his belt. Virtue handed Guyles a .38 wrapped in a brown leather holster. Guyles clipped the firearm to the back of his pants.

“Sometimes things go to hell in a hand basket,” Virtue said. “But you shouldn’t have any trouble.”



One of the IMPACT team members, a stocky guy with a light brown goatee, a wild mop of a hairstyle, approached him.

“Dan Davis,” he said by way of introduction.

Guyles stuck out his hand, “Wil- uh, Bill Guyles.”

Davis smiled but failed to offer his hand in return. “We’ll save the handshakes for later.”

Guyles didn’t know what to say, so he just stood there, hand grasping emptiness. His cheeks felt warm, and he felt sweat beading on his forehead. He looked around, self-conscious, ready to hear the laughter, ready to hear an apology, *just fucking with you, man*, but Davis didn’t retract his brush-off. Virtue didn’t rein him in, either. They went straight to business.

“You have to let them make an offer,” Virtue said. “They have to name a specific sex act and a price.”

“And you can’t lead them on, otherwise they can claim entrapment,” Davis continued. “You can’t roll up to them and say, ‘Hey, how much for a blow-job. Just let them wave you down – and they will, believe me – and let them do the talking.’”

“And if they ask if you’re a cop,” Virtue said. “Tell them, ‘No.’ They think you can’t lie.”

Davis laughed. “If they ask you to show them your dick, do it, but don’t fucking blush.” He nudged Guyles, jabbed him in the ribs where it tickled. “You’ve done this before, right?”

Guyles nodded, almost said, ‘yes,’ but he stopped himself. Davis handed him a cell phone, told him they’d be calling to advise him of any change in plans.

They led him out of the office, to the parking lot behind the Will Rogers briefing station. Virtue handed Guyles a faded blue Dickies shirt with a name tag on it. "Put it on... Wilson."

Guyles looked at the nametag. Wilson. A new identity. He put the shirt on, noticed the smell of grease and gasoline.

Davis straightened the collar, reconsidered, wrinkled it again. "When you've made your case you need to say a code word when you're clear for a safe traffic stop. The code word for tonight will be baseball, got that?"

Guyles nodded, baseball. Don't forget, he thought. Baseball, baseball...

"When the black and white pulls you over, you need to be like a citizen, understand? Don't blow your cover. Let the uniformed officer get the girl into custody. You might get taken out of the car and handcuffed yourself. Play it all the way, act put out, pissed off. We don't want the girls to figure things out too soon. Word gets out fast."

Larry Hicks walked out of the station, nodded toward Guyles, a scoffing look on his face. He went over to Virtue.

"My LT sent me out, said you need a black and white for transports," Hicks said, a strange tone to his voice, a kind of kiss-ass quality, over eagerness, maybe. He narrowed his eyes at Guyles.

Virtue grunted at Hicks, brushed his hand through his hair looking a little exasperated. "All right, then," he said. "Just meet us down behind Lee School at 30<sup>th</sup> and Harvey in about thirty minutes. Don't be late. It's supposed to get cold tonight."

Hicks frowned. "So, you're stooping to use rookies for undercover Johns?"

Guyles wanted to tell Hicks to fuck off, but he maintained his cool, tried to focus on what Davis was telling him.

Virtue forced a laugh. “I think he’ll do a bang up job. Don’t you agree, Dan?”

Davis nodded. “He’s going to be a natural, just watch.”

Hicks groaned to himself, walked toward his patrol car and got in. He backed out of his parking spot in a herky-jerky fashion, squealed his tires as he jetted through the parking lot.

“I don’t like that guy,” Virtue said. “He ain’t right, hiding something, overcompensating, I think.”

Davis laughed. “Yeah, what a douche bag.”

Guyles relaxed. Until then he’d thought Hicks was the cream of the crop, the worldly veteran officer on second shift, but it began to dawn on him – maybe Hicks works two-shift because his peers can’t stand him, because only rookies will tolerate him, not knowing any better.

“Well, are you ready for this, Mr. Wilson?”

Guyles looked around. Wilson?

Davis tapped the name tag on his shirt. “Wilson...”

Guyles laughed, cheeks warming. He mentally scolded himself. Shit. “Ready as I’ll ever be,” he said.

They gave him a truck to drive, an old Chevy with a toolbox in back, faded yellow paint with primer spots. Guyles tried to remember everything Davis and Virtue had told him, a lot of information.

“I love being a cop,” Guyles whispered to himself, psyching himself up like a boxer getting ready for a bout. “I love being a cop.”

He climbed behind the steering wheel of his undercover truck, turned the ignition. “I love being a cop.”

He almost believed it.

It was already getting dark. What had been a relatively warm day for January had turned into a cold, crisp evening, a little windy. Rush hour was winding down, and there were few people on the street. Guyles trolled up and down South Robinson, a sinking feeling in his gut. How was he going to get a bust if nobody was walking the street? It wasn't fair.

He drove down to Grand Boulevard; saw several cars crowded into the parking lot outside Trueloves, all of them huddled close to a light pole as if for warmth, the only light fixture still working. Trueloves was a biker bar with a rowdy reputation, except tonight, there were no motorcycles, too cold.

A man and a woman stood outside the bar sharing a cigarette. The woman was thin, had stringy black hair and a vacant face, dark circles under deep set eyes. Her face looked like a skull with skin stretched over it. The guy was dressed like a biker, jeans tucked into big black boots, a leather vest festooned with patches. They ducked into the shadows of an alley behind the bar. He leaned against a wall, undid his pants and let them drop to his knees. The woman kneeled in front of him, moved her face toward his crotch.

“There’s a prostitute,” Guyles said to himself, then remembered he was wired, remembering that Virtue and the rest of the IMPACT team could hear everything he said. He imagined them laughing at his tourist-like enthusiasm.

Guyles expected the couple might spot him, stop their encounter and walk back into the bar, trying to be discreet, but they didn’t seem to care about his presence, stopped as he was at a traffic light across the street. Then he remembered he was in a pickup truck, dressed as a civilian. He’d grown accustomed to driving a patrol car, had become used to criminal types trying to act like law abiding citizens when they sighted the police. He now realized the power of official presence.

Not knowing what else to do, he drove across Grand Boulevard to the Phillips 66 station situated catty-corner to Trueloves. From there, he might be able to monitor the prostitute’s activities without being obvious. He pulled the truck into a parking spot, glanced back across the intersection. Nobody on the corner. When he looked into the store he saw nothing out of the ordinary, just a customer or two paying for gas, buying cigarettes, a case of beer. Guyles walked into the store, bought a bottle of Diet Coke and a Snickers bar.

The clerk eyed him. There seemed to be a spark of recognition on his ruddy face, a smile lifting his thick jowls, but he didn’t say anything beyond the normal routine exchange between clerk and customer. Still, the man’s look made Guyles nervous, made him worry that he’d blown his cover.

When Guyles returned to the truck, he heard the cell phone ring. He answered the phone, listened to Virtue, “If you don’t get something going here pretty quick, we’re going to have to scrap the whole operation.”

Virtue's ire jolted him, made him feel a little desperate. He drove north on Robinson, intending to cruise by Trueloves again. The prostitute he'd seen only minutes before had returned to her corner outside the bar. The glow of a neon sign backlit her hair, made it appear as a flame on her head, made her face seem darker, demonic. She waved at him.

Here it was, the moment of truth. He took a deep breath, exhaled sharply, breathed deep again, psyching himself. When he was still boxing, if he'd managed to clear his head, empty himself of everything but aggressiveness, he almost always won, but if he couldn't quiet his nagging self consciousness, clear his mind of self doubt, he always lost.

"I'm ready," he said, but he was still nervous.

He looked at the rearview mirror, looked into his eyes, trying to steal himself to the task at hand, but the look in his eyes had a tinge of panic, a pathetic plea for deliverance.

The prostitute smiled at him, tilted her head back, appraising him. She walked toward the alley, slow steps, a forced nonchalance. She appeared to be trembling, and Guyles wondered if she was shivering from the cold or tweaking from withdrawal. He took heart in this. She was having her own crisis, maybe she wouldn't notice his.

Guyles pulled up alongside her, stopped the truck, stretched across the long bench seat and manually rolled down the passenger window. The prostitute smiled, kept walking toward the alley, toward the shadows. She didn't say anything. Nothing to record.

He was a little confused. He'd imagined getting waved down, letting a girl into the truck where they'd conduct business, but this prostitute wasn't playing that way. She seemed savvy to the cat and mouse procedures of law enforcement, conducted business in a furtive exchange of knowing glances instead of speaking outright.

There were safety considerations. Guyles didn't want to follow her into the alley. It could be a setup. He'd be robbed, his gun taken, his wallet and money gone. Talk about total, utter failure.

Though Davis had told him to let the prostitute initiate the deal, Guyles found himself yelling at the woman, "Hey, sweet cakes."

He scolded himself. Sweet cakes, for god's sake. He could almost hear Virtue cussing.

The prostitute turned around, walked toward the truck, smiling, revealing a mouth gaping with darkness, more teeth missing than present. He cringed. She had to be a walking Petri dish, full of disease.

She leaned against the truck, stuck her head through the window.

"How can I help you?" she said. "Need a date?"

Guyles exhaled sharply, unaware until that moment he'd been holding his breath. It sounded like a sigh. The prostitute widened her eyes, revealing the irises, the whites, a stark contrast to the formally vacant sockets she seemed to have when he'd first spotted her, and her pupils were dilated, big and bouncy like basketballs.

"You're a cop," she said.

Her words felt like a hard right across his jaw. He was reeling. "No, I'm not," he said. "I'm just... lonely."

He heard the ring of desperation in his voice, saw her retreating from the truck. He'd blown it, but he kept on trying.

"Please, come back."

She jogged toward the alley, retreating to the security of shadows.

"Dozer," she yelled. "I got me a creep out here."

Guyles jammed the truck into reverse, floored the gas, backing out of the parking lot screeching tires. He cut the steering wheel sharply to the right, felt the truck spin toward the left, barely missing a light pole. The smell of burning rubber in his nose, the shiver of cold air coming through the window all made his eyes tear up like he'd been punched in the nose, reeling with dizziness.

The cell phone rang.

They tried again at NW 9<sup>th</sup> and Western, outside the Git-n-Go. The smell of grease wafted through the air, and the thrum of loud music reverberated from the Western Lounge, a dilapidated nightclub across the street. Guyles saw a girl standing next to a payphone on the corner outside the bar. She wore knee-high red leather boots over black tights, a purple miniskirt and a furry white coat. She was healthier than the other girl, had some weight on her, a broad, cherubic face, cheeks blushing from the cold. She waved as Guyles drove past.

Guyles stopped the truck, backed up. The girl eyed him, smiled. This one had all her teeth. He measured his breathing.

"Hi, what's your name?" he said, managing a smooth banter.



The girl brushed her hand through her long blond hair, tossed it back, revealing black roots near her scalp.

“My name’s Lonnie. What’s yours?”

Guyles gulped. He’d forgotten his undercover name, looked down at the nametag on his shirt. “Wilson,” he said.

Lonnie smiled, a glint of knowing in her eyes. “You’re a cop, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not.”

She lowered her head, adjusted the front of her jacket, spread the furry lapels and jiggled her breasts. “Too bad you’re on duty. You’re a cutie-pie.”

The cell phone rang.

Guyles stopped near a dingy looking store near NW 10<sup>th</sup> and Indiana, windows covered with security bars and placarded with posters, mostly beer ads, the kind with scantily clad women luxuriating with bottleneck beers in their hands. The street light outside had been broken. Two women huddled next to a payphone. Neither was particularly eye-catching, just a couple of home girls dressed in baggy jeans and sweat shirts, hair pulled back in tight braids, glistening in the meager light.

At first glance, they didn’t look like prostitutes, but when a blue Monte Carlo pulled up through the adjacent ally with music thrumming loud enough to vibrate windows, one of the girls approached the car, waved it to a stop. The passenger side window rolled down, pouring out a thick cloud of smoke. From where he sat, Guyles smelled the odor of marijuana mixed with cherry incense. If he’d been in a patrol car, he’d be darting across the street trying to stop the vehicle, but he stayed put, watched as

the girl climbed inside. The car turned south on Indiana, rolled down the hill towards Linwood Boulevard, the music fading to a series of beats.

The remaining girl stood there, eyed the truck, looking a little nervous. She got a cell phone from one of her pockets, pressed some buttons and talked to someone briefly. Guyles wondered why she stood next to a payphone when she had a cell phone. It didn't make sense. She went inside the store.

After a few minutes, a black and white turned south from NW 10<sup>th</sup> and stopped across the street from his pickup truck. The officer got out. It was Hicks, and he had a big smile on his face, one of those smartass smirks of his. He waved at Guyles and approached the truck.

Guyles didn't know what to do. He didn't know if he should place the truck in gear and take off, or just sit there, let Hicks approach him. It'd be just like Hicks to blow his cover.

"Someone called the police," Hicks said, laughing. "She said there was some creep sitting in a pickup truck outside the store watching her."

The cell phone rang.

Guyles expected LT Virtue to be angry when the team assembled at the Taco Buena near NW 23<sup>rd</sup> and Penn, was afraid he might have one of his infamous meltdowns, but he seemed lighthearted, even jovial. He handed Guyles a tray of tacos and burritos.

"It's on me, tonight, folks."

The team went to the far corner of the restaurant, jostled for a moment while they tried to decide who got the corner seat, the one with a view of all the entrances and its

back to the wall, the tactical choice for a police officer eating in public. Ultimately, the team deferred to hierarchy, let LT Virtue have the prized position. The others fell in like dominos in a semi-circle. Hicks sat down at an adjacent table, relegated to the team's outer orbit. Guyles sat across from Virtue, closing the circle's gap, feeling like he was sitting in a place of judgment.

"I think this whole night's been a waste of time," Hicks said. "And I think we know why." He stared at Guyles.

Guyles took a bite of his burrito, stared back at Hicks, feeling defiant. He didn't have to concede to him ever again. He was no longer in training.

Virtue laughed. "Yeah, Bill. I don't think you're cut out for undercover."

Guyles felt the crush of disappointment, a rush of embarrassment. He'd failed. He wanted to leave, go home, call it a night.

Davis shoved him, a playful prod. "What were you thinking, bud? That last one wasn't a prostitute."

"I know," Guyles said.

Hicks laughed, leaning into the group. "You've got a lot to learn. I should have extended you, but no, Bowen thinks you walk on water."

"Larry, why don't you shut your mouth," Virtue snapped. "Guy-less here works his ass off on the street, a damn fine officer. It's just that not everyone's cut out for undercover work."

Guyles felt a glow of pride; one of Oklahoma City PD's legends had stuck up for him. It almost made the night seem worthwhile.

“It’s only nine-thirty, y’all. We still got another chance,” the lone female member of the IMPACT team nudged herself into the conversation. She smiled at Guyles. She was attractive but rough, like a biker chic, face crinkled with laugh-lines, weathered, her hair a sun-bleached wild tangle. She didn’t look anything like a cop. No wonder she worked undercover.

Davis groaned. “I don’t know, Ash. It’s cold. Nobody’s going to be on the street now.”

“Well, maybe not any of the girls,” she said. “But we still haven’t tried the boys.”

Virtue stared at Guyles, appraising him with new interest. “Yeah, Dan, what do you think?”

Davis stroked the whiskers on his chin.

“No offense, man,” he said to Guyles. “But you do look like queer bait to me. Not that I think you’re queer or anything, just, handsome, in a boyish way. Attractive... to men. You know, the kind of man men are attracted to.”

Guyles imagined himself impaled on a hook, dangled above a bunch of grubby guys dressed in leather, drag queens, girly boys who swooned for him, lispng their desire. Queer bait... oh hell. He glared at Ash who smiled back at him, flirtatiously.

What signals had he been putting off? Where had he slipped up? He thought he’d boxed that shit up years ago.

They all laughed. Even Hicks seemed happy all of a sudden.

“Oh, fuck,” Guyles said to himself.

## Ten

The IMPACT team gathered in the parking lot of the Baptist General Convention building near NW 38<sup>th</sup> and May, one of those glass and steel monstrosities, taller than everything else around it. The shiny exterior reflected the ambient light from the surrounding neighborhood, cold and forbidding, a dark tower looming over the gay club district less than a mile to the east.

The wind was blowing out of the north, turning the evening from cold to frigid. That's the way it was in Oklahoma, Guyles had been told - a sunny day in the 60's could turn into an arctic blast in a matter of hours. He'd been caught unprepared. The Dickies shirt they'd given him was not heavy enough to keep the wind from slicing right through him. He stood in front of LT Virtue, shivering.

Virtue slapped him on the back. “Hey, Guy-less, you ready for your tour of Queerville?”

Guyles’ chin quivered. “P-please call me B-bill. Okay?”

“Okay, B-bill.”

He had the sinking feeling he’d be called Guy-less forever. It wasn’t a hard name, nowhere near as hard as something Russian or German. Why was everyone massacring his name? Were they fucking with him?

Virtue lit a cigarette, a shock of ignited lighter fluid mixed with the smell of burning tobacco. The red glow of the tobacco cherry made the lieutenant’s face look sinister, shadowy when he inhaled. The interplay of light and dark, his white hair, created the effect of a living photographic negative.

“All right... Bill,” Virtue said. He looked at Guyles, a fire glowing in his eyes. “We need pay dirt on this one.”

“Okay,” Guyles said. He stared down at the concrete, a spacer line between his feet like he straddled a border. Here it was, his last chance.

“We need to get a good bust. Those faggots act like they can do anything they want,” Hicks said.

The team huddled against the wind, grunting in agreement. It felt like a football huddle, and Virtue was the quarterback. They were lining up for the last play, and they were sending Guyles out to catch a Hail Mary, wanting to salvage what had been an unproductive night.

Hicks squeezed into the crowd, nudging against Ash who groaned her disapproval.

“We need to send a message,” Hicks said. “Send them back to their closets.”

He was the guy who got too excited, the guy who tried too hard, the guy who didn't realize nobody took him seriously.

Virtue ignored him. “On this operation, Bill, we're changing the rules a little.”

“The rules?” Guyles said.

“We don't need them to name a price, just the act,” Davis continued.

“Just the sex act?”

“That's right,” Virtue said. “All one of them perverts needs to do is name the act, and then we can pop him. If he asks if you want a blowjob, you got him. Up the ass? Case close.”

Davis grunted. “Those bastards will do it for free, so we need to modify our procedures.”

Guyles didn't like the way this felt. The lieutenant and Davis seemed conspiratorial in the way they talked.

“Offering to engage in a lewd act is how the ordinance reads,” Davis explained. “It doesn't require a price. We do it for the girls so we can make a better case for prostitution, but these guys, they lurk around looking to have anonymous sex. They'll stick it in a hole in the wall, just as long as they get off...”

Guyles could only nod, afraid to say anything, afraid to sound hesitant or too excited. He was feeling transparent all of a sudden, like he was being tested, about to be penalized for any wrong move.

“It's got to stop,” Hicks said, a beat too late. “That's how those cocksuckers spread disease.”

Each member of the team stifled a laugh, regarded him, making no effort to hide their annoyance. Even Guyles joined in, happy to see the spotlight shifted from him, if only for a moment.

Virtue looked at Guyles. “You understand what we’re saying, right?”

“Yeah,” Guyles said. “Just the act...”

Ash laughed. “Then I’ve got you guys by the balls,” she said. “So, the next time we go to the Glitter Dome and one of you grabs my ass and says he wants to fuck, you’re toast. Offering to engage...”

Virtue frowned. “Not now, Ash. This is different. These guys are perverts, faggots.”

“What they do should be against the law, no matter what,” Hicks interjected.

“According to state law, it is,” Davis said. “Ever heard of the sodomy statutes?”

“Ever get a blow job?” Ash said. She and Davis eyed each other, their faces betraying a struggle of emotions.

“But they’re fags,” Hicks added, ever a beat too late, always at the moment of excess.

Virtue sighed, dropped his cigarette, stomped it, making a show of impatience.

“We have to stop what they’re doing,” Hicks continued.

Virtue shoved him, no nudge this time, but a warning. “And we will,” he said. “Just as long as our boy, here...” He looked at Guyles expectantly. “Just as long as Bill can deliver the goods.”

After the meeting Guyles climbed into the old Chevy pickup. It took three cranks to get the thing started, and when the engine finally started, the truck shook and sputtered.



It sounded like the manifold had busted a gasket or something, and the smell of engine exhaust filled the cab. He rolled down the window to let in some fresh air, only to feel the sting of a cold gust of wind. He shivered, trembled in time with the truck, fumbled with numb fingers, trying to activate the truck's heater. It blew cold air. He pounded the dashboard, half expecting the impact to vibrate a spring or something, making the heater work as if by magic.

“Hey, Bill.”

The voice startled Guyles, who was already on edge. Coiled in mid shiver, he jumped. He glanced around. It was Davis.

“You okay?” he said.

Guyles didn't answer, sat there trying to calm his spastic muscles.

“What's the holdup?”

Guyles forced a laugh. “I'm just waiting for the truck to warm up. I'm freezing my balls off.”

Davis smiled, patted Guyles on the left shoulder. “Okay,” he said, checking his watch. “But it's getting late.”

Guyles nodded soberly. He shifted the truck into gear.

“Remember,” Davis said. “Baseball, the code word for when you make a case.”

“Yeah, baseball.”

Davis gave him a thumbs-up.

Guyles romped the gas, intending to peel out of the parking lot, but the truck sputtered, jerked forward, and stalled. He turned the ignition, got the thing started, feeling

his cheeks warming with embarrassment. He gingerly stepped on the gas, coaxed the truck out of the parking lot and down the road.

By the time Guyles reached NW 39<sup>th</sup> and Youngs, the western limit of the gay district, the truck had begun to run more smoothly, warm air pouring through the vents. When he turned the fan on high power, the truck engine bogged down and coughed. To keep the damn thing running, he had to keep the fan on slow, the only speed this truck would go.

Guyles passed a coin-operated laundry on the southeast corner of the intersection where he saw a tall figure with long, dark hair standing next to a payphone. The person wore a long black coat, legs wrapped in thigh-high black leather boots with stiletto heels. Ha, another prostitute, but she didn't wave at him.

He stopped behind a line of cars near 39<sup>th</sup> and Barnes, all of them waiting to turn left. The line stretched several blocks, snaked around the front of the Habana Inn, an old motor hotel billing itself as the largest gay resort in the Southwest. From there, the cars cruised through the parking lot, past curb-side rooms, big picture windows devoid of curtains, inhabitants on display like merchandise.

There was a commotion outside a club, neon sign blinking pink letters: Saddle Tramps where a very tall woman with a high stack of red hair, wearing a Walmart smock was holding court, surrounded by admirers. Her eyes were adorned with heavy makeup, great swathes of color, thick rings of eyeliner, her huge lips the color of a dark red cherry. Another equally over-the-top woman came outside, hands on hips, twisting her neck and bobbing her head, a sneer on her lips. She wore a frizzy, pink wig, dressed like a

vagabond punk rocker, a Cyndi Lauper impersonator. The queens squared off, brandishing glue-on fingernails, yelling insults while the crowd laughed and cheered. Guyles wasn't sure if this was a real confrontation or something for show. Either way, it was an interesting spectacle.

“Hey, Reba Macintyre,” he said absentmindedly, after realizing who the Walmart queen resembled. Then he remembered the microphone, “Shit.”

He resolved to keep his observations to himself.

It was his turn to make a left, finally, but when he stepped on the gas, the truck sputtered and stalled, blocking both lanes of westbound traffic. Someone honked a horn, the sound of skidding tires. Guyles stomped the gas, causing the truck to lunge forward faster than he'd intended. For a mad moment he was out of control, running straight toward oncoming traffic. He jerked the steering wheel to the right, aimed the truck toward a gravel parking lot across the street from Saddle Tramps and barely got it stopped before colliding into a baby blue Mercedes sports coupe.

The crowd that had gathered around the drag queens ambled toward the street with Reba Macintyre in the lead. She (or he) waved and shouted at someone, and Guyles held his breath. For a brief, heart-stopping moment, he thought Reba was waving at him, and he stared, beguiled by the bold display of femininity concealing the man. But it turned out she wasn't waving at him, rather, she was waving at a group of people standing outside a Winnebago parked at the entrance of a self-storage compound. They held signs denouncing the gay lifestyle.

The woman holding the “Repent” sign was wearing a long skirt, cold as it was, and she had long blond braids trailing down to her waist. The one carrying the “Homo-

sex is a Sin” sign was a boy, ten to twelve years old, and one had to wonder why his parents would expose their son to this kind of circus, such an adults-only scene. Another woman carried a sign, “R U Saved.” She looked more modern than her skirted friend, sporting short hair and wearing a pink turtleneck and lavender jacket, big hoop earrings and lots of makeup. She looked out of place, like she belonged on the other side of the street. An older, stone-faced man with gray hair, shirt buttoned to the neck, sporting a black western-style string tie. He shouted, “For the wages of sin is death...” pounding a huge bible, beating on it like a bongo but without rhythm.

For the most part, Guyles admired the church people standing stoically, braving the cold wind, the catcalls the Saddle Tramps crowd hurled at them. He admired their conviction even if he didn’t exactly agree with their approach. Though they seemed determined to spread the good news of God’s love, they didn’t look happy, rather grim. American Gothic in the gay ghetto.

The preacher looked directly at Guyles, moved closer but not beyond the edge of the curb line as though it marked some magical barrier. “Leave Babylon, now!” he shouted. “Repent! Repent! The time is now at hand...”

Guyles clunked north on Barnes, cruised past the marquee front entrance of the Habana Inn where he saw a large group of people huddling beneath the portico, trying to get out of the cold wind. Inside the lobby he saw a tall, flamboyant woman holding court, posing for photographs with all the deportment of a beauty pageant contestant. She wore a white dress with a low-cut neckline, slits rising high on her thighs revealing muscular legs, bulging calves. She also had large biceps, a thick neck, the v-shaped torso of a bodybuilder, Marilyn Monroe on steroids.

A skinny security guard with thick-rimmed glasses approached Guyles, waving a flashlight. “You need to keep moving,” he shouted.

“All right, Barney Fife,” Guyles shouted back.

The security guard frowned, started coughing, gasping for breath, waving his hand in front of his face, eyes half closed. “Your muffler is shot. Get this piece of shit out of here before I call the police.”

Guyles almost blew his cover, annoyed by the geeky security guard’s hubris, he wanted to shout back, “But I am the fucking police,” but he managed to swallow the words, regurgitating, “All right, Mr. Rent-a-cop, sir,” instead. Working undercover was harder than it looked.

The security guard raised his middle finger as Guyles nursed the truck forward, this time anticipating the lunge. When he rounded the corner on the north side of the hotel complex, he saw a line of semi-truck trailers parked on the service road running east and west along Interstate 44. He followed the service road west until it curved to the south depositing him back at the intersection at NW 39<sup>th</sup> and Youngs, across the street from the coin-operated laundry. The figure he’d seen at the payphone ten or twenty minutes before was gone. He turned left, wanting to give the strip another pass, hoping the cell phone wouldn’t ring, calling it quits, the night a total failure.

When he got to Barnes, he went straight this time, stopping behind a vehicle parked in front of a shabby complex of one-story, flat-roofed houses not much bigger than a backyard shed. The Kozan Apartments, an old highway-side motel converted to efficiency apartments, a throwback to the days when the main road west was U.S. Route 66, but now, the place had all the classic signs of a crash-pad for prostitutes and junkies:

the broken street lights, the walls covered with thick scrawls of graffiti, a broken neon sign flickering in the darkness, producing unstable shadows reaching and receding like tentative fingers. Several people stood out front, near a bent and broken chain-link gate, centuries guarding the passage to a place of secrets and shame, criminal excess and neglect, mostly neglect.

One of the people resembled the dark-haired figure he'd seen at the coin-operated laundry. This time Guyles got a glimpse of the face, a hauntingly familiar face, but he didn't know where to place it. Obviously, she'd been someone he'd arrested or someone he'd dealt with professionally, and he began to feel self-conscious, slumping down behind the steering wheel, looking at the rearview mirror, waiting for a gap in the line of traffic crowding the left lane. He wanted to get out of there. The person stepped away from the little group, jogged toward the truck, peering inside the cab, smiling at him.

Guyles recognized the face - Jody, that she-male chic he and Hicks had hassled months before.

He felt his heart pounding, his breath getting shallow. Though she wasn't as glamorous as she was that first time he encountered her, she still looked alluringly feminine, though thinner with dark circles under her eyes, hair frizzy and unkept. She pressed toward him, knocked on the window.

"Hey there, you want a date?"

Guyles wanted to roll down the window, wanted to invite her into the cab where they'd make a deal. He wanted to make a case and watch her get arrested. Afterwards, he'd read the report, check Jody's gender to see if she really was still a guy. But he couldn't move, couldn't speak. He closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, Jody was gone. She'd trotted across the street, was talking to some guys in front of a little bar called The Park, a warm looking place, well lit and vibrant with life and color. She embraced one of the guys, and they walked into the bar, shivering off the cold.

Guyles was about to leave, content to call it a night, ready to admit he didn't have what it took to work undercover, but someone opened the passenger door. Startled, Guyles reached for the .38 tucked behind his back thinking he was about to get car-jacked, but instead of the menacing face of a desperate criminal, he saw the smiling face of a flirtatious young man, no older than eighteen or nineteen.

"Hi there," the intruder said. "Looking for company?"

Guyles tried to relax, the fear of the moment before replaced by a sense of triumph. Here it was, a chance to redeem himself. He took a deep breath, exhaled.

"First time, huh? I love to bust cherries."

"I'm not a virgin."

The young man slammed the door, nudged his head forward indicating he wanted Guyles to take him somewhere. "Not a virgin? Ever have sex with a guy before?"

Guyles looked away, face burning.

"I thought so," the guy said.

He brushed a strand of blond hair from his face. He was a handsome kid, almost pretty with smooth, fair skin, even white teeth. If he was a hustler he hadn't been one for very long.

"What I meant to say was, I think it's pretty obvious you've never been with a guy. That's all I was saying. I'm right, ain't I?"

Guyles nodded, lowered his head.

“Are you a cop?”

The panic came back. Here he was about to lose the chance to make a case. He knew what he said or did next would either make or break the whole transaction.

“I’m not a cop.”

The truck shuddered, almost stalled as they approached the traffic light at 39<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue. Guyles glanced to his left, saw Jody walking into Ziggy Z’s, a head shop on the northwest corner of the intersection.

The guy moved closer, patted him on the shoulder. “I believe you. A cop wouldn’t be driving such a piece of shit.”

“Gee, thanks,” Guyles said. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

For the first time all night, he was thankful for this bucket of bolts he was driving.

“I’m Ryan,” the guy said. He extended his hand in greeting, exhibiting the characteristic handshake one might expect from a male prostitute, the limp wrist thing.

Guyles wondered what had driven such a sweet-faced kid into the streets to hustle for a living. He almost felt sorry for the guy, imagining an overbearing father kicking him out of the house for being gay, yelling at him, calling him queer. He looked down at the patch on his shirt.

“I’m Wilson,” Guyles said. “Stan Wilson.”

“Nice to meet you, Stan. Turn left, please.”

Guyles sputtered north on Pennsylvania, drove beneath the I-44 bridge and stopped at a traffic light.

“Left, again. I know a really private place.”



While waiting for a green light, Guyles studied Ryan's face, the expressive eyes and dimpled chin, and he was quick to smile, charming. Guyles almost felt bad about trying to bust the kid. Almost.

"Do you think I'm cute?"

"Yeah, I mean, for a guy," Guyles said, scolded himself.

"I think you're cute."

They turned left on the service road on the north side of I-44, went past an apartment complex, more busted street lights, a falling down stockade fence covered with graffiti. Ryan pointed toward a trio of office buildings, directed him toward an unlit parking lot on the north side where they parked beneath a clump of cedar trees.

"What do you like?"

Guyles squirmed. "What do you mean?"

Ryan rolled his eyes. "You can't even say it, can you?"

Guyles shrugged, feeling humiliated, inept, worried. He wished he'd never agreed to this assignment. When a cop wears a uniform and drives a black and white patrol car, the expectations of the job are obvious, the roles clearly defined. Now, he was supposed to act interested in having sex with another man, a young man, a kid.

"It's okay," Ryan said, reaching across the cab and placing his hand on Guyles' right thigh high enough to feel his penis. He kept it there.

Guyles almost jumped out of the truck. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

Ryan's hand stroked the front of Guyles' fly, fingers grabbing the toggle of his zipper.

“What are you doing?” He needed Ryan to say it for the tape, needed Ryan to articulate the sex act first, otherwise he could claim entrapment, and he wanted so much to do this one right. It would probably be his last chance for the night.

“C’com, handsome, you know you want it.”

Guyles wanted to yell at the kid. *C’mon, just articulate it, you bastard!*

Ryan unfastened Guyles’ belt buckle, was just inches away from plunging his hand down Guyles’ pants, into his underwear, and at the most inopportune moment imaginable, Guyles developed an erection. That’s when he’d had enough.

He wanted out of this situation, and he didn’t care if things lined up just right. After all, if it ended up in court, who would the judge believe, a cop or a hustler? And it probably wouldn’t go to court anyway. Ryan would get busted, get out of jail on an OR bond and then simply fail to appear on his court date, an effective plea of guilt. These hustlers did it all the time.

“Hey... Ryan... have you been to a baseball game at the new ballpark downtown?”

Ryan stopped. “What?”

“I really like baseball, do you?”

“Baseball?”

“Yeah, I’ve played baseball all my life,” Guyles said, his mouth going dry. “I love BASEBALL.”

Ryan laughed. He reached into Guyles’ underwear, grabbed his now fully erect penis.

“Base-a-ball had a been berry good to me.” He sounded corny, even to himself. Oh, God, he thought, where is Hicks?

Ryan stopped, looked into Guyles’ eyes, faces close. His breath smelled sweet, like Peppermint Schnapps. “You like baseball, huh? So, okay... let me give you a home run?”

“A homerun?”

“God, you’re so cute.”

At that moment, Guyles glanced at his rearview mirror, saw a black and white pulling up behind them, lights out for stealth. He felt a wave of intense relief. The cavalry had finally fucking arrived. He never thought he’d be so grateful to see Hicks.

Ryan massaged Guyles’ penis. It felt too good.

“Third base is a blow job, and a homerun is taking it up the ass. So, are you a pitcher or a catcher?”

Here it was... he’d finally made the case. “Yeah..”

“Yeah, what?”

Hicks turned on the overheads, flooding the truck with light. “Yeah,” Guyles said, relieved, triumphant.

Ryan sat up, raised his hand to shield his eyes, a squeal of fright.

“Let me see your hands, motherfuckers,” Hicks yelled.

Guyles, still playing the part of the undercover cop, did as instructed, raised his hands. Ryan moved to the far end of the cab. Guyles heard the click of the door.

“If you run, you’ll get your ass shot off,” he warned. “Oklahoma City cops are mean bastards...”

Ryan surrendered, raised his hands, crying. “Oh, I’m as good as dead, anyway.”

Guyles had thought Hicks would snatch up the hustler first, but he was approaching the truck on the driver’s side.

“Driver, get out of the truck, keep your hands where I can see them.”

Guyles wanted to protest, concerned that Ryan might run. He submitted, determined not to blow his cover. Maybe that’s what Hicks was trying to do, get him to blow his cover. Asshole.

Hicks ordered him to place his hands behind his back, interlacing his fingers.

“Like when you pray, shithead,” he growled. “Because you’re going to need it.”

He kicked Guyles’ feet to widen his stance. Then there was the click of handcuffs, the feel of cold steel around his wrists, the bite of steel on skin, tighter and tighter. Too tight.

“What are you doing?” Guyles whispered.

“You really are a dumb fuck. Policy states that upon arrest, the prisoner shall be handcuffed to assure officer safety.”

Hicks did a pat search, did it rough. When he reached the area around Guyles’ crotch, he grabbed Guyles’ erect penis through the pants.

“I knew it,” Hicks said. “You’re a fag.”

Hicks checked the small of Guyles’ back, found the gun, took it out of the holster and set it on the hood of the truck. He leaned toward the open driver’s side door, shined his flashlight into the cab.

“This bastard was going to kill you, you dumbass,” Hicks told the kid.

Ryan got out of the truck, walked toward Hicks submissively, eyes wide with fear. Hicks handcuffed the kid, escorted him back to the patrol car, leaving Guyles standing there, shivering in the cold.

*Willie leaned his head against the cold glass of the front seat window. It felt soothing at first, but the cold penetrated his skull, deep into his brain where it settled into a dull ache. He didn't move. The pain seemed to vindicate his mood as he stared at the slush gathering in the gutter, a disgusting grey mass. Black water flowed beneath it, slithering into the sewer.*

*He heard a stifled laugh. The skin on the right side of his forehead had frozen to the glass, hurting when he sat up, looking for the source of laughter. The headache, like an ice-cream freeze, lingered inside his head.*

*"Hey, William..."*

*Willie knew the voice, Tommy Culbertson. Not a friend.*

*“Hey, faggot, I’m talking to you.”*

*Willie turned to see a crew of boys at the back of the bus, all of them staring at him, grinning. Nobody said anything. They just snickered. Willie glanced at the mirror above the bus driver’s head. Mr. Rodifer was not usually a bus driver, but since he’d been laid off from the factory he’d started driving a school bus. Their eyes met in each other’s reflections. Mr. Rodifer frowned. No sympathy there.*

*An object struck Willie on the back of his head, a light impact that didn’t really hurt, but the meaning behind it made him reel with dread. He blinked his eyes, tried to suppress the welling of tears. The boys moved closer, like sharks drawn to blood. Willie huddled in the corner of his seat.*

*“Look at me,” Tommy growled through clenched teeth.*

*Willie cringed and closed his eyes, anticipating a slap on the head.*

*Tommy Culbertson wasn’t a big kid. Tow headed, cute and charming, he had an electrifying smile and huge puppy-like brown eyes, a living, breathing Dennis the Menace. All the girls at school liked him, and all the boys wanted to be his buddy. He should have been the sweetest kid in the world, but he was a bully and, Willie was his target.*

*“Look at me, fag.”*

*“I’m not a worm,” Willie said, recalling his mother’s explanation.*

*The assembled boys, five in all, erupted in laughter. Willie looked up to the bus driver’s mirror pleadingly only to see Mr. Rodifer glance away quickly. Tommy grabbed Willie’s chin.*

*“Look at me.”*

*Willie did his best to stare at Tommy like one of those boxers right before a championship bout. They locked eyes for a moment. Tommy's eyes smiled with confidence while Willie melted inside, his strength drained by fear. He broke the gaze first.*

*"Okay, now that I've got your attention fag-boy, I want to play a game."*

*Willie nodded slightly, submitting to Tommy's demands.*

*"I want you to look straight ahead. When I slap you, I want you to say, 'Thank you, sir. May I have another?' And you're not allowed to cry."*

*"This'll be good," one of the other boys said.*

*"I'll bet he cries after the first one," said another.*

*Was that Patrick? Willie thought Patrick was a friend. They used to play Legos together, built some magnificent space ships.*

*"No tears," Tommy said. "You ready?"*

*Again, Willie nodded, closing his eyes. He puffed his cheeks to cushion the blow.*

*"Oh, oh," an older boy said. "He's gonna blow ya, Tommy."*

*Willie held his breath, waiting for the stinging slap. He saw a flesh colored blur in the peripheral of his left eye, and though he tried not to, he cringed, turtling his head between raised shoulders.*

*When Tommy's hand struck his cheek, it was only a slight tap, almost a caress. He let his cheeks deflate, and he felt a curious gratitude.*

*"Thank you, sir. May I have another?"*

*Maybe Tommy wasn't so mean after all.*

*Tommy laughed. "Well, how'd you like that, not so bad, huh?"*

*Willie didn't move a muscle, nor did he say a word. Tommy grabbed his chin, forced Willie to nod. Tommy tried to talk like a ventriloquist. "Gee, Tommy, that was great," he spoke in falsetto. "Let's do it again."*

*The boys laughed, louder this time.*

*Tommy looked at the assembly of boys, just a few but more than enough. The other kids on the bus were silent. Willie felt their stares, heard their whispers knowing they too were afraid of this wolf pack of tormentors.*

*"Michael," Tommy commanded, "your turn."*

*Willie felt a wave of relief. Michael had once been a friend. He wouldn't hurt him, or would he? Willie looked up when Michael stepped in front of him. He wanted to make eye contact, to reaffirm their friendship, but Michael stared beyond him with a grim, determined look on his face.*

*Willie took a breath, held it, clenched his teeth tightly together. He stared at one of the buttons on Michael's winter coat, a jean jacket filled with fluffy imitation wool. It was a Levi's button, copper in color, almost like a penny.*

*"Faggot," Michael shouted. The hard, stinging blow snapped Willie's head to the left. Tears threatened to overwhelm his eyelids like dams on the verge of bursting. A single tear drop slid down his right cheek.*

*"He's crying," Patrick declared. "He's crying."*

*The bus stopped near 8<sup>th</sup> and Roosevelt, a long block from Willie's home. He sat there, frozen. He hadn't cried, not really; it was the force of the slap. A single tear didn't mean he was a cry baby. It was so unfair. But, the boys kept teasing him.*

*"You know what the penalty for crying is?" Tommy said. "Target practice!"*



*Willie didn't know what that meant. He imagined being tied to a post and blindfolded like those guys in Wild West movies when they get executed by Mexican Army soldiers.*

*"Hey, Guyles," Mr. Rodifer barked. "Your stop. Get moving."*

*Willie stood up with a great sense of relief. Only he and Michael got off at this stop, and Michael lived just across the street. The ordeal was over, at least for the moment. He brushed past the crowd of boys, fingering his right cheek, worried it would leave a mark. Dad wouldn't like this.*

*Michael filed behind him as Willie stepped off the bus into the cold afternoon air. Though it had stopped snowing hours before, it was still cloudy, a slate grey canopy thick enough to make the sun's position in the sky indistinguishable. The whole world seemed somber, frozen and asleep. He shivered slightly, zipped his coat as high as it would go.*

*Willie watched Michael dismount the bus, figuring Michael wouldn't chase after him because he was big and fat, the worst athlete in third grade. Michael was the one the crowd usually tormented, the most unpopular kid in the class, that is, until lately. Things had changed after Willie's dad got arrested for hitting Mr. Fraley. He hoped Michael would smile at him as he stepped off the bus and apologize. Willie decided he would forgive him. But Michael maintained a menacing look on his face, a look directed at Willie. The other boys lined up at the door waiting to dismount.*

*"Hey, guys," Willie pleaded. "This ain't your stop. Tommy, you guys get off at Tenth Street."*

*Tommy jumped off the bus. "Target practice," he said, laughing.*

*Willie started to run, slipping and sliding on the ice, almost falling. It was a nightmare kind of running: the churning legs, the lack of traction, and the looming monster right on his heels.*

*“Get him, Michael!” Tommy’s voice shouted. “Get him. Sit on him.”*

*Willie plunged face-first into a bank of snow, chin scraping ice. The pain penetrated his mouth, jarring his teeth. Tasting blood, he heard Michael’s forced breathing right behind him.*

*“Come back... here... you... little faggot,” he shouted with great effort.*

*Willie sprang to his feet aided by a surge of adrenalin. He ran carefully, taking smaller steps. It was like trying to run on a balance beam. The other boys shouted behind him.*

*“Come back here, you fucking queer.”*

*The f-word meant that things had become really serious. If he got caught these boys would be merciless. A snowball glided past him on the right, another on his left. A third snowball hit the side of his head, just above the right ear, an oblique hit that didn’t hurt too much. Snow exploded in front of him.*

*“Good... one... Tommy!” The boys’ voices had risen an octave with the excitement of victory.*

*Willie churned his legs harder, building momentum step by step, teetering on the edge of disaster. He was only three houses away from home. The cold air froze his lungs, and each breath started to burn.*

*“Maaa...” he tried to shout, his voice lost in labored breathing.*

*Only two more houses.*

*Another snowball struck his back, right in the middle, but it didn't hurt because of his thick coat. Then, a flurry of snow balls sailed above him, disintegrating in the street. Since the boys had to stop long enough to scoop up handfuls of snow, Willie was at least a dozen strides ahead of them.*

*One more house.*

*The excited laughing was getting meaner as the teasing changed to cursing.*

*"William," Tommy warned. "This ain't over. We'll get your ass at school."*

*Willie made it to the house in time to see a tall masculine shadow behind the window of the front door.*

*Dad!*

*He plunged toward the porch steps, tripped on the edge of a sidewalk ravaged by the roots of a giant maple tree in the front yard. He slid through a haze of snowy debris. The whiplash of the sudden fall caused his face to smash into the ice-covered concrete. Darkness enveloped his vision, the boys' voices fading to echoes. He felt numb.*

*The next thing he knew, he was being dragged backward on his belly, out into the street. Willie looked up, saw a trail of red in the snow, so strange and foreign, a bright color in a dull, black and white world. He tasted something metallic.*

*Blood!*

*His own blood!*

*He tried to twist away from his captors, but they were too strong, too determined. He yanked and kicked, losing his boots before he finally broke free. Scooting on the ice, he tried to put distance between himself and his tormentors. It wasn't long before the cold*

*bit into his stocking feet, numb at first then burning. He collapsed in defeat, no longer able to fight or run.*

*The boys pelted Willie again and again with snowballs. He huddled into a fetal position. That's when he really started crying, great convulsing sobs, nose flooded with snot, chest heaving.*

*"He's crying!" Patrick howled. "The little fag is crying!"*

*When it seemed like the barrage of snowballs would last forever, when it felt like he would freeze to death right there in the street, he heard a car approaching, heard the engine, the crunch of snow beneath tires, imagined being plowed into the icy pavement, but the car stopped. A door opened.*

*"What the hell are you doing, you goddamn rednecks?" came a husky masculine voice. "Leave him alone!"*

*The snowballs stopped.*

*"Who are you, asshole?" Tommy's voice yelled defiantly but more distant. He was running away.*

*Willie saw the man scooping a handful of snow, packed it, and threw it. Willie imagined Tommy getting beamed by the snowball, right in the mouth just when he was about to yell another insult. He imagined Tommy sputtering and crying from the icy pain, running home with a huge fat lip. This made him smile.*

*The boys kept shouting, but their voices were more and more distant like the rumbling of thunder in a retreating storm. He tried to move, but his muscles were cold, seized in place, still retracted in fear. It hurt to move.*

*The guy stepped behind Willie, cupped his hands beneath his arms and lifted him. His legs were so cold he had trouble unfolding them even with the help of gravity. The guy gathered his boots while he stood there shivering.*

*“You all right?” the young man asked. And then it finally dawned on Willie who this guy was. It was Donut, the guy from across the street. He didn’t know Donut’s real name, only that everyone in the neighborhood called him Donut. Was it because he liked to eat donuts? Is that how he got his nickname?*

*Willie tried to speak, chin aquiver, voice shaking, but nothing intelligible came out of his mouth.*

*Donut was sixteen, maybe seventeen, old enough to drive, and he wore a letterman’s jacket. He was also really handsome and in very good shape, probably the toughest kid in the neighborhood, and that was saying a lot since Willie’s neighborhood was full of guys who were ready to rumble, a whole lot of wanna-be gangsters. Donut, though, had a refined quality of toughness, something beyond a bluff. He looked capable. He also had a bruised cut over his left eye, like he’d been in a fight recently. Willie supposed the other guy looked a whole lot worse.*

## Eleven

Guyles loved the speed bag, the repetition, the rhythm. He could stand there almost indefinitely – left-left, right-right, left-left, right-right, rata-tat-tat, rata-tat-tat, over and over again, faster and faster until the muscles in his arms reached the point of failure,

losing coordination. The world became tightly focused, things were predictable, and, as long as he didn't break form, he had total control.

The speed bag was a difficult thing to master, always swiveling left or right when he'd wanted it to go back and forth, like it had a mind of its own. He had to start over and over again until he learned how to hit it with just enough force at exactly the right place. It taught him focus, form, and balance, the value of resilience and fortitude, the virtues of discipline and restraint.

He'd been feeling unbalanced since his misadventure with IMPACT, and he wanted to drown the words "queer bait", "baseball" and "Guy-less" in the rhythm. Rata-tat-tat, rata-tat-tat, faster and faster, and it was working, too. He pounded on the thing harder and harder, breathing in and out, his whole body, a steady, ready beat, and the heat felt good. The sweat dripping down his face, he occupied his space, feeling free, suspended, upending the turmoil. He was flying, trying to be nothing but the steady, ready beat. Rata-tat-tat, rata-tat-tat, louder and louder, faster and faster...

Then, he felt a tap on his shoulder. And he was thinking, how could anyone be so bold? Can't you see I'm trying to uphold the beat?

"Hey, man!" a voice complained.

He thought, I must sustain the beat, stay focused, none of that hocus pocus shit, just the beat, the rhythm, man.

"Dude, time's up."

Damn the pain, must sustain the pace...

It was like a dream. A hand appeared out of nowhere, grabbing the bag, stopping the rhythm.

Guyles backed away, not comprehending what had happened, hands up, dancing in place. The rhythm still throbbed in his mind. No time to be unkind, man, just rewind the tape and go on and on, world without end, amen and repeat.

The heat swelled around him, squeezed his chest, and he knew he hadn't done his best. Just toss some more focus on the fire, and he could keep going higher and higher until, until he reached Nirvana...

A radio blared the words of Kurt Cobain, and he felt his energy draining, the beat dwindling from his body. What's this shit about everyone being gay? Oh, yeah... All Apologies.

The guy who'd jumped into his space stared at him. He was a tall, sinewy Latino with lots of attitude flashing in his steely eyes. He had a flat-top haircut, and tattoos. One of the tattoos high up on the left side of his chest, close to his heart, was a spider web. Guyles knew from the police academy that spider web tattoos were symbols of control, common among Mexican gang members.

Kurt Cobain's voice echoed off the walls of the gym, and Guyles wondered why someone hadn't changed the music already, something with more rhythm, something hard-driving, something inspiring. He bowed to the Latino guy, a martial artist's offer of deference.

"All apologies," Guyles said, feeling stupid, the song stuck in his head.

He felt disoriented, distressed from his interrupted speed-bag trance, his pulse hammering in his temples, a glaze of perspiration on his skin.

"So fucking hot," he said, wiping sweat from his brow. The salty substance stung his eyes.

Someone tossed him a towel. After clearing his vision, he saw an older man standing there, wild salt-n-pepper hair, deep blue eyes, and an infectious, indomitable smile. It was Pat Brummel, the owner of the South Side Boxing Club.

“Of course you’re hot. This ain’t the Pacer Fitness Center,” Brummel said. “You come here to fight? Or did you come here to tone up?”

One of the distinct aspects of the South Side Boxing Club was the heat. Brummel kept the heat up all year round as a conditioning measure to keep his fighters lean and tough. If you could go three rounds there, you could go three times that anywhere else. A runner up to the heat was the smell, the musky odor of male sweat permeated everything in that tiny gym.

“You look like a pretty boy,” Brummel observed. “Pretty boys don’t hang out here very long. They come in thinking I’ll turn them into fucking Rocky, but when they get knocked up-side the head a few times, they quit. They don’t want to be good; they just want to look good.”

Guyles nodded, thinking for a moment. *Pretty boy. Queer bait. Shit.*

“I came here to fight,” he said.

Brummel laughed. “Okay, then. You’ll have your chance, sooner than you think.”

The courtyard outside Guyles’ apartment usually brought him comfort, the soft trickling of water from the goldfish pond and the ting of wind chimes, the sound of muffled music coming through the walls of a neighbor’s dwelling. The trellis full of trumpet vines and flowers made him feel that the world was teeming with life, but as the sun began to set, shadows swelling into darkness, he felt the cold dread of dis-ease, not



merely a sense of unease. Something was beginning to unravel like a person succumbing to sickness.

The courtyard was silent. Someone had drained the water from the pond, and the air was uncharacteristically still, the chimes motionless, the vines on the trellis brown and dry. Guyles' feeling of vacancy yawned in the silence, inhaling the gathering gloom. Only the sky had color. He watched an orange cloud float overhead brilliantly juxtaposed to the deep blue sky. The cloud turned red, then purple, in the waning light. Winter sunsets do not linger, he thought, the light gone all too quick.

Guyles tried to cheer himself by thinking of spring, the big change, the new growth, but his melancholy held fast. He thought about the pain of growth, how new things feed off the debris of death left over from the summer before.

When he let himself into the apartment, the silence overwhelmed him. He missed Dana, wondered if she was gone for good. The click of the refrigerator activating startled him, sounding louder than it actually was. He moved cautiously through the living room as his eyes adjusted to the dying light. It was like exploring a crypt. He held his breath until he found a lamp and clicked the switch, finally exhaling when light flooded the room. He grabbed the remote and turned on the television.

Guyles didn't really want to watch TV; he just needed the ambient noise. The station was set on VH-1, and they were profiling the music of Pink Floyd, one of those Behind the Music documentaries. Instead of settling into his old beat-up recliner, he went to the bedroom. When he turned on the light he noticed his bed had been made, tried to remember if he'd made the bed before he went to work.

When he went into the bathroom, Guyles paused at the mirror, took off his sweat shirt and posed like a bodybuilder, flexing his muscles, proud of their definition. Although he hadn't been working out as intensely as he did when he was in the Army he was proud to see the coveted six-pack of abdominal muscles, a necessary attribute for a boxer, a shield to absorb body blows. His arms weren't big, but they were sinewy and hard like coiled springs.

"How can you call that queer bait?" he asked his reflection.

Then, he really examined himself. He had a spikey flat top like he did when he was in the Army, but he grew it slightly longer now that he didn't have to smash it down with a hat all the time. He'd been applying hair gel to give it a more stylish look, to soften the hard core veneer of a soldier.

His face was youthful with smooth skin, high cheekbones, and a small chin. He blushed when he remembered a time back in high school when he was in a play. One of the girls put makeup on him.

"Gosh, I just love your cheeks," she said laughing. She brushed a streak of blush on the left side of his face. "What a waste on a guy."

He quit the drama club after that.

His heart sank. He did have a boyish, sensitive looking face. He tried to grimace, but he couldn't manage a seriously mean veneer, a menacing sneer. He didn't look like much of a threat. He didn't even have a crooked or swollen nose, nothing to show for the time he'd spent in the ring. No wonder Brummel had called him a pretty boy.

Guyles felt his face, the stubble on his chin, a thin veil of blonde hair, hardly noticeable. He was the only guy he'd ever known to make it almost to the age of thirty without developing a five o'clock shadow. He had a Ken-doll face not a G.I. Joe face.

Guyles returned to the bedroom and stared at the computer in the corner. He sat down, logged on to the Internet. He found the message from Lady Pandora in his Saved Mail file.

*Do you want to make an appointment?*

His hands hovered over the keyboard as he considered the next step. He knew he should delete the message, but there was a curiosity. He wanted to know what he'd look like as a woman, the full cosmetic effect: the luxurious caress of long hair on his neck, legs covered in shimmery hose, breasts bulging beneath flowing fabric, their weight on his chest. He wanted to look down at the hemline of a dress hanging near his knees, see his feet shod in pretty blue pumps. When he walked, he wanted to feel the swish of the dress on the backs of his legs, the weight of earrings dangling from his earlobes.

He clicked the reply icon.

*How about two weeks from Saturday?*

Guyles maneuvered the mouse arrow to the send button and paused. The fear of the unknown seized him. He'd worked so hard to push these feelings out of his life, and yet here they were, stronger than ever and building.

"Just this once."

The words echoed off the ceiling, mocking him.

"Just one time," he repeated, "to satisfy my curiosity."

He looked upward, pleading to the moonscape on his ceiling.

“Then I’ll bury it forever.”

He closed his eyes like he did when he stood in the door of a C-130 during Army Airborne training. He clicked the send button, felt himself plunging downward into a spiraling vortex, hoping his parachute would deploy.

Guyles logged off the Internet, turned off the computer. The monitor blinked, icons disappearing, replaced by a blank, blue screen, like a clear blue sky. Then it went completely black.

He heard Pink Floyd music from the television in the living room.

*There is no pain... you are receding...*

*Willie heard a curious sound, a rhythmic thumping, ratta tat tat, ratta tat tat, over and over again. It sounded a little like someone dribbling a basketball at rapid speed. The sound was coming from behind Donut's house, and he imagined Donut was really good at basketball like a Harlem Globetrotter. He liked to watch those old films of Goose Tatum, Curly Neal and Meadowlark Lemon. He thought these guys were the best basketball players in the history of the world, and he loved their antics, the way they clowned around making their opposing teams look ridiculous. He wandered up Donut's driveway curious to see a fabulous display of athletic wizardry.*

*By the time he got to the back of the driveway the sound had stopped. There was nobody playing basketball, not even a basketball goal back there. He started to leave when he heard a series of thumps followed by quick, loud groans coming from inside the garage.*

*Thump, thump, "Who-ah!" Thump, thump, "Who-aahh!"*

*He snuck to the edge of the garage door, peaked around the corner. It was Donut, stripped to the waste, looking powerful with huge biceps, a well defined chest. He was*

wearing small boxing gloves, punching a huge bag that hung from one of the garage rafters.

*Thump, thump, "Whoa-ahhh!"*

*Sweat poured down his face, and Donut danced, bobbing and weaving, flicking his left hand several times, a succession of soft blows followed by a hard right.*

*Sometimes he punched low, the impact lifting the bag a few inches, the rafter it hung from groaning with strain. If the bag had been a man, his head would have popped right off - just like one of those robots in that Rock-em Sock-em Robots game.*

*Donut dropped his arms and smiled. "Hey there..." He grabbed a towel and wiped his face. "You like boxing?"*

*Willie didn't know what to say, but he heard words spill out of his mouth, "Uh, yeah," he said. "I guess so."*

*Willie watched for Donut's car every day after school, and he found himself drawn to the garage listening for the thumps and grunts indicating Donut's workouts. He watched Donut, infatuated with his skill and power. He wished Donut was his big brother.*

*One day, Willie finally asked a question that had been bothering him for a long time. "Why do they call you Donut?" He cringed for a moment expecting Donut to explode with anger.*

*Donut laughed, wiping sweat from his face. He wasn't mad, but Willie thought he could see some bitterness in his grin, the pain of an unpleasant memory.*

*Donut stood up. "Come over here," he beckoned.*

*They went to Donut's house, walked inside, through the kitchen, through the dining room and into the living room. The house had a big old fireplace and on the mantel, there was a bunch of family photographs. One particular grouping of pictures had a current photo of Donut, and next to it were several others. Looking at them from right to left Willie saw Donut getting successively younger. One picture showed Donut at about ten years of age, the same age Willie was now. He was fat in that picture. It hardly seemed possible that the vibrant and powerful young boxer could have ever been a chubby, awkward child. Yet, there it was.*

*"My real name is Steve Doughty," Donut said. "At first they called me doughboy because I was chubby, and then one day I was eating donuts at school and they started calling me Donut. I hated it at first. But when I learned that Dough Boy's were fighters in World War I, I started to like it."*

*He pointed to a picture of a young man wearing an Army uniform, handsome with red hair and blue eyes, a sergeant with lots of ribbons on his chest and a medal shaped like a parachute. He wore a patch on his left shoulder, an eagle's head, and above it was another patch shaped like a tab that said "Airborne." The young man looked a lot like Donut.*

*"My dad was a soldier," Donut said.*

*His eyes glistened, blinking several times. Donut seemed too tough to cry.*

*"He died in Vietnam when I was three years old. The guys in his squad called him Donut, too. My mom said he died a hero."*

*Without another word Donut went back to the garage. Donut lost his father in a war. Wow, so tragic. Willie tried to imagine what it would be like to lose his dad, and*

*then all the insults of the past several months flooded his mind, some of them uttered by his own father. He realized, in a way, he'd lost his father, too. But perhaps, it wasn't too late to get him back.*

*"Donut," Willie said tentatively. "I want to learn how to box."*

*Willie was having trouble with the speed bag, that small bag hung from a swivel attached to a platform, that small bag swinging in tight circles instead of bouncing back and forth in rapid succession. When Donut worked the speed bag it became a blur as he tapped it with alternating right and left hands, ratta tat tat, ratta tat tat. He made it look so easy, but Willie couldn't get it to bounce more than once or twice before he lost control.*

*"Patience," Donut urged. "Focus and control. Those are the keys to the speed bag, Willie."*

*Willie groaned with frustration. He didn't think he'd ever master the speed bag.*

*"I got a surprise for you," Donut said. He took a pair of boxing gloves out of a bag, presented them to Willie. They were red, just like the ones the pros used, but they were the perfect size for him.*

*"Put them on," Donut said. He held the right-hand glove firmly while Willie stuck his hand inside. He repeated the process with the left hand, and then Donut laced them up. The fit was tight but comfortable, like he'd been born to wear boxing gloves.*

*Donut put a pair of bag gloves on his hands. They moved out of the garage into the backyard.*

*"It's about time you learned how to spar."*



*Now, Willie was more than a little intimidated by this, sparring seemed a lot like fighting. He didn't want to fight someone as tough as Donut, but once they got started, Donut wasn't so intense like when he punched the heavy bag. He slouched a little and smiled the whole time, moved his hands in slow motion, telegraphing every move. Willie felt more comfortable, less afraid.*

*"Keep both hands up," Donut coached. "Keep your right tucked close to your face. It's your best weapon. Always have it ready."*

*Donut assumed a fighting stance, both hands in front of his face, elbows tucked tight, and he leaned forward in a partial crouch. When he moved, he stepped up quickly keeping his knees slightly bent. He looked like a tiger ready to spring upon its prey. Again, Donut made this look so easy, but when Willie tried it, he felt unbalanced and awkward.*

*"Try to hit my face with your left hand," Donut said.*

*Willie reared his hand back, tried to unleash a powerful blow, but the boxing glove felt heavy. He couldn't get it to go where he wanted it to go quickly enough. Donut kept ducking again and again, or, rather, he just moved his head out of the way. The rest of his body stayed balanced in a fighting position.*

*Frustrated, Willie stepped back. He took a deep breath, started swinging his hands in great big circles, like a buzz saw. He figured nobody could withstand an onslaught like this. One of his punches was bound to connect, but Donut just moved to the side, tapped him on the forehead. Willie turned to face him, trying to redirect the buzz saw. Donut danced in the opposite direction causing Willie to fall off balance, tapping him on the forehead, this time a little harder.*

*Willie put both boxing gloves in front of his face, charged at Donut like an angry ram. Donut tapped Willie's abdomen. Willie started swinging wide haymaker punches like the ones in John Wayne movies, but Donut blocked every single one of them, countering every punch with a tap on the forehead.*

*After a full minute of this wild flailing Willie started to feel a painful stitch in his right side and it to breathe. He gasped big gulps of air, and his boxing gloves felt like fifty pound lead weights. He couldn't raise his hands anymore. Donut stepped closer, smacked his forehead, pushing firmly but not abruptly. Willie lost his balance, tripped over his tired legs and fell down utterly exhausted.*

*Willie lay in the grass, staring up into sky, the clouds like boxing gloves, gathering strength, getting ready to beat the earth. He stayed like that until it didn't hurt to breathe anymore.*

*Donut laughed, but it was a patient, kind laugh, not a laugh of ridicule.*

*"Round two?" Willie said.*

*"You were down for the count buddy. It's time you learned how to punch."*

*Willie didn't understand why Donut would say that. "I know how to punch," he insisted.*

*Donut shook his head. "No, you don't."*

*Weeks later Donut had Willie on the heavy bag, holding it in place, playing the part of a stubborn fighter who refused to move.*

*"Jab," he shouted. "Jab. Jab."*

*Willie punched the heavy bag three times in quick succession with his left hand.*

*“Good,” Donut said. “Don’t telegraph it. Keep your elbows in. Jab. Jab. Jab.”*

*Willie punched three more times.*

*“Breathe, Willie. Breathe.”*

*Three more jabs, this time accompanied by three sharp, high pitched exhales.*

*“Good.”*

*Donut moved the bag forward, simulating an opponent’s attack. Willie retreated two steps back.*

*“Don’t let him back you up, side-step, then punch.”*

*Willie closed the distance.*

*“Jab. Jab. Cross.”*

*Willie jabbed twice with his left hand, let loose a firm right cross.*

*“Okay... to the body. Left hook. Right hook. Jab. Jab. Cross.”*

*Willie crouched and slammed the heavy bag as instructed. He exhaled with each punch, feeling energy coursing through his body, electrified with every hit.*

*“Okay, you got him reeling. Go in for the kill,” Donut’s voice sounded triumphant.*

*“Jab. Jab. Jab. Cross. Good rhythm. Okay, to the head this time. Jab. Jab. Right hook. Left hook. Okay, he’s unsteady on his feet. You got him Willie. You got him.”*

*Willie could actually see his opponent. It was Tommy, and he was reeling and crying, mere putty in his skillful hands.*

*“All right, killer. Take him out.”*

*Willie moved in with a right upper cut, the knockout punch, his glove smashing the bottom of Tommy's chin, lifting and snapping his head back. Tommy's eyes closed as he reeled on his heels, falling flat on his back.*

*Victory!*

*"Great job!" Donut shouted. "Outstanding!"*

*Willie raised his hands in triumph, danced around the garage. When he had calmed down, taking time to catch his breath, Donut handed him a water bottle, started untying Willie's boxing gloves.*

*"All right," he said. "You're ready for the next step."*

*Willie felt a surge of triumph. He really was getting good at this boxing stuff, proud of himself for choosing a sport and sticking with it.*

*"What's the next step?"*

*Donut smiled. "You can do it. I know you can."*

*Willie felt impatient. He wanted Donut to get to the point. "What?"*

*"A real opponent," Donut said tentatively.*

*"We spar all the time. You're real."*

*Donut laughed. "Are you doing this on purpose?"*

*Willie stared at Donut, saw the affectionate look on his face. He'd do anything for that look. Donut pat him on the back.*

*"I mean, it's time you had a real match with someone your own age."*

*Now Willie wasn't sure he was ready for that. The idea scared him. It was great messing around with Donut and punching on the bags, but to fight someone else for real, a real boxing match. That felt impossible.*

*Donut must have sensed Willie's hesitation. "You're ready," he said. "You can't really say you know how to box unless you put it all together in a real match. Trust me, Willie, you'll do great."*

*"Against who?"*

*"Tommy Culbertson. Time for some payback, huh?"*

## Twelve

It was time to get ready for work. Guyles donned the uniform with solemn purpose. Though the work of a police officer was largely routine, every new day held the potential for personal disaster, death. Cops died in fiery car crashes, got stabbed and beaten in fights, shot while responding to holdup alarms, ambushed on traffic stops.

Guyles had developed a series of habits reinforced every night he came home unharmed, and over time, these habits formed a ritual. He shined his boots, so shiny he could see his reflection in the toes. He shined his brass, the buttons first, the belt buckle, and then the badge. He arranged them on his uniform shirt, made sure everything was perfectly placed. He put on the trousers, the dark blue undershirt, the boots. When it came to the bullet-proof vest, he paused, thinking of ancient warriors blessing their armor, their shields. He attached the Velcro straps, tucked the flaps into his waistband. When he put on the shirt, he looked larger, heroic, invincible.

He wrapped his duty belt around his waist, fastened the buckle, feeling the weight of the leather, the loaded magazines full of ammunition, the two pairs of handcuffs. He liked that snug fit, the gravity of it. He got his handheld radio, placed it in a holder on his left hip, wrapped a cord around his back, clipped the attached microphone to a lapel on his chest.

Finally, he got the gun, his Glock 22 .40 caliber pistol. He took out the magazine, racked the slide to dislodge the chambered round. He released the slide lock, heard the metal slam home. With the weapon unloaded, chamber cleared, he aimed the pistol at a mirror mounted on the wall of his bedroom, aimed center mass and pulled the trigger.

*Click*

Guyles racked the slide again, resetting the trigger mechanism.

*Click*

Another shot to the chest.

The third time, he aimed at the middle of his forehead, imagined the bullet splitting his skull, wondering if he'd feel anything. The idea had some appeal. Not

suicide, but dying in the line of duty. That way, he'd get his name on a wall, be hailed a hero for all time, and nobody would have to know any of his secrets.

He reloaded the weapon, chambered a round and topped off the magazine. Then he placed the weapon in his holster, snapped the retention strap.

Now, he was ready to go to work.

Guyles heard a knock on the door, the rattle of keys, the twist of the doorknob. Dana walked into the apartment, and she had a gift, a white package wrapped with a pretty pink bow, offering it to Guyles with an expectant smile on her face.

“Where've you been? I haven't heard from you since before Christmas,” Guyles said, mustering all the hurt he could manage.

Dana shrugged her shoulders. “I've been out and about, nothing personal against you.”

“But I need to know what's going on, what's happening. I didn't think you'd be back.”

She thrust the package at him, excited, smiling, bouncing up and down like a little girl.

“C'mon, open it.”

“What? Do you think a little gift is going to make everything all right? I was worried. I care...” He cut himself off before he said something truly frightening.

“I love you, too,” Dana said, not missing a beat. “I really do.”

Guyles hadn't expected to hear those words coming out of Dana's mouth, not ever, not to anyone. She was always so nonchalant, committed to nobody but herself. Her

casual attitude was one of her most attractive attributes, mysterious, exciting, and charged with of sexual intrigue.

But love? How was that going to affect things?

He tried to imagine being married to Dana, sitting in rocking chairs, bouncing grandchildren on their laps. It didn't compute. They weren't built like that, especially Dana. All you had to do was look at her short dark hair, pale skin, heavy eye makeup, nose piercing, and tattoos. Dana wasn't a woman you settled down with. She was too much of a free spirit, too much of a hedonist.

And he wasn't the kind of guy... well... he still didn't know what kind of guy he was.

"You love me?"

Dana's eyes got real big, sincere and needy. "Yes, I do."

She stepped close, rubbed her shoulder against his chest, knocking his badge off-center. She pushed against his bullet-proof vest, pressed her fingers into the Kevlar, knocked her fist against the metal shock-plate inserted directly over his heart.

"Take that off," she said.

"But I'm on my way to work."

"Call in sick."

"I can't just call in sick when I'm not sick. I'm still on probation."

Dana lowered her chin, looked up at him with pleading eyes, fluttering eyelashes.

"Tell them you have a headache."

"But I don't..."

"A semen retention, headache."



“What?”

She rubbed her hand against his crotch.

Guyles called in a vacation day. LT Bowman wasn't happy about a last minute request, but since it was a full shift day, he went ahead and gave Guyles the day off. He cautioned Guyles, told him that last minute requests were hardly ever granted.

Dana listened over Guyles' shoulder, leaning on him, her face touching his. He smelled her perfume - something like wild flowers and jasmine - her hot breath like cinnamon on his cheek.

“He sounds like a real tight ass,” she said.

Guyles nodded. Most of the guys on the shift thought so, too, but Bowman had been pretty nice to him. “He's all right,” he said. “Kind of anal but fair.”

Dana held the gift, offered it to Guyles. “Can you open it, now?”

Guyles didn't trust it. Dana had never given him anything before, hadn't even bought him a Christmas present.

“What's the occasion?” he asked, afraid to touch the box. For all he knew, it was one of those spring-loaded gag gifts.

Dana pouted, bright red lips a stark contrast to her pale skin. Her dark hair framed her face, a sinister aura, subtly darker than the last time he'd seen her.

“You color your hair?”

She primped for a moment, smiling, turning her head left and right, her shimmery hair brushing back and forth across her face.

“Paul Richard wanted me to look gothic for this photo shoot he's working on. You like?”

She spun in place like a runway model, looking too much like a vampire in one of those old horror movies. Well, except for the short hair. Gone were those “fuck you” bangs she used to tease up like a hand shooting out its middle finger, punctuating her speech like an Internet emoticon. Her new look gave him the creeps.

“I like your old look better.”

Dana narrowed her dark eyes. “Well, I like this look better.” She thrust the package toward him. “C’mon. You’ll like it.”

Guyles took the gift, shook the box. It was very light, and he didn’t hear anything mechanical, so it probably wasn’t one of those spring boxes.

“What is it?”

“Just open it.”

He inspected the box, tried to remove it without breaking it. It was pretty, he thought, and girly. He suspected she’d bought him some kind of sex toy, and though the idea enticed him, he was afraid, yet another step into vulnerability. When he glanced at Dana, he saw her face brighten with excitement as sincere as a child watching her friend opening a birthday present. It wasn’t a joke, then. This was a real gift.

He lifted the lid off the box, Dana squealing with anticipation. When he peaked inside he saw a fluff of white tissue paper.

“C’mon, Willie.”

Guyles reached inside the box, felt something cool and slippery. He withdrew his hand. Dana squealed with passionate frustration like she’d gone to the threshold of climax only to be spurned at the last second. She took the box, plunged her hand through the tissue paper, grabbed the contents like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

“Look,” she demanded.

She held a black satin bra edged with red lace and a matching pair of panties.

“Oh, those are nice,” he said. Leave it to Dana to get a gift for herself in the guise of getting something for him. “Can’t wait to see you in them.”

Dana shook her head.

“Oh, no Willie boy,” her voice was low and sexy. “They’re for you.”

Guyles stared at the bra and panties laid out on the bed. Dana wanted him to put them on, but he wasn’t able to summon the resolve to do it. It was embarrassing.

“You ready?” Dana called.

“Not yet.”

“Do you need help?”

Guyles felt a stir of panic. She was going to come back into the bedroom pretty soon, and then she would insist on watching him don the women’s underwear, taking charge. He knew he’d submit if she absolutely insisted, but he didn’t know if this was part of the fun or just another way to humiliate him, probably both. At this point in the game he didn’t want to assume responsibility for his desires. He wanted to be forced to do what he really did want to do. It was silly; he couldn’t explain it, not to himself, not to Dana.

“I’m coming in,” Dana said, “on the count of three.”

Guyles grabbed the panties, tried to find the tag so he could tell which way to put them on, but there wasn’t a tag.

“One...”

He fumbled with the panties, noticing a bigger patch of cloth on one side and a strip of elastic fabric on the other. The cloth part had to be the front, he figured, so he stepped into the panties right leg first.

“Two...”

He pulled the panties past his ankles, up to his knees. It was going to be a tight fit. Thank God for elastic, he thought as he pulled them up to his thighs. He had to wiggle to get the panties around his waist. They still didn't feel right. The cloth web caught his penis and scrotum like a ball in the web of a baseball mitt, except his penis was growing, pressing against the fabric. Embarrassed, he grabbed a damp pair of sweat pants out of the laundry hamper, pulled them over his legs to conceal the panties.

“Three... Ready or not, here I come.”

Guyles darted into the closet, closing the door behind him, so excited it was hard to breathe. He trembled like a child, afraid to be discovered yet wanting to be found. He heard the bedroom door squeaking across the floor, and he covered his mouth, shrank back into the clothes, wiggling behind one of Dana's dresses.

“Willie,” Dana sang. “Where are you?” She had the indulgent tone of voice of a parent playing peek-a-boo with her child.

“Are you under the bed? No...”

Guyles brushed up against a dress covered in plastic wrap. The rustling sound reminded him of that time when he was a child playing with that girl down the street. He tried to remember her name: Susan... They were raking leaves into piles, burying themselves and making wishes.

“Are you under the covers?” Dana continued. “No...”

Sitting there in the closet he imagined what life would have been like had his wish come true all those years ago, what life would have been if he'd become a girl, a ten year old little girl, with a long ponytail, wearing a blue jean jumper over a red Betty Boop t-shirt. She could have been a ballet dancer, graceful, holding herself with poise and confidence. When she was twelve, she would have been distracted during choir practice, looking down at her sweater, noticing how tight it had become, thrilled and embarrassed at the growing breasts beneath.

He grabbed his chest. It ached in a spot deep within his being. He could feel it physically, but the pain was even deeper than his heart. It ached to the depth of his soul. Oh, what could have been.

“Are you behind your desk? No...”

She would have been a young woman at high school graduation, a tall, a lithe figure, long amber hair and a bright smile. She'd make a graduation gown look classy, cap tilted on her head just right while she shared her valedictorian speech, admired and loved by all.

Guyles felt a bug crawling down his face, but when he went to smack it, he felt moisture, a stream of tears. Oh my God, he was crying, crying like the mother of stillborn child.

“Are you in the closet?”

He crawled further into the darkness, heard Dana's hand grasping and turning the doorknob, the groan of swollen wood rubbing against the frame. The hinges squeaked as the door swung open, and a flood of light spilled into the closet. The light hurt his eyes like he'd never seen it before.

Dana leaned into the closet, her face appearing angelic from the light surrounding her head. She reached toward Guyles.

“C’mon, honey,” she crooned, still playing the indulgent parent.

Speechless, Guyles grasped her hand, leaning forward, blinking into the light.

Dana paused, the smile on her face fading.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, the parent voice gone.

Guyles choked a sob, swallowed hard trying to conceal his crying. “I’m afraid,” he admitted, feeling vulnerable, exposed. He expected her lips to curl with disgust, stretching into a cruel smile, but she just looked at him, tenderness in her face, something that he’d never seen before.

He stood on wobbly legs, embarrassed, wishing she hadn’t seen him like this. The fight within himself churned up again, almost like a ringing bell commencing round ten thousand.

When would it ever end?

Holding his hand, Dana guided Guyles out of the closet. She pulled down the sweat pants, and he felt goose pimples on his legs, the fear and thrill of exposure. They stood in the light and embraced.

“I love you,” Dana proclaimed, sounding sincere.

Guyles backed away, stunned by her declaration. He looked into her eyes, no attitude, no manipulation, no mischief.

“I love you, too,” he found himself saying, surprised at how much he meant it.

They sat down on the bed, a silence swelling between them, comfortable, even cozy at first, but then it started to feel awkward. He didn’t know to say, and she seemed

to be struggling with her own thoughts, also. Her lips pouted, and her eyes turned from tender to stormy. Her chin quivered, and then, the hard smile returned.

“So,” she said, her voice too sweet. “Do you need help with the bra?”

*Willie heard a noise in the attic one night, a thumping like the pounding of dry bone on creaking boards. He was sure it was a ghost, some unfortunate spirit trying to find its way out of its melancholy woes, trapped between this world and the next. Now, Willie wasn't necessarily afraid of ghosts because he loved Caspar the Friendly Ghost from television, and he figured that some ghosts might be mean, but not all of them. He listened through the hiss of silence...Thump! Thump! And he thought he heard a whimper, like a child crying.*

*He lived in an old house, one of those houses that had a history. He once heard his mom and dad talking in hushed tones about a former owner who shot himself, and he briefly wondered if the spirit above was this unfortunate guy who couldn't stand his own life. He imagined the ghost having a bleeding, permanent hole in his head.*

*When he heard the whimper again, it was a soft, high pitched moan, like a sigh, not a man's voice but a child's. A child ghost wouldn't be a mean ghost, he reasoned, and it might be neat to have a playmate from the netherworld, someone like Caspar who*

*was always searching for a friend. He sat up in bed, resolving to seek out this otherworldly visitor.*

*“I’ll be your friend. I’m not afraid,” he whispered to himself.*

*Though his words quaked with uncertainty, he pushed the covers off the bed, placed his feet on the floor. He paused, listening.*

*Thump!*

*Willie stood up.*

*Thump!*

*He wrapped his arms around himself, stared at the doorway to his room. He remembered Scooby Doo and the phantom who reached around doorways trying to grab unsuspecting passers-by. He saw the green face, the glowing red eyes, and he anticipated the mournful moan, but all he heard was silence. Well, not necessarily silence. He heard his mom coughing in the other room, his dad snoring. He strained his ears trying to hear the child again, looked out of the second story window in his room and stared at the street light. It was so late there weren’t any cars on the road.*

*Thump!*

*The noise seemed louder now that Willie had his ears tuned to the slightest sound. Straining in the silence he heard the child moaning again, a kind of crying. It would be so cool to have a friend like Caspar, and he resolved not to scream and jump out of his skin before running away. He didn’t want to hurt Caspar’s feelings. He was determined to see Caspar for what he really was, a friend. He almost started to cry when he realized how much he had in common with Caspar: always lonely, always searching for a friend, always battling against the meanies of the world.*



*Thump!*

*Was that the ghost, or was it his own heart?*

*Thump!*

*He walked out of the bedroom, stepping through the doorway with some trepidation anticipating the appearance of the green phantom, but there was nothing but the dim glow of a nightlight in the bathroom. He saw a shadow on the wall, and it seemed to expand and contract, breathing with the house.*

*“I can be your best friend,” Willie whispered in the dark, looking up, trying to see through the ceiling into the attic.*

*He moved forward cautiously, eyes drinking up the scarce light, the light that seeped through various cracks and crevices from the streetlights outside, through half drawn window shades and parted curtains. He found his way easily enough, discerning the shapes of large objects, but there wasn't enough light for him to perceive color or details.*

*Willie stood in the doorway of the L-shaped room, the bedroom belonging to his yet-to-be-born little sister. Some of the light reflected off strips of silver paint imprinted on the wallpaper. He remembered the shapes on the wall, those things Mom called Astrology, but in the faint light all he could see were grins and frowns, sparkling orbs and thin crescents like rounded and narrowed eyes, some beckoning to him, some warning him away. He listened for the child's cry, heard a lonely voice sighing through window slits, vibrating with the wire screens.*

*Thump!*

*He managed enough courage to walk into the room, took several steps and rounded the corner of the L. There was a door where the wall should be, a door that seemed like an afterthought, an extra closet. He placed his hand on the knob, retracted it when he felt the cold metal, the curious contour of something not round like he'd expected it to be, but something oval and vertical, pointing upwards.*

*Willie strengthened his resolve, forced himself to grasp the doorknob again. "I'll be your best friend," he promised. "I will. I will."*

*He felt the latch release the door, and it opened slightly. He pulled the door slowly and watched a stairway appear, a gloomy stairway illuminated by moonlight pouring through a row of windows high and right.*

*Thump!*

*The noise was louder than ever, and it was coming from the attic. He stepped up, felt the wood creak under his weight. The sound reverberated upwards, and he held his breath sure he'd announced his presence, but nothing else happened. He stepped again and again and paused, listening for the whimper, the breathing and the sigh, but the house didn't breathe up there. It was still, silent and dark.*

*Willie wanted to turn back, but he felt trapped in this momentum, seized by curiosity and full of hope for friendship. Only three more steps to the landing where he'd be able to see the attic and the secrets it contained. He took another step, the creak and groan of ancient wood. He took a breath, stared straight ahead and stepped upwards two more times, turning to face the cavernous room, noticing the two-by-fours spaced evenly up and down the length of the roof like the inside of a giant whale, the dark beams like the bones of a rib cage. He remembered Pinocchio and his quest to become a real boy.*

*Willie glanced to his right, saw the windows at the top of the house, two of them, like eyes, and next to the windows he saw a ghostly white cloud, a shimmery opaque apparition. Breathless, he watched the ghost stare out the window, bent in mournful thought. This was not Caspar the Friendly Ghost.*

*Fear seized him, his breath trapped in his chest, aching to be released, but he dared not exhale. He didn't want the ghost to look at him. He didn't want to see the gaping hole, the bleeding face and the dead red eyes.*

*A car's headlights shined up from the street, and the shifting light reflected off the ghost, a gleaming display revealing its true nature. A dress, the ghost was only a dress, the one he'd seen Mom hanging up on a hook last fall. Willie felt foolish, laughed at himself, relieved and happy to have found nothing of a supernatural origin up there in the attic, but then he felt disappointment. No Caspar, no friend waiting in the eaves. It almost made him cry.*

*Willie climbed the last four steps, stood in the attic proper where he saw a light bulb on the ceiling, a dangling string beneath it. He pulled the string, thrilled to see warm, incandescent light flooding the room. The attic wasn't so scary in the light, but the dress worried him more than ever. It just hung there, tempting him. He wanted to run his hands through the sleek fabric, feel the soft folds of cloth on his skin, but if he did that, he'd want to wear it. And if he wore it, would he ever want to take it off?*

*Despite his misgivings, he felt himself walking toward the dress, caught in the unstoppable trajectory of curiosity. He touched the transparent plastic liner Mom had pulled over the dress, heard the squeak of cellophane on skin, a noise that set his teeth on edge. His hand slid down the liner, found an opening at the bottom of the skirt. The fabric*

*was smooth like silk or maybe satin - he didn't know how to tell the difference - but whatever it was, it felt cool and smooth, electrifying.*

*"Who would know?" he whispered. Nobody, his mind replied.*

*He reached up, unhooked the hanger from a nail protruding from a roof beam. The dress and cellophane made a ruffling noise in his grasp, like it had come to life, shaking with expectation. After all, wasn't a dress made to be worn? And wouldn't a dress be thrilled to be worn after hanging in the attic for months, years?*

*"Just this once," Willie said to the dress like it was a puppy begging for a scrap of food. "One time only."*

*Willie carefully removed the liner, trying not to pull too hard. He didn't want to make holes Mom might notice. Once removed, the liner lay on the floor like a shed snake skin, and the dress looked more alive than before, not so dull and yellow as it had appeared when covered in cellophane.*

*He raised the dress above his head, ran a few steps holding it aloft like a kite. The dress was so flouncy it might have taken flight, so light, so soft. He'd seen ballerinas dancing, so graceful, like they could walk on water, and he wanted to be like that. It would be so easy to be a girl.*

*Before he'd consciously decided to do it, Willie found himself plunging through the bottom of the dress, folds of supple fabric brushing against his face, tickling the tops of his shoulders, sliding down his back. He peered up through the bodice, the attic light gleaming through the hole, leading the way home. The dress yielded to his dimensions, adhered to his skin, a perfect fit. He kicked and turned, felt the skirt brushing against his legs. It felt so good, so natural. The lace on his shoulders fluttered in the breeze of his*

*movement, like the wings of butterflies. The only thing missing was long hair dangling down his back.*

*Willie saw a light shining through the attic windows where the dress had been hung, just a brief glimmer but long enough to bring him out of his fantasy. What if someone had seen him? He looked through the windows, stared at the house across the street, at a set of vacant, dark windows nestled in a dormer. Nobody there.*

*He adjusted his gaze; saw his reflection in the window - a transparent little girl segmented by the pieces of wooden framing between panes of glass.*

## Thirteen

Guyles thought the underwear game was foreplay, but Dana had other ideas. She tossed him a pair of jeans and his red polo shirt.

“We’re going out,” she said.

With every move he felt the elastic stretch of the bra, one of the straps falling off his shoulder, but the panties were the worst, they crowded his balls and crawled up his ass. As he walked he wiggled his butt to make them move to a more comfortable position.

Dana walked behind him, laughing. “Shake it, don’t break it,” she teased. “It’s ass not glass.”

“That’s so, like, seventies.”

Dana drove them to Flip’s, a popular wine bar and Italian restaurant near Nichols Hills, a posh suburb north of Oklahoma City. Guyles had seen the place several times when he had to take a juvenile to the Berry House, Oklahoma County’s Juvenile Detention Center, just across the street.

“It’s a small place, a cozy neighborhood bar with a regular crowd,” she said, sounding like a commercial.

As they entered, Dana turned to look at him, a lurid smile, eyes lingering on his chest like she could see through the loose fitting polo shirt.

Guyles grabbed his chest, feeling the bra cups underneath. “What?”

“Nothing,” Dana said, still smiling.

“Is it showing?”

Dana’s eyes widened, smile curling into a smirk. “No, not at all.”

He pulled the neck of the shirt, trying to loosen the fabric, make it look baggy.

Guyles insisted on being seated in a dark corner of the establishment, back to the wall where nobody could see him, where he could scan the scene, surveying it like hostile territory. He was feeling transparent, and the darkness was comforting, solidifying.

The bar was intimate, dimly lit by a red neon sign, smoky blue lights next to a mirror above the serving well. Dana leaned over a juke box against the far wall, flipping through the music selections. She’d chosen a Madonna song of all things, one of her hits from the 1980’s.

*Gonna dress you up in my love, all over your body.*

Dana turned around and winked at him.

A waitress stopped by the table, wearing black tights and a black and white checkered dress. She had long dark hair gathered in a tidy little bun with a few stray strands. It looked like she'd been working hard, an air of fatigue, wincing with every step.

Guyles tried to make pleasant conversation. "Busy, huh?"

The waitress smirked, obviously not fond of idle conversation. "Can I get you something?"

Dana came back to the table.

"I want a bottle of Merlot" she said. "It's good with pasta."

"No alcohol. Not tonight," Guyles said, trying not to plead. He didn't want to feel too loose, yet he wanted a drink, something stronger than wine, though.

Guyles saw a glance of hostile recognition in the waitress' face while Dana sat down with a sneer of her own. He guessed that these two women probably had a history, that one had stolen the other's boyfriend or something.

"Lighten up. We're supposed to be having fun, right?" Dana said.

"With my luck, we'll get stopped on the way home, get arrested for DUI."

Dana massaged his neck, but Guyles was too tense, raising his shoulders as high as his ears. An overwhelming anxiety flooded his thoughts as he imagined being arrested while wearing women's underwear.

"Let's go home," he pleaded.

Dana frowned. "Party pooper," she said. "Aren't you having fun?"

"Not anymore."

"Too bad," she grouched. "Your ass is mine, tonight."

Guyles leaned back against the wall, took a deep breath. If he could just get over being anxious, he realized, this whole thing could be a lot of fun. In fact, in some ways it was a fantasy come true, but he began to realize that most fantasies are often better as fantasies, that trying to act them out spoils their allure.

He forced a laugh. "I'm a piece of work, ain't I?"

Dana giggled. "You're a perv," she said. "But I like pervs. Just try to have some fun, all right?"

Dana poured a glass of wine, offered it to him, but all he could do was stare at it.

Flip's was a nice place, just a quiet little bar with a decent restaurant. He smelled pasta boiling, marinara sauce simmering in the kitchen around the corner, oh, and the smell of fresh baked bread. It made him hungry.

Flip's had some interesting art on the walls. One of the paintings showed a man with a stiff body and clenched fists, a grimace on his face like he was in pain, and there was an outline of a figure emerging from his body, arms raised in rapturous assent. He was interested to see that the "soul" leaving the man's body appeared genderless, maybe feminine. A plaque next to the painting displayed the artist's name and the title of the work, "Break Out."

Guyles checked his chest again. The loose fitting polo shirt concealed everything. He took a deep breath and settled into his chair, calculating that if he could keep cool and go along with the game, he and Dana would make love later that evening. He remembered the time with the pantyhose. This time would be even better, exponentially better.



After dinner, they sat, listening to music, making idle chat. Dana had stopped teasing him so much, was telling him what she'd been doing with herself since Christmas, about her trip to Houston and New Orleans in the back of a van, riding with a Heavy Metal band from Oklahoma City.

"I know it sounds fun," she said. "But it was really a bummer. Those guys stunk. I mean their music was okay, but they literally stunk. And I hated sleeping in that smelly van."

Guyles had once played the drums, had entertained dreams of rock stardom. Dana was the groupie type, that's for sure, one of those sultry vixens like Bebe Buell and Michelle Overman, those famous muses who enticed Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin. He felt especially fortunate, glad to be back in Dana's orbit.

"I have to go to the little girls' room," she said. "You want to come?"

"Ha, ha, ha..."

Guyles felt a rush of cold, the rising wind outside and the frequent opening and closing of the bar's entrance. He heard a familiar voice, a deep jovial laugh. He craned his neck to see who'd arrived.

Duncan. It was Duncan. Of all the times and places to run into a buddy from work. He almost got up to leave, but he held fast, shrinking back into the corner, trying to merge with the shadows.

Duncan was with another woman, not Carla from the truck stop. This one was prettier, classy. Carla was beautiful in an all-American girl-next-door way, the kind of woman who liked to wear jeans and ball caps, but this woman looked like a pampered princess, a lady who wouldn't be caught dead outside the house without her lipstick. She

was dressed in a sleek, white gown, tiny pearls sown into the fabric, and her hair was short like Audrey Hepburn's in *My Fair Lady*, pixyish and cute. When she walked, she glided across the floor, totally in charge of her femininity, and Guyles felt his jaw drop with envy, a commotion of feelings: a desire to possess and a desire to be. He felt the strap of the bra sliding down his left shoulder.

The hostess seated Duncan and the woman on the other side of the room near the bar, at the center of activity. By all appearances, Duncan and his date were well known at Flip's, people walking by greeting both of them warmly. Guyles knew he and Dana wouldn't be able to leave without being noticed and invited to sit down for a drink or two.

He peeked at his watch, a little past 10:00 PM. Late enough for an after-show crowd to start arriving but early enough for people to feel like they had plenty of time to unwind, to visit and talk, to get liquored-up. He glanced at the restroom doors. Dana was taking forever.

A waitress walked up to Duncan and his date without offering menus and started taking their orders. Definitely regulars, Guyles thought. Duncan leaned back in his chair, smiling broadly. He looked in Guyles' direction, recognition flashing in his eyes.

"Hey, Bill," he said, warmth in his voice.

Guyles took a deep breath, held it for a long moment. He waved at Duncan, afraid to move. Duncan waved back, inviting Guyles to join him. Guyles stood up, feeling the panties rising higher, deeper into the crack of his ass. He walked toward Duncan, a stiff and deliberate gate, as rigid as a soldier, to keep from swishing his butt back and forth.

"Hi there," Guyles said.

Duncan frowned, and there was an awkward moment as he considered something. Guyles didn't know what to do, walk away, have a seat. He lingered there, waiting for a cue, but Duncan's hesitation disappeared, his face brightening, his famous magnanimous smile.

"Honey," Duncan said. "I'd like to introduce you to someone."

Honey - that familiar term of endearment usually reserved for spouses. She was his wife. Then why did he have to cheat on her? Cultivating a relationship with a truck stop waitress, like ordering hamburger at a steakhouse.

The woman looked up at Guyles, her eyes wide with interest and friendly. Guyles felt flattered in her gaze, impressed by her attention. He felt his heart jump, stunned by her beauty, her obvious intelligence.

"This is Bill Guyles," Duncan continued. "He's one of the new guys at Will Rogers."

She extended her hand, and Guyles touched it softly, a feminine handshake. The physical contact with such a savvy woman made him feel electrified, chest aching like he'd been jolted with a defibrillator.

Duncan gazed at Guyles, a conspiratorial look on his face, a shadow of warning. "Bill," he said. "This is my wife, Marcia."

Guyles nodded toward Duncan, making eye contact, a sign of understanding. "Nice to meet you Mrs. Duncan," he said.

Marcia tugged away from Guyles' hand, breaking their contact, and he wondered if he'd held her hand an instant too long. She frowned, shot a pained look at her husband. In that very moment, Guyles understood that Mrs. Duncan knew about her husband's

infidelity. Yet, Duncan just laughed, chatting away like he had no clue. How could Duncan cheat on such a beautiful wife? If Guyles had such a woman, he'd be devoted to her, worship her.

Guyles heard someone approaching from behind, felt a slight tug on his back. He heard it before he felt it, the bra strap snapping against his skin. The sound reverberated through Guyles' mind, amplified by his embarrassment, his heightened paranoia. He wrestled with an explosive rush of emotions: anger, fear, betrayal. He almost raised a fist, turning around to address the threat. It was Dana.

"We're just leaving," Guyles said. He grabbed Dana's hand, grasping her fingers in a tight clamp. He wanted to see Dana wince, but she was tough. She smiled, nodded toward Duncan and his wife.

"Now wait a minute," Dana protested. "I'd like to meet these nice people, get to know them a little."

Duncan smiled at Dana, a slight nod toward Guyles, eyebrows raised, impressed, but Marcia frowned, no offer of hospitality. She reached toward her husband, gripped his left hand and pressed his fingers into her wedding ring.

"It's our anniversary," she said. "Our eighteenth."

Guyles had to wonder how they'd managed to stay together so long. There must have been something beyond trust that kept them bound in wedlock. He looked at her clothing, the glistening gown that women of means wore to the opera. He looked at her jewelry, the sparkling diamond necklace, the matching earrings and her elaborate wedding ring. Her whole style betrayed sophistication and privilege. She had money, and

Duncan had grown accustomed to a certain level of opulence. Then, this begged another question. Why didn't she just get rid of him?

“Well, we certainly don't want to interrupt your celebration,” Dana said.

Dana and Guyles started toward the door, had almost left the restaurant before Guyles realized they hadn't paid. He got out some money and walked back to their table. The waitress had already placed a narrow black folder on the table indicating she was ready to see them pay up and leave so she could get another set of clientele. When Guyles opened the folder he was irritated at the price, \$78.00. Boy, he thought, Dana had some expensive tastes. He placed four twenties in the folder, ashamed he didn't have enough cash to leave an adequate tip.

“Dana?” he inquired. “Can you cover the tip?”

The waitress who'd served them walked by, and Dana made a point to say, “No, she got what she's worth.”

The two women bristled at each other.

“What's that all about?”

Dana sighed, rolled her eyes. “She's my ex, that's all.”

Her nonchalant attitude about outing herself as bisexual surprised Guyles, but the fact itself wasn't such a big deal. He should have figured Dana as a switch hitter, but until now, it had never come up.

“So, you and her used to be an item, right?”

Dana waved him off. “I don't want to talk about it.” She sounded hurt.

They went to the parking lot where Guyles approached the driver's side door of his Camero. He jangled the keys in his pocket, took them out and started unlocking the door.

Dana clicked her tongue, frowning at him. "I'm the driver tonight, remember?"

"I want to go home."

"Not yet, the night is young."

"What now?"

Dana recovered her smile. "Dancing," she said.

They had been sitting in the parking lot of Angles for twenty minutes debating.

"Why did you have to pick a gay bar to go dancing?" Guyles asked, on the verge of exasperation.

"Angles is not a gay bar. Well, not just a gay bar. A lot of straight people go dancing there. They have the best techno-rock in town."

Guyles wasn't buying it. "Okay, just give me a few minutes to calm down," he pleaded. He was silent for a moment, trying to breathe. When he was undercover in the area a few days before, he felt insulated from the activities of Oklahoma City's so called gay district. He had a goal: get a bust, but he didn't have to get involved with the whole scene. Now, Dana was asking to go into a gay bar as a patron, something he'd never done before.

He didn't know what to expect. What would happen if some guy hit on him? He didn't mean to flatter himself, but of course. He was a reasonably good looking guy, in good shape. The prospect excited him, yet filled him with dread all at the same time.

Would there be drag queens inside? He'd always wanted to talk to a drag queen, not just superficial small talk but a candid conversation, to compare notes. He wanted to know that he wasn't some kind of anomaly, that he was just a variant of human experience, not necessarily a deviant.

"Are you ready?" Dana said, getting impatient.

Guyles was on the cusp of getting out of the car when he looked across the street at the Kozan Apartments. A light had flickered, and he couldn't tell if someone had broken one of the street lights or if it had simply burned out. A group of three or four people stood in the shadows near the main entrance of the complex, and they were sharing a cigarette or perhaps a joint. Guyles saw the red coal floating among them, and then it rose to one of their faces where it brightened for a sustained period of time. It was definitely a joint. Nobody toked on a mere cigarette that long.

The cop in him wanted to jump out on them, to intervene in the act of a crime being committed. He once had a lieutenant who'd told him that if he ever saw a group of people sharing a marijuana cigarette, he could bust them for distribution of a controlled dangerous substance regardless of how little weed there actually was. He had yet to test that theory, but it was interesting to consider.

One of the figures stepped out of the shadows into the light of a nearby lamppost, a tall female. Guyles recognized her. It was Jody.

At that point, the whole place felt surreal, seedy, impossible. He couldn't get out of the car and wade into this underworld of shadows and secrets, of unrestrained decadence. The bra straps had begun to itch, and he couldn't wait to take it off.

"What's wrong, now?" Dana sighed with frustration.

He pointed at Jody. “See that, uh, girl...across the street?”

Dana shrugged. “Yeah. So?”

Guyles felt irritated at Dana’s apathy, her lack of appreciation for how hard it was for him to be there.

“Well,” he spoke forcefully. “That...person...is a prostitute. I’ve dealt with her before. She might recognize me.” The female pronouns came with some effort. He recalled how Hicks kept referring to Jody as an “it” that night last fall.

He studied Jody. She certainly looked like a woman: her long dark hair, the oval shape of her face, her generous bosom still obvious though concealed beneath a dark sweater. Although he couldn’t be sure because of the surrounding shadows, he noticed that her face was rougher than that first time months ago. It appeared dotted with pock marks similar to the effects of severe acne, but this was a new development. He wondered if she’d gouged her face with the incessant picking common to someone tweaking on methamphetamine.

Despite her tragic circumstances, Guyles felt a twinge of envy for Jody. He wondered, briefly, what it would be like to live as a woman. But then, he steeled himself. Jody was a mess, selling her body for a few bucks here and there trying to feed an insatiable appetite. As glamorous as she looked back on that evening last fall, she was nothing, really, but a petit criminal, a lowlife prostitute living in the shadows of society. This was not a life, Guyles thought, and he knew in the depth of his soul that if he lost control, that if he dared to move toward accepting his dark self, he’d end up like Jody.

And here he was, a cop wearing women’s underwear sitting in a car parked outside a gay bar. He was overwhelmed with self loathing, feeling like he was gazing into



the abyss, teetering on the edge of falling. Like a person standing at the top of a skyscraper who couldn't help looking down, he felt the tug of gravity.

"Are you okay?"

Guyles shrugged, looked at her face. She seemed sincere.

"I mean, it just seems like you're scared all the time, like you never let yourself relax and just go with the flow."

Guyles could only nod. He didn't know how to articulate what he was feeling. Dana had nailed him. She was right; he did feel scared all the time. He rested his head on the steering wheel, buried his face in his hands trying to suppress the urge to cry, pressing his eyes with the heels of his palms. It didn't work, errant tears streamed down his cheeks.

Dana moved close, wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to soothe him, "Oh, baby, we don't have to go dancing."

At that moment, there was an urgent knock on the driver's side window. Dana sat up, turned toward the noise. "What's going on?" she asked, perturbed. She opened the door, started to get out of the car.

Guyles thought the knocker was one of the security guards who patrolled the parking lot, felt sheepish, like a high school kid busted for parking with his girlfriend. When he looked up, though, he didn't see a guy in a security uniform. It was a black guy with a long sleek face, a thin mustache and a goatee, eyes wild with excitement.

He mumbled something unintelligible in a low growling voice, "Hey, ya movah-fuckin puh, gimme it!"

Guyles didn't understand. "What the fuck..." Then he saw the gun, a nickel plated snub nose revolver in the guy's right hand. They were being robbed!

The robber grabbed Dana's hair, yanked her out of the car and threw her to the ground. He reached inside the car, grabbed Dana's purse. Though he kept the gun aimed at Guyles, he was looking down at Dana as she screamed and kicked with anger.

"Fuckin, shu da mouf, bitch!" he yelled.

Guyles grabbed the man's wrist with his right hand, and with his left hand he clenched the short barrel of the gun, cupping the cylinder in his palm.

"Wha da fuck?"

Guyles he pushed up and back on the barrel, rotating the weapon against the hinge point of the man's thumb. Though the robber had a white knuckle grip on the gun, the laws of physics combined with the mechanics of human physiology worked against him. He let go of the gun before Guyles rotated it enough to break his trigger finger. Thankfully, the gun didn't go off.

The robber took off running southbound through the parking lot back toward the Kozan Apartments.

Guyles transferred the gun to his shooting hand and gave chase. Though he was several paces behind the robber, he gained on him fast as the robber had to pause for traffic on 39<sup>th</sup> street. Once the traffic was clear, the guy glided across the street, pushed past Jody who was still standing on the sidewalk, and disappeared in the shadows of the apartment complex.

Mad with rage, Guyles plunged into the darkness right behind him in an uncharacteristic display of recklessness. He saw the guy turn a corner and disappear

again. Since he'd disarmed the man, he wasn't worried about being ambushed, and he darted around the corner into an open courtyard, actually an old filled-in swimming pool.

The robber was only halfway across the open space when he stumbled, tripping over a small bicycle left there in the shadow of the next building. He yelled with fear and anger and tried to get up again, but by then Guyles was right on top of him, plowing into him like a linebacker tackling a quarterback in mid throw.

Guyles landed knees first on the robber's chest, air exploding from the guy's mouth in a bluster of surprise. He coughed and sputtered while Guyles smacked his face with the revolver. Guyles was so full of wrath he didn't realize he'd been pistol-whipping the guy until the guy's face disappeared behind a veil of blood.

Guyles paused in mid strike, horrified that he'd twisted off like that, losing control so easily. What would his lieutenant say?

The robber lay still, and a silence fell on the court yard like a heavy cloud of fog, frightening and intangible, the pause between breaths. The moment seemed to last an eternity while Guyles' mind raced to the awful conclusion: he just might have killed the asshole. But then, the man started sputtering, spitting blood.

Some of the blood splattered Guyles' face, and he winced, afraid he'd been exposed to the AIDS virus. He backed away, wiping his face on his shirt sleeves.

That's when he noticed that his shirt was torn, that the left shoulder had been completely ripped away from the collar, and he realized in one appalling moment that his bra was showing.

It was like the worst naked nightmare come true. There he was standing in the courtyard of the Kozan Apartments wearing a bra for the whole world to see.

Several residents had poked their heads out the doors to see what all the commotion was about, and Guyles saw everything he had worked for, all the boxing, the Army, the police academy, all those macho things he'd done to prove to himself and to the world that he was undoubtedly a man, all of them were spinning away from him like a dream just after waking.

He raised the gun to his head, at the right temple, and he started to squeeze the trigger.

He hesitated. He didn't want to die.

He just wanted to disappear.

Then, a curious thing happened. The residents started applauding. They weren't angry. They were actually glad that someone, anyone, had kicked this guy's ass. He knew in that moment, he was safe. He didn't have to report this to his superiors; he didn't do this in the line of duty. Still embarrassed by the exposure of the bra, he grabbed it by the front, in the dip between cups, yanked on the thing until he broke the clasp behind his back. The shoulder straps snapped easily, holding it away from him like it was radioactive.

He walked over to the robber who was still sputtering on the ground, moaning and groaning with pain. He dropped the garment on his face, a talisman of shame.

By the time Guyles got back to the car Dana's face was streaked with makeup, two black lines running down her face, and with her frown, she looked like the tragedy mask personified.

When she saw Guyles, she ran to him with arms open wide. “Oh my God!” she cried. “Oh my God, you’re all right!”

She hugged him like he was a soldier returning home from war, holding tight. Guyles embraced her. He felt like a conquering hero.

A crowd was gathering outside the club, and Guyles became self-conscious. He tried to shrug away from Dana’s embrace when he noticed an approaching drag queen.

“Are you all right, sweetie?” Dana said. Her excitement raised the volume, and the proximity made him wince. He grabbed her waist and pushed back.

“I’m okay,” he said harshly. “I’m okay. I just want to get the fuck out of here.”

The drag queen hovered close, wrapping a white feather boa around her neck, a regal posture accentuated by a lot of attitude. She looked like an aging Marilyn Monroe with the platinum blond wig, but she was much taller, an Andy Warhol caricature, absurd and decadent.

Guyles thought the queen could have been something out of his own nightmares, the big nose, the prominent jaw line, and the obvious Adam’s apple betraying the person’s true sex. The incongruent attributes frightened him.

“What the fuck you looking at?” Guyles growled.

“A closet case!”

The drag queen moved closer, smiling ruefully, wig moving slightly forward, dipping in front like the edge of a gunfighter’s cowboy hat. She was like one of those nocturnal animals, deceptively docile at first glance but full of ferocity. The drag queen, though queer, was no fairy, able to kick ass if necessary, and all it took was one scratch.

Guyles backed off, chastened, tugging on Dana's arm. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

The drag queen stood taller, pursing her lips and looking triumphant. Then she straightened her wig.

"Give me the keys, Dana. I'm driving."

They left the parking lot in a hurry, engine roaring, squealing tires. The drag queen stretched an arm toward them waving the back of her fist, extending one finger tipped with a long crimson nail.

"Fuck you, too!" Guyles screamed. It felt good to let out the rage, especially toward this particular target.

When he turned onto 39<sup>th</sup> street he romped the gas, fishtailed across the lanes, but when he saw a black and white patrol car in his rearview mirror he restrained himself, terrified to get stopped by another police officer in that part of town, terrified to find himself the butt of jokes, the source of rumors. He suppressed the surge of adrenaline, accelerated with tepid deliberation, hoping the police car wouldn't follow him.

The adrenaline settled in his stomach, innards twisting with anxiety. The bile of paranoia rose to the back of his throat. He held his breath. The patrol car turned into the parking lot at Angles.

"Did someone call the police?" Guyles asked, surprised an officer had responded to a call originating from a gay bar so quickly.

"Well, duh," Dana said. "Someone tried to rob us, you know. It's like a major fucking crime."

Guyles stomped the gas pedal, accelerating to sixty miles an hour before letting off. The four lanes on 39<sup>th</sup> street narrowed to two lanes just west of Youngs. As they passed the coin-operated laundry on the southwest corner of the intersection he saw Jody standing next to the pay phone outside, a dark blur in the night.

## Fourteen

### **Guyles is a fag**

He read the message scrawled in the mortar between bricks in the men's locker room while he was getting ready to take a piss.

Standing there, he held his breath, disbelieving what he saw, not quite comprehending the small speck of slanderous graffiti. But then, he started to recall a

matriculation of memories: the startled look on Susan's face when he revealed his deepest secret, her father's scornful response labeling him a queer, the snickering of his fellow classmates at school, and the bus ride, the beating and his father's dark shadow in the door. They accumulated like rain on a desert mountain rushing down, becoming raging rivers before finally settling into vast arid lakes, shallow depressions on a lifeless plain. Only the heat of anger, blazing like the one mad eye of a Cyclops could evaporate the sudden despair welling up within him.

Guyles slammed his fist into the wall.

"Fuck!"

The pain felt good. The sharp impact throbbed through his knuckles to the back of his hand, his wrist, into his forearm, dissipating at the elbow. He grabbed his right hand with the left massaged his knuckles, driving the pain below the surface of his skin, the lakes absorbing the water until they became dry again - at least on the surface.

"Hicks," Guyles snarled. "Son-of-bitch!"

Thankfully, the graffiti had been written in pencil, so he licked a finger tip to rub the insult away, the message a blot of gray in the white mortar. Though he'd rendered it unreadable, the mark had been made. He wondered how many people had seen it before him.

Guyles was the last officer to arrive for lineup. When he burst through the doors he was met with silence, a perturbed look on Lieutenant Bowman's face. Everyone was watching him. Some of the faces were questioning and confused while others stared at him through narrowed, cynical eyes. The two female officers on the shift whispered to each other. Hicks winked.



“Asshole,” Guyles hissed louder than he meant to.

Some of the guys responded with amused, “Ooo’s.”

Hicks frowned, a threatening glare in his eyes.

“Nice of you to join us, Officer Guyles,” Bowman said.

Guyles glanced at the clock. It was just then exactly 4:00 PM. Bowman had started early, as usual. Guyles raised his left wrist, tapped his watch. “I’m not late,” he said.

Bowman consulted his own watch. “According to my watch, which is set to MDT time, you’re two minutes late. Sit down and don’t let it happen again.”

“Yeah,” Hicks said. “We’re all professionals here.”

“Cut the comments,” Bowman said. He resumed roll call. Each officer sounding off, “Here, sir,” but when Bowman called Guyles’ name, someone’s muffled voice answered, “Queer, sir” The contorted response seemed to echo off the walls, answered with stifled laughs.

Guyles suppressed the urge to stand up, to shout down the cowardly asshole who wouldn’t directly address him. It had to be Hicks, maybe Bingham, who commonly derided homosexuals, often boasting that he liked to put them in their places - whatever that was supposed to mean.

Bowman didn’t say anything, just stood there behind the podium checking his notes, assigning extra patrols to the relevant district officers. Guyles knew Bowman must have heard the “queer” remark.

If the remark had been a racial slur, the lieutenant would have come down hard on the shift, sending a clear message that such behavior wasn’t going to be tolerated. It

wouldn't have been any different if some officer had been stupid enough to make some kind of sexist remark. Hell, back when Guyles first got on the street, a female officer accused a male officer of farting in her general direction, and because of that, the whole shift had to endure a four hour block of sensitivity training.

But direct the word queer at someone... nobody spoke up. If you're gay or lesbian, or thought of as such, you're free game for persecution.

Guyles decided he'd lose if he tried to address the snide remark, especially since he was still on probation. Better to let the remark go, he thought. Let it roll off the back like the water off a Labrador retriever's hair. Don't let it soak in. He repeated the words to himself like a mantra. Don't let it soak in. Getting pissed off would only make it worse.

After Bowman finished assigning extra patrols, dolling out information, Hicks raised his hand. "I got something to say, LT."

"Is it something related to officer safety or something your fellow officers need to know?"

"Yes... lieutenant."

Bowman frowned, eyebrows furrowed, but he didn't say anything. Hicks took this as a go-ahead.

"I just want to say that Probationary Officer Guyles did a tremendous job with IMPACT the other night getting some of the queers off the street." His voice sounded overly sincere.

"Yes, sir," Bingham jumped in. "He ought to be designated as the dedicated queer patrol, sir."

The assembled officers laughed, some of them forcefully. Guyles himself coughed up a chuckle. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said, pretending to make light of it, but inside he was churning with fear and rage. It seemed that he managed to help diffuse the laughter by acting aloof since the laughs died down rather quickly.

Bowman dismissed lineup. “Be careful out there,” he said.

As they filed out of the briefing room, a couple of the guys patted Guyles on the back offering assurance that they still respected him, that they had seen the lineup episode as a joke, not as a serious attack on his character or reputation.

Dandridge, one of the other rookies, a fresh faced kid and the youngest recruit in Guyles’ police academy class, looked at him sincerely. “Good job,” he said. “Wish I could get a chance to work undercover.”

Guyles shrugged, acting all experienced while trying to hide a surge of relief. “It’s not all that it’s cracked up to be,” he said. “I like patrol better.”

Guyles muddled through the night. It was cold again and slow. After the initial flurry of calls at the beginning of the shift, the night caved in on itself. The streets became silent, and the boredom set in. He couldn’t wait until summer when things got busy, but for now, he had too much time to think, too much time to stew about the graffiti in the men’s locker room, the comments in lineup.

“Dedicated queer patrol,” Guyles scoffed to himself. “What the hell’s that?”

Ever since he was a kid he has always been so earnest. He meant what he said, and, in turn, he believed what he was told. He had a hard time discerning when the guys were just joking with him or when they actually meant what they said. But with Hicks, he

knew there was real contempt. What had he ever done to deserve the shit Hicks heaped upon him? A big consolation, though, was his growing awareness of Hicks' as someone other officers didn't like much. If he kept his cool, things would blow over and Hicks would be even more isolated than he was.

Guyles drove south on Walker from NW 23<sup>rd</sup> into the heart of Oklahoma City's historic home district. Walker divides the Heritage Hills and Mesta Park neighborhoods, both of which were built in the early 1900's through the 1920's and contained some of the largest mansions in the metropolitan area. They were grand and opulent, decadent displays of prosperity. The smaller homes weren't as fancy, but they were still very substantial dwellings, classic structures fit for the so called American dream: the two story frame house and white picket fence ideal. These neighborhoods would be perfect settings for a Norman Rockwell painting, Guyles thought.

He liked to drive through Heritage Hills when he wanted to calm his anxiety and dream about living there. It didn't have to be a mansion; just one of those houses that reminded him of the TV shows from the 1950's and 1960's, those substantial, idyllic homes that had become icons of familial harmony. Places where the dad's and son's were strong and handsome and the mom's and daughters were beautiful and feminine, everyone perfectly content to be who they were.

Guyles felt particularly attached to a house on NW 14<sup>th</sup> and Walker. It was a classic two-story neocolonial built out of red bricks, three sets of dormers protruding from the gentle downward slope of a broad roof covered in wood shingles. The front yard had two very tall birch trees towering over the neighborhood, adding a stately feel to the property. The yard was meticulously landscaped with alpine hedges bordering the

adjacent lawn. The flower beds up front were enclosed by short brick walls containing dormant rose bushes surrounded by ornamental grass.

When he drove past the house, he looked down the driveway, saw a back yard enclosed by a twelve foot privacy fence, a garage that matched the architecture of the house, one of those garages with an apartment upstairs. The driveway widened in the back, big enough to host a great game of half-court basketball, and then he saw the shadow of a basketball goal stretching across the front of the garage which was illuminated by a security flood light. He imagined a dad and son shooting hoops and talking things over in the cool of an early summer evening, mom and sis slicing watermelon for all to enjoy, and he ached for the stability and normalcy that this home represented: the post card picture perfect ideal of American contentment. Why couldn't he have that?

He stopped his patrol car across the street, watching the windows lit with a warm yellow glow, wondering what life was like for these people who lived there. Were their problems like those on the TV sitcoms, easily resolved in a half hour? He found himself hoping it was so, hoping that somewhere in America there were families who really did talk to each other, families that had control over their lives, smoothing the bumps of life with kind smiles and encouraging words. Yeah, he was old enough and cynical enough to suspect that these homes often served as benign shrouds obscuring the truth that the inhabitants were as fallible as anyone else, succumbing to dysfunction: alcoholism, incest, alienation, rivalry, over ambition, underachievement...

But, now, as he felt overwhelmed from the events of lineup, he felt seduced by the fantasy that enticed him to believe that after all was said and done, even he could expect a

happy ending. All he had to do was work hard enough, pray fervently enough, stay focused and...

A car approached from behind. When he looked at the rearview mirror, he noticed tears welling in his eyes. The vehicle, a black late model Lexus, pulled up next to him. The driver was a dapper, gray-haired gentleman with a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee. He exuded confidence, the kind of confidence that comes with money and success. They lowered their windows to exchange words. Guyles tried to muster the confidence to look at this man with an equal amount of pride.

“Everything all right, officer?” He didn’t sound suspicious, more pleased than anything.

“Yes, sir,” Guyles said. “It’s pretty quiet. “Thought I’d watch the stop sign at Walker. We’ve been getting complaints.”

He didn’t want to tell the man he was like a voyeur, mesmerized by the trappings of the upper middle class lifestyle. Having a police car exempted him from suspicion. After all, he thought, it was his job to watch people, all kinds of people.

“Nice to see you guys around,” the man said. He rolled up his window and drove off toward the mansions that lined Hudson and Harvey avenues. He didn’t say thank you, Guyles noticed. It was like he felt entitled, that he expected his neighborhood would receive extra police patrol just because it was Heritage Hills.

“Asshole,” Guyles snarled below his breath. Though he admired and coveted the rich, he also hated them. They didn’t know how good they had it.

Guyles turned off the patrol car’s headlights, shifted the gear into park. He didn’t watch the intersection, though. He stared at the house, watching the windows, the

movement of shadows inside, knowing that a family dwelled within. He imagined the father sitting in his study smoking a pipe. Mom was in the kitchen drying the dishes with sister while brother played with his train set in the spacious family room in the basement.

One of the upstairs lights flashed on, and a slight, feminine silhouette approached the window. She had a ponytail, and she was talking on the phone, probably to a girlfriend or maybe a boyfriend. She seemed buoyant, effervescent, full of life and beauty. He felt that familiar ache in his chest, the ache of longing, and he wished he could be the big sis in a home like that.

Dispatch dispelled the fantasy, “2 Adam 95.”

Guyles snapped out of his trance, back into the real world. He grabbed his mic and responded, “Go ahead.”

He breathed a sigh of relief, melancholy swirling away, replaced by a call to duty. He hoped it was something urgent.

“2 Adam 95, assault report at Saints E-R. Subject just came in. Staff called.”

Guyles was a little disappointed. Report calls were not very exciting, but at least he had something to do. He drove away from his dream home. The light in the upstairs window was out, now.

Midtown was struggling to make a comeback, but the area was still a blight, empty houses and apartment buildings, burned out shells with vacant windows. Most of the residents in the neighborhood either lived in crowded tenements or in fortified condominiums with twelve foot walls and steel spikes, modern castles. The alleys and parks were full of people chasing their addictions, prostitutes and their johns, drug

dealers hiding in the shadows. The area was also infested with fleabag motels that advertised hourly rates, sidewalks littered with tiny plastic bags, broken glass tubes, used syringes, and discarded condoms.

Guyles drove past the old Mercy Hospital at NW 13<sup>th</sup> and Dewey, an abandoned building left vacant decades before when the Sisters of Mercy moved their act to the north side of town, to more prosperous environs. When he glanced at the old, empty hospital, Guyles thought he saw sets of eyes glowing in the dark windows.

He'd heard stories about the ghosts at Old Mercy: the mysterious lights on the upper floors, the murderous former surgeon who'd gone psychotic and lured local transients into the abandoned operating room, the mental health ward on the fifth floor. Yeah, they were probably just urban legends, but the place didn't need these stories to give someone the creeps.

He flashed his mounted spotlight and swiveled the beam at one of the windows. The light shocked the face of the empty building, evaporating the shadows and exposing a lone figure framed by the window, but Guyles only got a glimpse. The person – he couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman – jumped back, away from the glare. All he could tell was that the person had long dark hair.

Only St. Anthony's dared to stay in Midtown, but even they were making noises of moving out of the area if the city leaders kept stalling on the various revitalization projects they'd been talking about for years. The hospital was the one of the bright spots in a sea of shadows, and when Guyles turned onto NW 9<sup>th</sup> he felt better, like he'd returned from the frontier to the comforts of civilization. The slightly orange flood lights at the tops of tall poles bathed the area, bringing a daylight quality to the streets and



parking decks just outside the hospital perimeter, but the black sky, the stars drowned out by the glare, made a surreal contrast.

Thankfully, the Emergency Room looked slow, no ambulances parked near the entrance. Perhaps he could get in and out on this one, dodging the report all together. Fairly often, alleged assault victims that showed up at the E-R refused to cooperate with the police, yet the staff still called on their behalf, obligated by policy to report suspected crimes. Often, the victim was intoxicated, and the call would end in a trip to Detox or to the county jail. Guyles hoped for the latter situation as he walked through the automatic sliding doors, his senses shocked with the smell of alcohol and antiseptics.

The receptionist at the front desk looked up, her eyes puffy from fatigue. She adjusted the headset that squashed her hairdo down to the middle of her head, a mass of tight black curls tinged with red dye. She had light brown skin and subtle African features.

“Room 8,” she said without smiling or offering a greeting. With a pout she grabbed a tube of lipstick and a small mirror as Guyles walked by.

Guyles saw several nurses gathered at the circular desk in the center of the facility. It was slow, and the staff looked bored. Like cops, they needed a regular dose of adrenaline to keep them sharp, a life or death situation to keep things in proper perspective.

A large, muscle-bound male nurse looked up at Guyles and smiled. He was bald, a shaven bald, with a shiny, oily veneer. He had an earring in his left ear, ink lurking below the purple right sleeve of his shirt. It was something Celtic, an armband tattoo, nothing too original.

“The freak’s in there,” he whispered loudly pointing at Room 8.

One of the female nurses, a slight woman with grandma glasses clucked her tongue at her male colleague. “Marcus, be nice.”

Marcus shrugged his shoulders and laughed, displaying a comically smitten face. “What? What’d I say?”

The other nurses giggled a chorus of laughter, and Guyles was thinking, what have I gotten myself into? He half expected to see the Elephant Man when he stepped through the doorway of Room 8, but what he saw scared him even more.

The patient in question was Jody, the drag prostitute.

Jody’s face was demolished, barely recognizable, left eye swollen shut, a nasty cut on her forehead. Her skin and hair were matted with dried blood. The right side of her face was relatively untouched. She looked like a comic book character, a living, breathing embodiment of yin-yang.

When Jody saw Guyles her good eye flashed with recognition, then she frowned, jaws clenched like she was trying to suppress a strong emotion.

“He left me in a dumpster,” Jody slurred, her speech muffled by the injuries, her tone laced with pain. A large tear welled in her right eye, flooded onto her cheek stopping at the precipice of the bone line. Then it toppled away from her face like a suicide jumper leaping off a cliff. Guyles thought he heard the splash when it spattered the floor.

Jody’s face hardened, her frown stretching to a grimace, her good eye set in an angry gaze. “Can I help you officer?”

Guyles wasn't sure what to say, but he gathered his thoughts, assumed his professional personae. "No, the question is, how can I help you?"

"You can leave me alone."

Guyles felt a surge of relief, and he backed out of the doorway. "Okay, suit yourself." He turned to leave, already composing his explanation to dispatch in his mind, "Assault victim refused to cooperate. Declined report. 10-8."

"Wait," Jody's voice trailed behind him. "I want to tell you what happened."

Guyles tried to walk away but couldn't. He tried to pretend he hadn't heard Jody's plea for help, but he was curious, wanting to talk to Jody, wanting to establish a rapport.

"He did it, your partner."

The words "your partner" scraped his conscience like someone twisting Styrofoam, setting him on edge. She must have remembered that night back in October when they jacked her up on 9<sup>th</sup> and Western.

"He's not my partner," Guyles said. "Not anymore..."

"Officer Hicks," Jody asserted. "He's the one."

She knew his name, impressive. Some officers, including Hicks, shined their name badges so fervently they'd make their names unreadable.

"How'd you know his name?"

"Do you think he's only jacked me up one time? We know all about Officer Hicks. He's notorious."

"What do you mean?"

"He's just... known," Jody said with an anxious tone in her voice.

“And now you’re saying he’d beat you up and leave you in a dumpster? Why would he do something like that?”

Jody shook her head, shrugged her shoulders. “He’s an asshole, that’s why.”

Guyles nodded. He couldn’t argue with that.

“So, do you want to make a report?”

Jody forced a laugh. “And... you think I’m crazy?”

Guyles understood why Jody didn’t want to make a report. She didn’t want to risk retaliation, and he knew Hicks could be a vindictive bastard.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“It’s not about what I believe,” Guyles said. “It’s about what you’re willing to testify to in court.” He hoped the idea of testifying in court would make Jody want to drop the whole matter. He took a pen out of his left pocket, clicked the top, ready to take her statement.

“It won’t do any good. It’ll just make him madder.”

Guyles replaced the pen in his pocket.

One of the nurses walked by, glancing in the room. She was young with strawberry blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she was a little chubby, what people would call pleasantly plump in her formless light green scrubs. She arched her eyebrows and smiled tightly when she looked in. Guyles thought she might be eavesdropping, reporting to the other nurses gathered around the desk. When she walked away Guyles heard some faint snickers. Even though cops and nurses see a lot of strange things in their lines of work, a drag prostitute was rare enough to spark some curiosity and debate.

“No report, then, right?”

Jody hung her head, trying not to cry.

A veteran officer would have left the hospital by then, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and Jody, but he felt trapped with indecision. If Jody was telling the truth, then this was really a big deal; she'd implicated a police officer in a crime, and judging by the severity of her beating, one could justify the felony charge of aggravated assault and battery.

He considered the consequences of taking a report. Certainly, Hicks would have to answer for the charges, would be dragged before command and asked to explain why a prostitute was making allegations against him. A scandal like that could get Hicks reassigned, maybe to an obscure desk job, off the street and out of Guyles' life. No more fag graffiti in the locker room.

"I think a report is a good idea," Guyles said. "If he did this to you, who else might be getting the same treatment, you know?"

Jody nodded, looked up. She seemed so malleable in her present state, nothing like that defiant, streetwise chick he first encountered months before.

"You can't just let this happen without doing something about it."

"Okay. What do I have to do?"

Guyles got a municipal citation out of his report file. He scrawled the words Assault and Battery – AB-2 in the charges section and wrote the name of the suspect, Larry Hicks, listed the police department's address and phone number. He gave the citation to Jody and pointed at the *signature of complainant* line.

"Sign here," he said. Then write your full name, your real name, and give us an address and phone number where you can be reached."

Guyles watched Jody write her personal information: Joseph D. Engel, 2118 NW 39<sup>th</sup> (the Kozan Apartments). He felt a twinge of anxiety, recalling the robber he'd beaten the other night. God, he hoped it had been too dark for anyone to recognize him.

After Jody completed the citation Guyles took out a crime incident form, started filling in the blanks. He wrote Jody's real name in the space listing the victim. "Joseph D.," he said out loud. "What's the D stand for?"

"David."

When he got to the box for race and sex, Guyles felt a little nervous. Okay, he thought, so the name indicates that Hicks was right: Jody really was a guy, but he wanted to hear what Jody would say. "Race and sex?"

Such categories would seem to be immediately apparent, but not in Jody's case. She was a blur of race as well as gender. One could call her Native American or Hispanic, maybe even white if you went by the last name. Some might call her a light skinned African American because of her very dark hair and prominent lips. Guyles realized the answer here would tell more about how Jody views herself than how the world viewed her.

"You can put down Native American male," she said. "But that's only because that's what I am, legally, at least until I get my surgery."

"Indian? What tribe?"

"My mother was Lakota Sioux, and my father was white, German I think. But I never knew my dad, and my mom... she..."

"Your mom... she's dead?"

Jody winced at the question, nodding. “But my grandma loved me, told me about the old days when the tribe respected people like me. They called us two-spirits.”

Guyles was curious. People like her?

He tried to focus on the matter at hand, but he had a lot more questions, the kind of questions he’d been asking all his life, but he never had the opportunity to talk to someone about them. Then, he realized, this was the first real conversation he’d ever had with someone like Jody.

“So why did you end up on the street?”

Jody felt the bump on her head and ran her fingers along the outline of the cut. “Oww!” She stared at the trace of blood on her fingers. “I got kicked out. After my mother died, my family tried to make me act like a boy, but I couldn’t do it. I came to Oklahoma City and tried to find a job, but I couldn’t find anything because I didn’t get a high school diploma and because I still have a boy’s name. I met a guy at a bar one night, and he told me I could make a lot of money being the way I am, because lots of people like she-males, you know, chicks with dicks.”

Guyles felt his cheeks getting warm. He rushed to the next box on the report form, trying to resume professional distance. “What’s your date of birth?”

Jody rattled off the numbered sequence. “Eight, eight of seventy-eight,” she said.

“So, you’re only twenty-one?” She looked older. The street does that to people.

“Yeah,” Jody admitted. She lay back on the examining table, nestled her head on a thin pillow covered with paper cloth. Flakes of dried blood fell from her hair like crimson dandruff. Guyles wondered why the E-R staff hadn’t tended to Jody yet. He knew it wasn’t because they were busy. He heard the staff chattering away.

He closed the door to the exam room because he didn't want to be overheard.

“What kind of surgery are you talking about?”

Jody smiled painfully, right eye widening. “You know, the sex change surgery. I've been trying to save up, but it's really hard.”

Guyles placed his report folder on the counter next to a small sink, sat down on a short stool with wheels on it. He scooted closer to Jody.

A curious thing happened; he felt like he understood her, that he could feel her pain. Where she was visibly beaten, he felt emotionally torn. With her head looking lopsided, he knew he himself was out of balance. Where she expressed her truth outwardly, enduring abuse from society, he kept his truth inside and abused himself. It had become all too clear in just a moment, and he experienced a deep empathy for Jody. He wanted to confess, to absolve himself of decades of denial and lies, and he wanted to be forgiven for the times he went along with the guys, talking shit about queer people, avoiding them at school, tormenting them because he was afraid to stand up for someone labeled a queer and risk being labeled a queer himself.

Jody moved away from Guyles, apparently startled by his proximity. “My grandma told me that two-spirits were once considered very powerful. They had strong medicine, and they brought good luck to our people.”

Guyles listened, intrigued.

“They went away because the white man doesn't understand. When that happened, my people lost their luck. Grandma told me, when my own people reject me, they reject themselves.”



Jody started to cry, a full torrent of tears let loose from her right eye, a steady stream of sorrow.

Guyles didn't know what to say. He'd never had any real exposure to Native American people. His only points of reference were movies like *Dances With Wolves*, and he remembered being charmed by the possibility of being adopted by an alien culture, learning their ways, finding peace and harmony with community and nature. If Jody had been born in a different time and place, maybe she'd be someone important.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Guyles asked, suddenly uncomfortable, feeling the obligation to share his own story with Jody.

Jody shook her head and sighed. "I don't know. You seem safe. I can tell you're a good soul."

Guyles felt a rush of gratitude. He'd always felt so dirty, so corrupt, not really believing he was one of the good guys. Oh, he tried to be good. He tried to do everything right. He became a cop more because he wanted to have a sharply defined role in life, to have good and evil spelled out for him in explicit definitions so he could simply chose the good path. As he was about to complete the first year of his law enforcement career he was already learning that life is much more ambiguous than it appeared, that good and evil aren't so obvious. It felt good to be called a good soul.

"Nobody has ever told me that," Guyles admitted. "Well, maybe my mom, but nobody else."

Jody patted Guyles on the shoulder, and they stared at each other for a moment. It wasn't a romantic pause, more like an unspoken recognition, like gazing down at a pool

of rippling water trying to discern the shape of your face amid the waves of concentric circles. The stone had been dropped.

“I’m like you,” Guyles said, and it felt good to say it. But as the words reverberated off the walls, Guyles felt himself becoming afraid, feeling the power of words spoken aloud.

Jody laughed, not harshly, but with empathetic joy. She did not rebuke his confession. “So, you’re in drag, then.”

Her statement sounded like truth, but he didn’t understand what she meant. Of course he wasn’t in drag, he thought. He wasn’t like her. He didn’t wear women’s clothes openly in public, living fulltime in the female role.

“What do you mean? I’ve never been in drag.”

“Drag isn’t only dressing up like a drag queen on Saturday night. It’s about the costumes we put on to fool everyone into believing we’re something we’re not. Honey, you’re in drag right this moment.”

Guyles bowed his head, knowing that Jody had nailed him. There was no use in arguing. Then he felt himself harden. He couldn’t afford the truth; he was too invested in his chosen way of life, too late to change. How could a prostitute evoke so much wisdom? Why didn’t she use it for herself, get off the street and stop using drugs? He was immediately ashamed of himself, and the old panic returned, seizing his mind, erasing the peace he’d felt only a moment before.

He stood up, grabbed his notebook, holding it in front of him like a shield. The flow of empathy between them had been severed, and they resumed their former roles: Guyles the just-the-facts-ma’am cop and Jody the jaded street walker.

They finished the report. Jody told Guyles that she was behind the Homeland store on NW 39<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania when a police car pulled into the alley. Hicks shined the spotlight on her, yelled at her to stop. Then he approached her, told her to “spread-em” while pushing her against the wall. Jody explained that she panicked and started to resist because she had some marijuana stuffed down her bra.

“That’s when he started beating me,” she cried. “He kept on hitting me, knocked me to the ground and beat my head against the pavement. I blacked out and woke up in a dumpster.”

“When did this happen?”

“I guess it happened earlier tonight, just before it got dark.”

“Right after lineup,” Guyles said to himself.

Hicks must have cleared lineup, took a few calls like everyone else, then hit the streets looking for someone to bust. He guessed that Jody didn’t end up going to jail because she was too beat up, likely to attract too many questions, a hospital visit, a whole night in the emergency room.

He called dispatch for a case number.

Dispatch responded, “2 Adam 95 your case number is 99-10234.” He wrote the number on the report form, wrote it on one of his business cards.

He handed the card to Jody who started tearing it into small pieces, depositing them into a leather bag adorned with a silver medallion inlaid with an oval piece of turquoise.

“My medicine bag,” she said. “My mother gave it to me before she died.”

## Fifteen

Guyles sat at the booth normally reserved for cops at the Flying J truck stop near 122<sup>nd</sup> and I-35. It was the table in the far corner where police officers could sit with their backs to the wall. He'd been there about fifteen minutes without any attention from the wait staff. It wasn't really that busy, not like it usually was, and he just sat there feeling morose, staring outside past his reflection, thinking about how the night turns windows into mirrors. He wondered if he wasn't really transparent, that the darkness somehow reflected peoples' true qualities and that he had been only partially formed, lacking the substance and courage to become a real human being.

"Two-spirits," he repeated to himself. "Sounds like a bunch of shit."

He pondered Jody's cryptic story, wondering if there was truth to it. The idea that there might be some kind of mythical explanation for people who feel the way he had always felt about his gender identity was compelling. To imagine that there might have been a society somewhere in some time that would have honored a gender conflicted boy was almost too much. It was like dreaming of paradise, something intangible, unobtainable...at least in this life.

He shook his head, trying to create a centrifugal force in his mind, pressing his thoughts to the back of his head, wanting them to escape through his ears, to dissipate in the stark light of the Flying J, merging with the smell of greasy burgers and chicken fried steaks, consumed by big-bellied truckers, digested and excreted.

When he looked up, he saw Carla approaching. She looked harried as usual, but her eyes were puffy and bloodshot like she'd been crying. She was carrying a platter loaded with two plates of omelets piled high with salsa, another plate stacked with biscuits alongside a bowl full of gravy. As she walked by, Guyles tried to make eye contact, but she snubbed him, acting like she hadn't seen him.

"Carla?" he said, but she kept walking.

He looked out the window again, watching the line of trucks, wanting to spot a lot lizard darting from cab to cab. It reminded him of when he was a kid looking for tadpoles in the murky water of a shallow pond, how they would move from rock to rock. Then, he realized that the term "lot lizard" was very appropriate, even primeval, a fit description for someone motivated by savage urges, a basic instinct. Then he thought about Jody again, the one who changes, like a chameleon, another kind of lizard.

He shook his head again, succeeding only in making himself feel disoriented. Carla walked by, this time unburdened, holding the tray in front of her like a shield.

"Excuse me," Guyles said, trying to sound more formal. "Waitress, please."

Carla stopped, turned around stiffly, an about-face drill maneuver. "Yes?"

"Coffee?" he said, a note of pleading in his voice. "I'd like a cup, please."

Carla stood behind the round tray looking vulnerable. Her throat tightened like she was about to speak, but then she clenched her teeth, the muscles in her neck flexing to suppress some kind of outburst. She nodded and turned around.

He shook his head, again. "Shit..."

Carla darted to the left and disappeared behind a swinging silver door as Duncan entered the restaurant. Guyles glanced at his watch, 12:30, a little early for Duncan to be on his meal break.

Duncan had a bemused look on his face. He spoke to the bus boy, a kid with long red hair bound up in a ponytail. He had a hawkish nose and several facial blemishes. The kid shrugged his shoulders.

When Duncan saw Guyles he smiled, not the playful, mischievous smile he usually displayed. This one was more deliberate, almost grim.

“Hey, Ron,” Guyles said, trying to sound light hearted. “How’s it hanging?”

Duncan’s smile fell into a frown, eyebrows knitting together. He glanced around for a second before slipping into the booth. He stared down at the table, hands fidgety, groaning like a weight lifter after dropping a heavy load.

“C’mon, what’s up?” Guyles persisted. He didn’t like seeing Duncan this way. It made him paranoid about the incident at lineup, the graffiti in the restroom.

Carla came out of the kitchen, took one look at Duncan and immediately retreated. The look on her face told Guyles that she and Duncan must have had some kind of falling out.

“What’s up with Carla?”

Duncan shrugged, stared out the window. “It’s snowing.”

Snowflakes swirled in the beams street lights, but the snow wasn’t very consequential, flurries.

“Gonna turn to ice,” Duncan said.

Guyles had never known Duncan to make small talk about the weather, at least not with another cop. He wished Duncan would launch into one of his incessant war stories, even if it had to be one of the ones he'd already heard.

"The waitress been by?" Duncan asked.

"She's blowing us off tonight. I asked for a cup of coffee fifteen minutes ago."

Duncan slid out of the booth and stood up. "This is bullshit." He walked behind the counter and grabbed a pitcher of coffee.

Earl, the manager of the restaurant, walked out of the kitchen, nodded a greeting to Duncan.

"Where's Carla?" Duncan asked, grabbing two mugs from a stack of fresh cups next to the coffee maker. He walked back to the booth and poured coffee for himself and Guyles. He set the coffee pot on the table.

Earl shrugged his shoulders and went back into the kitchen.

"I'm not seeing Carla anymore," Duncan confessed.

Guyles wasn't sure this was a bad thing. What could he really say? Duncan had a beautiful wife, and Guyles couldn't understand why this was not enough for him. "Oh," he said, trying to sound concerned.

"The bitch called my wife."

"Really?"

Duncan sipped the hot liquid in his cup a little too vigorous, burning his lip. He winced, spilling a spot of coffee on his uniform shirt. "Fuck! I just had this cleaned." He grabbed a paper napkin and dabbed the spot.

“Let me give you some advice,” Duncan offered. “Never, ever, stay with a woman long enough for her to learn your secrets.”

He recalled the scene in the Batman movie, the one with Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson that came out in 1989. “When Vicky Vale followed him down into the Bat Cave, remember how she went to hug him and then put her fingers beneath his armor? And she said, ‘Oh, there you are.’”

Guyles nodded, amused at how Duncan developed philosophies about life from comic book characters.

“That’s what a woman wants to do,” he continued. “They want to remove your armor. Yeah, they might say they love you once they know the real you, but they’ll never pine after you again. The mystery’s solved, and then you’re just another chump they ignore.”

Guyles thought about Dana, realized Duncan was right. Hadn’t she been probing his armor? Hadn’t she penetrated his defenses? And now she was all lovey-dovey, even leaving little “I love you” notes on his pillow.

He almost choked when he took a sip of coffee, hand trembling. He spilt some of the brown liquid on his own shirt. “Fuck,” Guyles grumbled.

His paranoia jumped a notch as he felt an awful dread. He’d exposed himself too much. She knew too much.

“They don’t respect you anymore. It’s just better to love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

Carla pushed through the silver door, carrying another loaded platter. She walked past the two officers and served the plates to a group of truckers at the other end of the dining room. She smiled at them, laughed with them and didn’t even protest when one of



the truckers grabbed her ass. When she came by Guyles and Duncan again she had her platter up, staring straight ahead. She didn't stop to take their orders.

That's when Duncan had had enough. "Fuck it," he said, standing up again. He chased Carla down, grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door.

"Earl," Carla shouted. "I'll only be a minute. Any longer than that, call the cops."

They went outside the restaurant and argued in the parking lot. Guyles couldn't hear what they were saying, but he saw Carla remove her bracelet, the one Duncan had given her at Christmas. She tossed it to the ground like it was a piece of trash.

Earl leaned on the counter, looked over at Guyles, raised his eyebrows in exasperation and sighed. "Happens all the time," he said. "The girl's a real badge bunny. She can't resist you cops."

Guyles forced a laugh.

"You want to order something?"

"No. I just wanted a cup of coffee. Got a report to write."

He opened his folder and scanned the municipal citation he filled out for Jody, wondering whether or not it would do any good to turn it in. He decided to write the report anyway. He was absorbed in the writing when he heard Duncan's voice a few minutes later.

"What you got there?"

Guyles leaned forward, covered the paperwork with his left arm. Duncan snatched the citation from the table top and began reading it.

"Larry Hicks?" he asked more to himself. "What's he done now?"

Guyles knew he was busted, feeling heat on his face. "He beat up a prostitute."

Duncan read the name of the complainant, “Joseph David Engle. Jody? That’s who’s making this complaint, Jody?”

Guyles folded the crime incident report and deftly replaced it in his notebook.

Duncan tore the citation in half, then tore the halves in half. He let the pieces of white, yellow, and pink paper fall from his hands, a rain of debris, and he rubbed his hands together like he was washing them. He showed Guyles the palms of his hands, like a magician, *see, nothing up my sleeves...*

“Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to fill out a lost citation report and then you’re going to cancel that case number.”

Guyles didn’t move. He sat there frozen, wishing he could disappear. He’d made a mistake, and now he had to face the medicine.

“All you gotta do is make a simple report saying you requested the case number before the victim decided not to cooperate.”

It was that easy, Guyles thought. Just a little report, and a crime just goes away. He figured it probably wouldn’t make a difference; Jody would probably fail to show up at court, the whole matter dropped.

“You know what this kind of shit can do to an officer’s career? It might get him suspended for a few days, but the worst thing is that some slimy defense lawyer or an opportunistic civil attorney can use a report like this to show how an officer has the tendency to be violent. Then he’s liable to be sued. He can lose his retirement, not just a career. And then, if the media got a hold of it...”

Guyles had heard enough. “All right. All right. It never fucking happened.”

But he knew it was true. Hicks did have a tendency toward violence. He did use excessive force. Routinely.

His mind screamed at Duncan, so what if he loses his career. He doesn't give a shit about mine, starting rumors about me and writing derogatory remarks on bathroom walls. That shit can ruin a career, too. But, he dared not speak. It would invite too many questions. He just stared out the window, gazing again, past his reflection. He saw a female figure illuminated in a truck cab, watched as she disappeared behind a curtain, right before the light went out. The lizard had crawled behind a rock.

Duncan calmed down, slid back into the booth. He stared at Guyles.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

Duncan leaned closer, drilling right through Guyles with his intense gaze. “I mean,” he said deliberately. “Are you okay?”

Guyles had that feeling of *déjà vu*, and he knew what he was supposed to say. He faced Duncan.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

## Sixteen

When Guyles got to the South Side Boxing Club, Brummel had a bunch of guys laced up in gloves and wearing headgear, all of them taking turns sparring with that tough looking Latino kid who'd interrupted Guyles on the speed bag, baiting him to fight. His name was Jorge, one of Brummel's best fighters.

"Take it to him, you big pussy," Brummel shouted. "Make him earn it."

The sparring partner had both gloves around his head, elbows crowding his abdominals, shelled up in a defensive crouch. He was getting his ass kicked, Jorge slamming him again and again with body blows, liver shots, the kind that hurt for days. The kid was off balance. If he even threw a punch, it was more of a defensive jab trying to buy some distance and enough time to take a breath. By no means was he giving Jorge a challenge.

"Goddamnit, either stand up and fight or get the fuck out of the ring."

The sparring partner retreated from a flurry of Jorge's punches, backed himself into a corner and leaned against a turnbuckle. He raised his hands in surrender.

Jorge danced to the middle of the ring, throwing jabs and crosses, shaking the sweat from his eyes. He was lean and tough looking, not too muscled up in terms of bulk but sinewy, arms light and fast. He had a trim waist and a nice breadbasket, a well defined abdominal six-pack.

The next sparring partner looked more capable, leaner and faster, more aggressive. He charged at Jorge, throwing punch after punch, but Jorge blocked most of his shots, bobbing and weaving, working his way inside then exploding with hooks and uppercuts. One of the uppercuts connected to the guy's chin, really rang his bell, and he stumbled backward, practically out on his feet. He leaned against the ropes to keep from falling. Jorge closed the distance, started pummeling the guy with body shots, playing with him instead of knocking him out.

“Jorge, how many times do I got to tell you? Finish the bastard. Your job ain't done until he kisses the canvas.”

Brummel chose a third fighter, but the kid shook his head, backing away. That's when Brummel saw Guyles. “You said you came here to fight?”

Guyles nodded, nervous, a little intimidated by Jorge's ferocity, but he knew he could test Jorge better than the other fighters had.

“Booker, lace him up.”

Booker was Brummel's all purpose assistant - part trainer, part custodian - a black guy wearing lots of miles, a graying afro and wrinkled face, missing teeth, a large, pugilistic nose, flat and crooked.

“So, we get to see the pretty boy in action,” Booker said. “You sure can hit them bags, let's see if you can hit another boxer.”

Booker wrapped Guyles' hands, weaving the fabric through his fingers, around his wrists, making his fists tight and straight. Guyles put his hands into the boxing gloves, loving the tight fit, squeezing thumb to fist while Booker tied the laces and taped them down until the gloves felt like natural extensions of his own body. It had been awhile since he'd worn boxing gloves, and he felt their weight, eager to wield his weapons.

Guyles stepped into the ring, watched his opponent hop up and down in the opposite corner. Jorge smiled at him, invigorated by another challenger.

"The kid's pretty tough, but he ain't unbeatable," Booker said. "He thinks he's hot shit, but he ain't been tested."

Jorge danced to the middle of the ring, shuffling his feet, throwing punches, displaying his prowess.

"He looks pretty fast," Guyles said.

"Yeah, but don't let his showboating fool you. He's a crybaby. If you can tag him real good a time or two he'll blow his cool. When that happens, he's easy pickin's."

Guyles wondered why Booker was giving him all this information, but it was good to know, good to have someone in his corner. He needed the reassurance, unsure about his abilities.

"How do you know Mr. Brummel?"

Booker smiled his nearly toothless grin, chuckled. "Me and Pat, we go way back."

Guyles figured this meant Booker and Brummel had done time together, maybe cell mates, both dreaming of a day when they could operate a boxing gym, dreaming of finding that diamond in the rough they could coach into a champion. Maybe Jorge was their ticket, maybe not, probably not. Crybabies don't get far.

Booker held a mouth piece, and Guyles leaned forward, receiving it in his teeth, clamped down. He started bouncing in place, throwing punches. He didn't showboat like Jorge, more of an attempt to shed some nervous energy. He didn't think he could beat the kid, just wanted to make a respectable showing. Fighting a man in the boxing ring was one of the most terrifying things he'd ever done. Even though he'd done it many times, he'd never lost that edge of fear, that nervous anxiety rumbling through his gut, telling him he needed to be sharp, tough, ready for anything. When he fought well (even if he lost), he felt a rush of exhilaration, the power of facing a fear and not backing down, the most intense feeling of accomplishment he'd ever known. He knew Brummel was testing him, and he wanted to measure up, to reaffirm his status as a man. The jitters were a good sign. He was on the ride now, no backing down.

The fighters bounced to the middle of the ring, squared off, tapped gloves and tried to stare each other down. Guyles didn't like the psychological battle. It bored him. What he really wanted to do was cut straight to the action, but he wasn't about to show weakness. He stared back at Jorge, looked deep into those steely brown eyes, wanting to explore their darkness, the secrets they concealed, knowing that some things would be revealed soon enough, during the first round, maybe the second. He didn't know if he had the steam to continue beyond that. Yeah, he was in good shape, just not in fighting shape, and he hoped Jorge wouldn't find out how unprepared he actually was.

Guyles blinked first. Jorge grinned, revealing the red mouthpiece he had clenched in his jaws, looking like a mouthful of blood.

A buzzer sounded. Round one.

“Don’t try to knock him out right from the first punch. Get a sense of his range, of how he moves. Pace yourself, Jorge,” Brummel shouted.

Jorge didn’t listen. He attacked Guyles savagely, jumped toward him, two sharp jabs, a hard right cross. Guyles felt his head snap back, saw a fog of darkness...

*Dad was down in the basement pounding pieces of metal. He was supposed to be building something or fixing something, but Willie knew he must have gotten really angry again. He was always angry, always in the basement destroying things. Mom had taken a job in the bakery of a local grocery store, and she wasn’t home from work. One of the good things about her job was all the extra cookies she brought home. Willie grabbed the cookie jar, fished his hand through the opening and snagged a couple of chocolate chips, his favorite.*

*“Mom says you can’t have cookies before dinner,” Danny said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen.*

*“That’s not true,” Willie said. “Mom says **you** can’t have cookies before dinner. You’re the one who never eats your vegetables.”*

*Danny made a face at his brother, a face of sneering defiance. “I’m gonna tell, and you’ll get in trouble. Nah, nanna, nah, nah.”*

*Willie wasn’t scared. Mom wouldn’t be home for at least another hour. “Who you gonna tell?”*

*Danny motioned his eyes toward the basement. Dad hammered away, cussing like crazy. The boys heard his growling voice curling up through the furnace vents, a sinister echo like a voice from hell.*



*Willie laughed. "Well, I dare you. Go ahead, make my day."*

*Danny acted like he was going to do it, but just as soon as he put his hand on the doorknob to the basement door he chickened out. "Uh-uh, not gonna do it."*

*"Well, then, you're smarter than I thought."*

*Willie went outside, to the front of the house. He checked Donut's driveway. His car was there, cool! He trotted across the street followed by his little brother.*

*"Can I have one, too? Please..." Danny pleaded. "I want to share."*

*"If you go home, I'll give you a cookie."*

*"But I want to play, too."*

*"You can't. This is big kids' stuff."*

*Danny started to cry, and Willie felt bad. He wouldn't want to be home alone with Dad right now, either. "Oh, all right, but you gotta stay out of the way."*

*Danny smiled, hopping across the street to join his brother. They heard the ratta tat tat of the speed bag. Donut was working out.*

*"What's that?" Danny asked.*

*"That's a speed bag. It's for boxers," Willie said, feeling well-informed, experienced.*

*When they got to the garage Donut had switched to the heavy bag. The boys watched him wail away, throwing full strength behind his punches. The bag didn't merely swing back and forth; it flew through the air, to the limits of a chain attached to the roof beam overhead. The whole garage trembled, and a trophy vibrated off the window sill where it had been placed, falling to the floor. Willie retrieved the trophy, read the words "District One Golden Gloves Champ, Light Heavyweight" engraved on a thin brass strip*

*glued to its base. In the middle of two pillars was the year 1981, a small brass boxer on top.*

*“Wow,” Willie said. “You’re a champ?”*

*Donut stopped punching. “Not anymore. I won that a couple years ago, but you could win it tonight, champ.”*

*“Tonight?” he asked, unable to hide a hint of panic. “I’m not fighting anyone tonight, am I?”*

*Donut frowned. “Look, Willie, it’s time to stand up. Be a man. You can do it. After all, you’ve been trained by a champ, right?”*

*When Donut put it that way, Willie felt a lot more confident.*

*“Tommy?”*

*“Yes, you’ll be fighting Tommy Culbertson. He should be here any minute.”*

*Danny stepped from behind his brother and beamed a smile up at Donut. “I like boxing,” he said.*

*Donut laughed. “Who’s that?”*

*Willie sighed. He didn’t want his little brother around to watch Tommy Culbertson kick his butt. He especially didn’t want Danny to tell Dad about it. “That’s my little brother. He followed me over here.”*

*“Then your little brother’s going to see how tough his big brother is.”*

*Willie wished he could feel that positive right then. He considered walking away with the excuse that he needed to get his brother home, leaving assurances that he’d return, knowing he’d never come back.*

*Before he could move, he heard a familiar voice.*

*“Hello, faggot.”*

*It was Tommy Culbertson. A trail of voices laughed in response to Tommy’s greeting.*

*Tommy and a whole entourage of kids from the neighborhood walked up Donut’s driveway: Michael, Patrick and Tommy’s big brother, Tim among them. Some of the kids had come from several blocks away, some he recognized from school, some he didn’t know at all. There had to be over twenty of them. Willie worried that this boxing match might turn into a rumble, wondered if he and Donut both could take them all. He imagined standing back to back with Donut throwing flurries of punches, kids writhing in pain at their feet. It seemed glorious, like a comic book triumph, like Conan the Barbarian with a host of corpses piled at his feet.*

*Donut’s voice permeated the fantasy. “You ready, Willie?”*

*Willie nodded vacantly, still charmed by the fantasy. He tried to speak but gulped instead. Every muscle in his body clenched all at once.*

*“Just breathe, Willie. Relax, man, relax,” Donut coached. “If you’re holding your breath when he hits you, it’s going to hurt. You don’t want to lose your wind.”*

*Willie held his breath a moment longer. When he exhaled his resolve drained as the air left his body. At the bottom of the cycle, he felt his legs turning into rubber. He could barely stand, much less throw a punch.*

*Tim Culbertson stepped forward, shook hands with Donut. They greeted each other warmly, betraying a spirit of friendship. Tim must have been the same age as Donut, Willie surmised, and they knew each other from school. And, suddenly, the whole*

*situation seemed like a set-up, another opportunity to beat him down. Willie tried to walk away, but Donut grabbed his shoulder, held him in place.*

*Meanwhile, all the other kids fanned out forming a ring, an arena of excited pre-adolescent boys. They were laughing at Willie, patting Tommy on the back. They hadn't come to see a boxing match; they'd come to see a massacre.*

*"Smear the queer!" someone yelled.*

*A chorus of laughter erupted in response, and Willie found himself in the center of that arena surrounded by menacing faces. The brief dream of triumph had turned into a nightmare. He blinked his eyes, trying to keep mounting tears from spilling down his cheeks.*

*Donut placed boxing gloves on his hands, laced them up while Willie stood there in a daze. He stared at Tommy, beyond him. He wished he was a ghost, beyond the threat of harm.*

*"Lighten up, bud," Donut urged, "This is a boxing match not an execution."*

*Donut pushed the boys together, made them face each other.*

*"Nothing below the belt," he cautioned. "No kicking. No spitting. No elbows and no wrestling. This is a boxing match. Got it?"*

*Tommy nodded and smiled, punching his gloves together.*

*Willie just stood there.*

*"Willie?" Donut inquired.*

*Donut's face appeared in Willie's line of vision. "You got it?"*

*Willie nodded involuntarily. Life slowed down like a slow motion replay. The crowd of voices merged into a cacophonous groan.*

*“Shake hands,” Donut said.*

*The boys hesitated, pondering how they could shake hands while wearing boxing gloves. They managed a cordial bump before their coaches swept them back into their perspective corners.*

*Donut tried to get Willie to look at him, but Willie couldn't shake the daze of fear and dread that had overwhelmed him.*

*“You can take him. He's not all that tough. Just don't get him toe to toe.”*

*Willie nodded.*

*“Keep moving. Step in and punch. Hit him square in the nose.”*

*“Umm hmm.”*

*“Set him up, just like I taught you and take him down.”*

*Donut's encouragement was just another surreal element of this very bad dream.*

*“Ready?” Donut asked.*

*Willie nodded.*

*“Okay. Hands up,” Donut urged. Willie assumed a fighting stance, walked stiffly forward. Donut wedged his body between the boys, raised his arm then quickly dropped it, signaling the beginning of the match.*

*Tommy struck first. He moved forward, and though Willie could see the right hand coming from a long way off, he couldn't manage a block. The glove penetrated Willie's defense, filled his vision with red-dyed leather and collided with his nose full brunt. He felt the force of the blow before he felt the pain, and he stepped backward trying to maintain his balance. It felt like his head had swollen to the size of a basketball, the pressure overwhelming his vision, blurring his eyes with a swell of tears. When the*

*bubble of painlessness finally burst, Willie felt sick and dizzy, reeling on his feet. He fell forward cradling his face in his boxing gloves.*

*The world resumed its regular speed, and the voices were clear again. They chanted. "Smear the queer. Smear the queer."*

*"What a fag!"*

*Willie lay on the ground afraid to get up.*

*"Tommy. You killed him! One-punch knock-out!"*

*Someone kicked his feet. Duncan's voice permeated the shouting. "Get up! Get the fuck up!"*

*Willie tried to make himself merge with the earth.*

*"One. Two." Donut counted a slow beat. "On your feet, Willie."*

*The crowd of boys took up the count by the time Donut reached, "Three."*

*"Four!"*

*Willie heard Danny's voice rise above the fray, "Five!"*

*"Six!"*

*He heard Tommy laughing, imagined him dancing around joyfully.*

*Donut wasn't counting anymore. He shouted in Willie's ear. "If you don't get up, you'll get beat up for the rest of your life. You'll run away for the rest of your life."*

*"Seven!"*

*"Get up!" Donut's voice was beyond angry. "Get up, fag!"*

*Now, when even Donut's voice joined the chorus calling him a fag, Willie's despair turned to anger. He surged with an overwhelming sense of injustice, screamed into his boxing gloves, beyond the leather, into the very ground. His mind focused on a*

*lingering bitterness, a question, something he'd been afraid to ask. "Why did you make me this way?"*

*"Eight!"*

*Willie gathered himself to stand.*

*"Nine!"*

*He struggled to his feet, stood there, resuming a fighting stance.*

*"Ten!"*

*Tommy danced around, the picture of confidence, shifting his feet, bobbing left and right like Sugar Ray Leonard. He moved his right hand in a winding motion, lunged forward with a left jab, striking Willie on the chin. This time, Willie didn't go down.*

*Tommy faked another jab, a hard right to Willie's body just above the kidney.*

*Willie absorbed the blow, but he didn't strike back.*

*"Get moving," Donut shouted. "He's going to kill you if you just stand there like that."*

*Tommy kept showboating, dancing around like an idiot. He rushed forward, right glove cocked behind him, getting ready to throw a haymaker, one of those Hollywood punches you could see a mile away.*

*Willie finally moved, jabbing with his left, striking Tommy squarely on the nose. Not hard enough to draw blood, but it was hard enough to stop Tommy in his tracks. Willie followed the jab with a hard right, slamming home directly beneath Tommy's diaphragm, bending him forward. Then, Willie exploded with a flurry of lefts and rights on either side of Tommy's head.*

*It was Tommy's turn to fall face down on the ground.*

*Stunned silence...*

*“Get up!” Willie yelled. “Get up, you little sissy!”*

*Tommy lay there moaning at first, crying into the boxing gloves, but he didn't stay down. He got back on his feet.*

*The dynamics of the crowd had changed. Tommy had lost his bluff, and when Donut called for the end of the first round, Willie found Michael and Patrick in his corner. Danny was there, too, looking at his big brother with obvious admiration. Some of the other boys shifted their alliances also. By the time Donut signaled the beginning of round two the crowd's allegiance was divided in half.*

*When the fight resumed Tommy was a lot more cautious, no longer showboating. He approached Willie tentatively, flicking out a jab here and there. Willie had lost his fear, had finally gained confidence, realizing he was the superior boxer. He closed the gap, jabbing, missing, throwing a right cross that connected, striking the chin. Tommy's forward momentum amplified the punch, and he reeled to the left, face unprotected, vulnerable to another jab landing directly on his nose. An explosion of blood.*

*Tommy managed to stay on his feet, but he backed away from Willie, staying beyond his reach. Willie chased him all over Donut's back yard.*

*“C'mon,” Tim yelled at his little brother. “Are you going to let this wimp kick your ass?”*

*Tommy stopped running, resumed a fighting stance. He stood squarely in front of Willie, and the boys were in a momentary stalemate until they moved at the same time. Tommy got lucky and landed a blow first, again right on Willie's nose which exploded in*



*a veil of red mist. Blinded with tears and blood, Willie struck out furiously, losing his composure and style,*

*thrashing at Tommy with wild punches, some of them hitting their mark but most of them missing. Tommy returned the favor, and the two boys stood toe-to-toe trading blows.*

*Donut grabbed Willie by the waist while Tim did the same with Tommy. They took the flailing boys back to their corners.*

*End of round two.*

*The crowd of boys was really whooping it up, now. This fight had become more than they'd bargained for, and they were excited, crazy at the sight of blood.*

*Donut placed his thumbs over Willie's nostrils trying to stop the flow of blood. Willie coughed and sputtered, droplets of blood spewing from his mouth, all over Donut's face.*

*"Sorry..." Willie said, slobbering.*

*Donut laughed. "I'm proud of you, Willie. You're really something."*

*Affirmation! Willie basked in the glow of Donut's admiration, felt a sense of warmth and acceptance that he'd never known before, gratitude toward Donut, love... He reached around his coach, gave him a hug. He knew, no matter what happened from that point on, he was a winner.*

*Round three began with both boys circling each other, both of them breathing hard. They'd grown weary, were trying to muster the strength to continue. Tommy threw a jab but missed. Willie closed the distance, landed a left hook to the body, which made Tommy bend over and start crying. Willie sensed victory.*

*Tommy did something unexpected. He flung his arms downward, the loose-fitting boxing gloves thumping on the ground. He lunged at Willie, struck Willie's face with a bare fist. Willie reeled with dizziness, outraged. This wasn't supposed to happen. Tommy grabbed his opponent in a bear hug, pinned his arms to his sides and wrestled him to the ground.*

*Willie's own boxing gloves were securely on his hands so he was at a desperate disadvantage in a wrestling match. Tommy clawed and scratched Willie, pulled his hair and even bit him on the shoulder before Donut and Tim jumped into the melee to separate the boys.*

*"Match over!" Donut shouted. "Match over!"*

*The circle of boys had moved in closer, congealing into a great amoebic mass with the struggling boys forming the nucleus, their bodies curled around each other, a living yin-yang.*

*Donut and Tim shouted at the crowd, told them to back off, grabbing their perspective protégé's, dragging them to either side of the yard.*

*"Match over!"*

*Donut shouted until the boys backed off and fell into a speculative silence, mumbling among themselves, offering opinions about who'd won the fight.*

*Some of the boys started murmuring a low chant, "Tommy! Tommy!" while Michael, Patrick, and Danny countered with, "Willie! Willie!"*

*"Quiet!" Donut yelled.*

*Donut grabbed the fighters by their wrists, brought them to the middle of the yard where he stood glaring at the crowd until the chants died to whispers. He remained stoic*

*until the whispers fell to silence, breathless expectation, waiting for Donut to announce the winner.*

*Without a word, Donut raised Willie's arm signaling victory.*

*Some of the boys cheered while the others booed and complained, protesting that Tommy had been screwed out of a victory.*

*"Tommy drew blood!" a boy said. "Look at Willie, he's more beat up."*

*"But Tommy cheated..."*

*"Well, my dad says if you ain't cheatin' you ain't tryin'."*

*Donut and Tim urged the fighters to the center of the yard where Donut untied Willie's boxing gloves.*

*"Shake," Donut commanded. "Be a good sport, Willie."*

*Willie stared at Tommy's face, red and swollen, blood trickling from his nose. He was going to have a real shiner. Tommy seemed smaller, diminished compared to how he seemed only an hour before. Willie extended his hand in the spirit of sportsmanship.*

*Tommy glared at Willie, stiffened his arms and refused Willie's hand, backing away, mumbling something, "F-ing fag."*

*The words resonated, and Willie withdrew his hand, embarrassed and hurt. He had thought, after all this, he and Tommy could finally be friends.*

*Tim slapped his little brother's head. "Be a good sport, dumb-ass."*

*Donut nudged Willie forward. Both boys raised their arms reluctantly, grasped each other's hands and shook half heartedly, refusing to look each other in the eyes.*

*Tim approached Donut, offered his hand, but his narrowed eyes and twisted mouth revealed a dark, smoldering anger. Willie guessed that Tommy was in for another fight when he got home.*

*The boys' voices were still embroiled in debate, their protests and affirmations falling away as the crowd dispersed. The evening sun was beginning to wane, a tinge of coolness. Willie's skin raised goose pimples, the sweat evaporating, or maybe it was his father's voice.*

*"Willeee!"*

*Willie glanced around looking for his little brother, a sense of rising dread. He knew if his Dad had to call for him he was already in big trouble. He wanted to mitigate his penalty, if at all possible, by finding his brother and getting home before Dad started walking the neighborhood searching for his sons.*

*He spotted Danny who was wearing a pair of boxing gloves, play-fighting another boy, bobbing and weaving.*

*"Danny," he shouted. "Dad's calling. We gotta get home."*

*Danny's eyes widened, and he stood up straight and still, allowing his opponent to slip inside, slapping his face. He flung the gloves to the ground, trotted over to his brother.*

*Donut grabbed Willie in a giant bear-hug, lifting him off the ground. "I am so proud of you," he said. But Willie tried to squirm out of Donut's grasp.*

*"Willie!" Dad's voice again, more menacing, closer.*

*He was standing in the driveway, face contorted with rage, gaze fixed on Willie, who was beginning to feel crestfallen, victory lost in fear. He went limp in Donut's arms*

*forcing Donut to set him down. He looked down, tried to summon the will to speak to his father.*

*Dad was breathing hard, face covered in dirt. He almost looked like a black man. Sweat poured down his face, from his temples, around his eyes, the droplets carving streaks of white through the grime. It looked like he'd been crying, like the photo negative of a sad clown, a mime. Willie saw the whites of his father's eyes, a disturbing contrast to the darkness of his skin, the black pupils bulging outward, glaring like a demon's.*

*"Willie, get your ass over here."*

*The remaining boys fell silent, compelled to watch the drama that was unfolding before them.*

*Willie heard a voice behind him. "Maybe we're going to see Willie get his ass kicked after all." A couple of the boys laughed.*

*Willie left Donut's side and walked toward his father.*

*Danny shouted, "He won, Dad. Willie won the fight!"*

*Tommy was still there, yelling back, "He did **not** win." He paused, fingered the swell near his left eye. "It was a tie."*

*Willie walked toward his father, still naked from the waist up, torso covered with boxing glove marks, blood on his light blue shorts. Dad's face softened, the glare in his eyes switching from anger to confusion.*

*"Danny," he said. "What are you doing over here? You're not allowed to cross the street."*

*“Dad, you should have seen Willie fight. He was really tough. He kicked Tommy’s ass.”*

*Dad’s eyes bulged. “Kicked his ass?”*

*Danny looked sheepish. “Sorry, Dad, kicked his butt is what I meant to say.”*

*“Where have you been hearing language like that?” Dad surveyed the crowd of boys.*

*Danny responded to the question with the sincere, unspoiled voice of a child, a voice that rings innocent truth. “From you, Daddy,” he said.*

*Willie thought he saw Dad blushing beneath the thin veneer of dirt on his face, and the change in his demeanor was surprising. Dad looked down at his sons, smiling, and the smile cracked the dirt caked at the edges of his lips. The make-up was crumbling.*

*“So, you won the fight, huh?”*

*“He was awesome,” Donut said. “He went the distance, Mr. Guyles.” He handed Willie the boxing trophy. “You deserve it, champ.”*

*Dad looked at Willie like he didn’t know who he was.*

*“He’s been working really hard. He’s a natural,” Donut continued.*

*“A natural?”*

*Dad reached down, lifted Willie and gave him a hug. For a moment Willie’s feet dangled in the air, father and son looking at each other’s face. Willie hugged his dad around the neck. Some of the dirt got on Willie’s face, but this time, he didn’t cringe.*

*“I love you, Dad?” Willie confessed, laying out the bait, hoping Dad would reciprocate.*

*Dad looked up, smiling. “I love you, too.”*

*The statement sounded sincere, no hesitation, and Willie knew that he'd finally done something right. He'd finally won his father's affection, if only for the moment.*

*Yes, he had won...*

When Guyles came back to real time, he saw Brummel yelling before he heard him. His face looked furious. When the words came, they were like a television suddenly blaring full blast after a long mute.

“What the fuck was that? This was only a sparring match for chrissakes. I don't know who you took into the ring with you, but you've got some demons, kid.”

Booker and a couple of other guys were helping Jorge to his feet.

“Get out of my ring.”

Guyles wound his way through the ropes, hopped down to the floor. Had he been kicked out of the gym?

“So fucking what?” he said, mostly to himself, suddenly disillusioned with the place, sick of the macho posturing. He'd put Brummel's best man down for the count, and he wasn't even in fighting shape. So much for boxing legends.

Before he got his gloves off, Booker intercepted him. “Hey man. Slow down. You don't have to be going nowhere,” he said, almost pleading. “Hang out for a while. The old man will cool off. If anything, you did him a favor. Jorge's been needing his ass kicked for a long time. Where'd you learn how to fight?”

“In my back yard,” Guyles said, feeling cocky, high on adrenaline.

Booker guided him to the shadow boxing station. “Just stay here, wait for the old man to cool down. He’s gonna want to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Guyles relented. A special light suspended from the ceiling shined upon the white paneling nailed to the wall. When Guyles stepped in front of the light it cast a full sized shadow.

Brummel, still gruff but not so angry, shouted across the room at Guyles, “Yeah, that’s the best opponent for you, young man. You’re fighting yourself. It’s high time you got to know your shadow, kid.”

Guyles faced his shadow, crouching, gloves up, elbows in. He threw a jab, another jab, a right cross, mesmerized by the shadow’s mocking precision.

Booker patted his shoulder. “Good thing shadows can’t hit back.”

Guyles, distracted, stood up straight, lowered his guard.

“Yeah, thank God for that,” he said. And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw something that almost made him faint.

Standing straight up with his boxing gloves held chest high, it looked like his shadow had enormous breasts.

## Seventeen

When Guyles got back to his apartment building he noticed a car parked in his assigned parking spot, a 60’s model Lincoln Continental with suicide doors, black with chrome star rims. Definitely a ghetto cruiser, he thought. Loud music boomed from the



car, not loud enough to make the ground tremble, but loud enough to hear that the music wasn't Rap or Hip Hop, but Rock, a band he didn't recognize, the singer's voice whiny and forlorn.

Guyles was about to get out of his car, tell the occupants of the vehicle to scoot the hell out of there when a lithe female figure popped open the rear door, stood up. She was dressed in black, a short black skirt over fishnet stockings with a lacy blouse unbuttoned half way down. The girl's hair had strands of varying length, curling inward under her chin like a pair of tusks. It was Dana with a new hairdo.

She looked across the parking lot, saw Guyles sitting in his Camero and ran toward him. He rolled down the window, and Dana leaned in, giving Guyles a look at her breasts bulging beneath a black lacy bra, one of those push-up bras that made her look more voluptuous than she really was.

"Hi there," Dana said, smiling. She had a nose ring on the left flare of her nose, another new affectation.

The singer's voice reverberated from the Lincoln.

*I'm a creep. I'm a weirdo.*

"Hi," Guyles said. "What's up with that?" He nodded toward the car.

Dana knit her eyebrows and frowned. "Glad to see me, huh?"

Guyles realized he couldn't hide his discomfort at seeing her right then. He faked a yawn. "I'm tired," he complained. "It's been a crazy night."

Dana stared at him for a moment like she was trying to read his mind. She seemed to sense something.

"We're going to Larry's. Want to come along?"

Some of the effervescence had left her voice like the fizz leaving a glass of soda-pop when it sits out too long. She wasn't cynical but somewhat desperate.

"They're talking about closing Larry's down and putting up a Taco Hell," Dana continued. "So we're trying to hang out there as much as possible until it happens."

Larry's was an old road house restaurant near NW 39<sup>th</sup> and Ann Arbor built back when 39<sup>th</sup> street was a highway, part of U.S. Route 66. Legend had it that Jack Kerouac once bummed a meal off the original Larry back in the late 1940's when Kerouac and his bunch were traveling back and forth across the United States, before he wrote *On the Road*.

It seemed like a plausible story since the patrons at Larry's were among the fringes of society: tattooed, blue-haired punk rockers, Goths dressed in black with their ghost white faces, flamboyant gay guys, butch lesbians, and, sometimes, drag queens. They all went there after the clubs on the strip closed. Once, Guyles went there on a call when a bunch of racist skinheads were trying to bash a queen in the parking lot. The whole restaurant emptied into the street causing a freakish rumble.

Guyles didn't feel comfortable with the idea of going to Larry's. He was worried he might be recognized, afraid to be seen by any police officers who might happen by.

*What the hell am I doing here?*

Guyles yawned again, this time for real. "I'm really tired, but you can go if you want. Some other time, maybe?"

Dana smiled one of her bitter smiles, eyes narrowed like she was trying to stare through him. She looked like a feral cat showing her teeth.

"Okay. Just don't expect me home any time soon."

Guyles was more relieved than anything, but he felt a curious desire to scratch back. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll change the locks.”

Dana turned away, walked toward the Lincoln. A door opened, she climbed inside, shouting, “Then I’ll pound on the door until your ass gets out of bed.”

*I don’t belong here.*

Dana slammed the door shut.

Guyles felt a dread of loneliness for a moment, but he cheered himself, glad to have some privacy for awhile. He wanted to surf the Internet, check his e-mail without worrying about someone looking over his shoulder.

Later, Guyles sat in the darkness hunched over the glowing computer monitor like it was a supernatural orb, trying to discern his future, at least the next few days. He clicked an e-mail message from Lady Pandora.

It read, “Be here at 5:00 PM, not a second later.”

The authority in the message was tantalizing. Had the game begun?

He typed, “Yes ma’am.”

He opened an attachment to Lady Pandora’s e-mail, a map and a set of directions to a gas station in Irving, Texas, just outside a business district called Los Colinas.

“When you get to the Texaco Station at N. Macarthur Blvd and Valley Ranch Pkwy, call me at 972-555-4355.”

He mouse-clicked the print icon and listened as the printer buzzed to life filling the room with a prolonged electronic sigh.

His breath came faster, heavier. He was excited, titillated, an urgent drive building between his legs - something uninvited, incongruent to the journey he was about to begin.

To distract himself, Guyles grabbed a suitcase from his closet, a vintage 1950's sparkly blue, hard-covered case with blue trim and a matching handle, something he'd inherited from his grandmother when he first joined the Army. Before reporting to the MEPS station he'd removed his grandmother's name tag, a small metal rectangle, and wrote his name on the naked wood, Willie Guyles. After he graduated boot camp, he erased the name Willie, replaced it with Bill. He wondered if he'd be writing another name someday. It sent shivers down his spine to contemplate this.

He gathered some socks and underwear from his dresser drawer, a couple of t-shirts, a collared blue pull-over from his closet and a pair of jeans. He grabbed his shaving kit, stuffed it with a razor and shaving cream, a toothbrush and a travel size tube of toothpaste. The inside of the suitcase looked incomplete. There was room left for more clothing, and he thought about packing more, staying an extra day or two in Dallas, savoring the experience he was about to have before returning to Oklahoma City.

He had to remind himself he'd planned this trip as a cathartic exploration, a total humiliation, to satisfy his curiosity, to shame himself. He wanted to look into the mirror, see how ridiculous he looked and know once and for all he'd been fantasizing the impossible. He hoped the experience would purge him of his desires, hoped it would bring him back into balance, and then he could get on with the rest of his life.

The door to his apartment opened and closed. He heard the click of hard shoes on tiled floor, smelled her perfume. Dana was home a lot earlier than he thought she'd be.

Guyles logged off the Internet, hit the shut-down button. Dana poked her head through the doorway to the bedroom before the computer had completely shut down.

“What are you doing, Willie boy? Looking at transvestites, again?”

Guyles didn't answer. When the computer blinked off, the room was devoid of light, images of the computer screen floating in his vision. He was busted. Again.

Dana flicked the light switch, and the sudden bright light dazzled his eyes, made him feel exposed. He huddled in his chair. She walked toward him. He noticed the tips at the end of her longest strands of hair had been dyed red, like she'd just gored some predator. She smiled at him.

“What's the suitcase for? Going on a trip?”

Guyles tossed another pair of socks into the suitcase. “Yes, I'm going to Dallas... for a gang conference.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they're having a conference about the influx of MS-13 gang members into Oklahoma City.”

“In Dallas?”

“Yeah... in Dallas. You know, it's the midpoint, like when they have the OU-Texas game.”

Dana pouted, at first for effect, it seemed, but then her eyes got glassy. “You're going to meet someone else, a girlfriend, someone kinkier than me.”

“No, I'm not,” Willie said, feeling his cheeks getting warm, feeling transparent. “I don't have a girlfriend.”

“You don't? Then what am I?”

Indeed, Guyles thought. “You’re my... roommate?”

“With benefits.”

Guyles didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to have drama with Dana, she knew too much. He was afraid to piss her off, afraid of what she might say.

“It’s not that,” he said. “I mean... I don’t know what we are. You’re here then you’re gone. You tell me you love me and then you’re gone. What kind of relationship is that?”

Dana frowned. “And you’re just a poser, a real fake. How can I commit to you, when you can’t even commit to yourself?”

She walked out of the bedroom, pulled a cell phone from her purse. Guyles followed her.

“Hey, where did you get that?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She dialed some numbers, walked out of the apartment, stood in the shadow of the balcony above. The green glow of the cell phone against her face blanched her skin, reflected off the whites of her eyes, making her look like a ghost head floating in the darkness.

“Hey, Thomas,” she said. “Come back.”

Guyles followed her to some concrete stairs on the north side of the apartment complex. She waited on the edge of the street, hugging her breasts, shivering through a blast of wind.

“I’m sorry,” Guyles said. “I’m a jerk, really mixed up, but I’m going to get my shit together.”

Dana looked at him, rolled her eyes and sighed. The black Lincoln Continental rounded the corner at 29<sup>th</sup> and Lee, stopped in front of Dana. She got into the car, closed the door, disappearing behind the tinted glass.

## Eighteen

Guyles stopped at the Texaco station on Valley Ranch parkway, pulled up to a payphone at the outer edge of the parking lot. Feeling paranoid, he glanced around furtively to see if there were any police cars waiting nearby. For some reason, he felt like a john trolling the streets for a hooker, except this wasn't some sleazy part of town with boarded up beer bars and cheap motels. He saw immaculately trimmed medians, sculpted trees and bushes and lots of walls and gates. Los Colinas was definitely a high rent district.

He rolled down his window, reached for the receiver and plopped a quarter into the slot. He heard the slight jingle of a bell as the quarter dropped into the coin box at the base of the phone. His right index finger hovered over the key pad. He'd remembered Lady Pandora's phone number on the drive to Dallas.

When the phone connected, he waited breathlessly, listening for the ring: one ring, two rings, three... He closed his eyes.

The phone clicked.

He listened to the answering machine, a sultry female voice. "Lady Pandora, pleasure and pain all the same. Leave a message and tell me your game."

Guyles couldn't believe it. He had traveled all this way, had done what he was asked to do, and then he gets some kind of cheesy phone message.

"Uh...this is Willie, Bill Guyles? From Oklahoma City? I'm at the Texaco at Valley Ranch parkway."



He heard another click, the same female voice, only live this time.

“Hello?”

Guyles felt a surge of relief. “Yes, I’m Bill Guyles, the guy from Oklahoma City? We’ve been exchanging e-mails?”

The live voice wasn’t so sultry. She sounded like a normal woman but with a pronounced Texas accent. “Oh, Beel,” she said. “Oh yes, sweetheart. I remember yeww.”

Lady Pandora had transformed in Guyles’ mind from Pamela Lee Anderson wearing thigh-high black leather boots and a leather corset to Dolly Parton in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* wearing a Victorian dress buttoned up to the neck. The image of a wild mane of blond hair morphed into a beehive stacked three feet high.

“Oh hi,” he said, feeling like a junior high school kid calling a girl for the first time. “Are you Lady Pandora?”

The woman’s voice chatted back, “Yes, I am,” she said, “the one, the only.”

Guyles was still disoriented from the voice. “Well... I’m here.”

Lady Pandora gasped. “Oh, sheet. Is it five o’clock already?”

There was a pause, a muffled conversation with someone. “Oh, Virgil, I’m not sure I have time for this.”

A husky voice groaned with disappointment. “C’mon, Connie. I really need this.”

Lady Pandora giggled. “All right, I’ll see what I can do.”

She returned to the phone, speaking to Guyles. “Honey, you still there?”

Guyles felt his voice get caught in his throat. He swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Good. Aren’t you hungry? I mean you’ve been driving all afternoon, and you must want to sit a spell and get something to eat.”

Guyles wondered if Lady Pandora was trying to kiss him off. “I guess I can eat,” he said, unable to hide his disappointment.

“Good. That’s really nice of you. I’ll make it up to you. I promise. Just grab a burger or something and call me back at six. I’ve got a big tipper who just blew into town,” She cupped the phone, a futile attempt at privacy. “He’s been really naughty,” she teased. “And he needs a little spanking.”

The phone clicked, and he listened to the silence until an automated voice came on the line, “Please hang up and try your call again.” The unpleasant pulsing alarm blared in his ear. He hung up, feeling suspended, floating in the air wondering when or if he’d be able to make a safe landing.

Finally, at 6 PM Guyles called back, got Lady Pandora’s voice mail, again. He was about to leave in disgust, almost relieved at the same time, but she finally answered, a breathless quality in her voice.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Beel.”

She told him how to get to her condominium complex, gave him her gate entry code, actually a number that rang her phone letting her know she had a visitor. If she didn’t buzz him through, Guyles wouldn’t be able to make entry.

Guyles drove a few blocks along a twisting boulevard lined with recently planted trees. They were past that fragile, newly planted stage, yet far from reaching their full height and splendor. The trees, the smooth streets, the clean buildings and light fixtures were part of a whole new world, only recently created. Everything looked so new and up to date: no crumbling old buildings or lopsided houses, no vacant windows or decaying

apartment complexes. He wondered if a cop in this part of town had anything at all to do. It felt Utopian, at least on the surface.

When he found the appropriate housing complex he drove to the main entrance, saw a small square shack next to a gate, an ornate series of black iron bars, a measure of music like the entrance to Graceland. He halfway expected the security officer to look like an Elvis impersonator.

The guard turned out to be a skinny kid with a square mustache, wearing a uniform shirt with sharp press lines, a polished six pointed star. He had short hair, completely shaven on the sides but long on top, a punk rock high-n-tight.

“I’m here to see...”

Guyles started to say Lady Pandora but realized it couldn’t be her real name. He remembered that the mysterious spanking guy, he’d called her Connie.

“Does Connie live here?”

The guard smiled knowingly, lips twisted in a slight display of disgust.

“Just dial the code,” he said, pointing at a box with a speaker and a telephone keypad.

Guyles fought to suppress a surge of paranoia, even placed his car in reverse, wanting to back out, but another car had pulled up behind him. He was trapped, nothing to do but move forward. He punched the key-code, listened to the ring tone. Lady Pandora answered.

“Okay, Billy boy,” she said, a playful tone in her voice. Had the game already begun? “Just pull on through the gate. Drive down three rows and turn left. Go to the far end of the parking lot and park in space number 127. Wait there.”

When Pandora buzzed him through, the gate began to open. He glanced in his rearview mirror, saw the guard smirking after him. How many faces had the guard seen, people asking for Connie? There was also security camera fastened to the back of the guard house, recording his arrival, the make and model of his car, his tag number. Evidence.

He steeled his resolve. He had to do this.

By the time he pulled into parking space 127 he was getting nervous, thrilled with anticipation. He tried to talk himself down, wanting to seem cool and detached when he met Lady Pandora, not like some salivating rank amateur.

“This better be worth it,” he said, looking at his watch. It was already ten after six. He’d been waiting for more than an hour, over a quarter of his allotted time.

Guyles saw a woman walk out of the condo complex. She was dressed plainly: blue jeans, a tight white blouse, a multicolored vest embroidered with a collage of highway signs, prominent among them, old U.S. Route 66. She had a wild mane of hair, an explosion of tight blond curls she tried to contain with a red bandana. He found her rather attractive, wholesome like the girl next door. When he saw her bright red cowgirl boots, he thought she was getting ready to go out two-stepping. This couldn’t be Lady Pandora. But instead of walking to another car in the parking lot, she walked toward him.

“You’re Bill, aren’t ya? Beel Guy-less.”

“That’s Guy-ells,” he said, pronouncing it phonetically.

Lady Pandora gave him the look-over. “Are you a cop?”

Guyles, choked with surprise, stammered, “Uh, yes I am.”

A wave of self consciousness swept over him. Was he that easy to read?

Lady Pandora didn't say another word. She turned around and walked away.

Guyles felt a wave of panic. He'd traveled all this way. Months of tentative communications had come to this, a simple question and a wrong, albeit truthful, answer. He ran after Lady Pandora unable to hide the pleading in his voice.

"Ma'am, ma'am," he almost cried. "I'm a cop in Oklahoma City. Honest and true. Please believe me. I'm not investigating you."

Lady Pandora stopped.

Guyles reached for his wallet, a leather case really, concealing an embedded badge, his police I.D. card, and his driver's license. He showed it to Lady Pandora pointing at the words "Oklahoma City" emblazoned over a small replica of the city seal.

Lady Pandora glanced around for a moment. She nodded and smiled. "All right, sweetie, don't get your panties in a twirl. I've had cops before. Follow me."

She stopped in front door 159. Above the number was a wooden sign that portrayed a friendly looking witch, black hat and flowing robe. She was surrounded by flowers, birds and butterflies. A dialogue bubble read, "Welcome, my pretties."

Lady Pandora was in the kitchen preparing a pot of tea while Guyles sat on a plush white couch in the living room. The condo was lavishly decorated with a collection of anachronistic antiques. In one corner he saw a hutch with faded blue paint, some artfully placed nicks and worn spots. One of the chairs was a bright red leather monstrosity with curvy arms reminiscent of the tail fins on a '57 Chevy, and everywhere he looked he saw kitschy little nick-knacks, movie posters from the 1930's, many of them featuring the seductive and elusive big screen siren, Greta Garbo, art deco lamps, a sign

that looked like it came from an 1880's western saloon that said, "Lady Pandora's Pleasure Palace." It was all quite Bohemian, very eclectic and feminine.

Guyles liked it. He felt comfortable there, leaning back into the oversized couch, almost swallowed up in the huge pillows.

"So, Bill," Pandora chatted through an opening between the kitchen and living room, a picture window. "How can I help you?"

Guyles sat up. She was going to make him say it, give voice to his long buried desires. He realized this wasn't some kind of sex game with Dana; this was a professional he was talking to. He felt a lump in his throat, swallowed hard, but it wouldn't go away. Heat rose to his cheeks, and he stared at the floor.

"I'm not sure," he managed to stammer.

Lady Pandora carried a tray loaded with a fancy ceramic tea pot and matching cups, a plate of cookies laced with powdered sugar. She set it down on a low coffee table in front of the couch, and with a slight turn, she sat down gracefully next to him, legs together, back straight, breasts thrust forward. She was elegant, even in a pair of jeans.

She poured some tea, offered the cup and saucer to Guyles. "Sit up straight," she said, the cordiality in her voice gone. "Legs together, please, like a proper young lady."

Guyles had been slouching, his legs spread wide. He slapped his knees together self consciously, feeling the strain in his thighs, and he did his best to sit up straight, shoulders back.

"Like this?"

Lady Pandora smiled. "That's a start." She took a sip of her tea, set her cup down on the table. "Now, we need to discuss some business."

She reached behind her head, released the bandana that had bound her hair. Her curls sprang out, free from bondage, falling in a dramatic, shimmering wave around her face. She shook her head like a lion shaking his mane. Though she had only removed her bandana, Lady Pandora seemed like a different person.

“I excel in the use of discipline and light bondage. I especially enjoy humiliation and forced feminization, but I do not do water bondage, real imprisonment, or body modification.”

Guyles nodded, not knowing what to say. Body modification? Just how far down the rabbit hole had he gone?

“I do not use cellophane or melted wax. It’s such a mess. Nor will I crucify you because I don’t have the equipment. I mainly deal with boys who want to be girls. I will dress you up like a baby, a school girl, a bride, or I can just doll you up for a night on the town.”

Guyles was holding his breath, trying to suppress a moan rising in his chest, but he didn’t want to reveal how turned on he felt. He sat there, trying to maintain a stone face, but the lack of breathing was making him dizzy. Or was he giddy?

Lady Pandora smiled, a knowing look in her eye. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

Guyles thought about the games he’d been playing with Dana, but they were nothing compared to Lady Pandora’s propositions. “No,” he croaked.

She stood up, unbuttoned her white blouse, revealing her cleavage, her breasts pressed tightly together. She leaned forward, hand outstretched, gently grabbed his chin with her thumb and index finger, tilted his head upward until they were eye to eye.

“Did I give you permission to look?”

Embarrassed, Guyles tried to look away, but she held his face firmly, her gaze penetrating deep into his psyche. “Do you like breasts?”

Guyles nodded.

“Do you want a pair?”

Guyles hesitated, a bubble of anxiety rising to his throat. He tried to gulp it down, but it was stuck there. He couldn't keep his feelings inside any longer. They had to come out, he thought, exhale or die, moaning with longing. His unintelligible acknowledgment echoed off the wall.

Lady Pandora pat him on the head, ruffled his hair, and tickled his right ear with her long red finger nails. He shivered, convulsing orgasmically.

“That'll be \$180 an hour,” Lady Pandora said, all business.

Guyles tried to swim out of the spell, but he was drowning, struggling to get back to the surface where he could breathe fresh air and think clearly. He remembered the night he spent undercover trying to pick up prostitutes, and his thoughts coalesced around a concept, a deed and a price. He wondered if he was committing a crime.

“Are you a prostitute?”

Lady Pandora stepped back, glared at Guyles. She frowned, but her lips weren't tight with anger, rather, they were curled with amusement. She'd been asked this question before.

“I do not engage in sexual acts,” she said. “I do not engage in intercourse with my clients, nor do I orally or manually stimulate them. I am not a prostitute. I'm your mistress.”



Guyles was confused. He felt his crotch throbbing, a pre-orgasmic release. “But what you do. It stimulates people.”

Lady Pandora laughed. “It’s all just theater of the mind,” she said.

“Theater of the mind?”

She kneeled down, placed her right hand on Guyles’ chest. “I can feel your heart beat.”

Guyles stood up, stepped away from Lady Pandora, the knee jerk reaction of a cop trained to keep his distance. He assumed the bladed stance he’d been taught in the Police Academy, the interview position, weapon side away from the subject. Her proximity intimidated him, and he wanted to find a way to regain control of himself and the situation. She felt so powerful, so he dared himself to look her in the eye. He wanted to see her, to understand the source of her power.

She stared back, unblinking, grinning. “You’ve always wanted to be a girl, haven’t you?”

Guyles blinked first, looking away, his heart pounding in his chest, the Tell-Tale Heart betraying his truth. He lowered his head in shame.

“I can help you with that.”

He stood there feeling naked, thrusting his hands into his pockets, smitten by Lady Pandora’s directness.

“Ask me,” Lady Pandora commanded. “Ask me to dress you up like a girl.”

Guyles felt weak and dizzy. Of course, that was the reason he’d traveled to Dallas, but when she told him to articulate his desires he found himself suddenly mute.

The last time he'd expressed his desires his whole life went to hell. He'd fought his way out, punching and punching, the opponent elusive, all encompassing like some cosmic wet blanket dropped upon him without warning. He hadn't even seen the shadow. Now, after all these years he was still there, in the middle of the wet, warm, darkness, barely able to breathe, smothered with shame and desire.

Lady Pandora stepped back, hands on her hips. "You can't even say it, can you?"

He looked away, cheeks burning, and he felt tears of terror welling in his eyes.

She grabbed his hand and pulled. He stepped forward hypnotically. "It looks like you're a candidate for forced feminization," Lady Pandora said. "But I need you to acknowledge this."

Guyles froze. Wasn't his presence there testimony enough?

Lady Pandora stopped. Her haughty gaze melted into a look of concern. "Honey? You okay?"

Guyles nodded, choking back tears.

"Do you want to do this?"

"I need to do this."

"Okay, then."

She led him down the hallway, stopped at the door leading to a back bedroom.

"First of all, you must understand this. In a dominant-submissive relationship, the submissive has the real power. You say the word, and the whole game comes to a stop."

She looked in his eyes probingly, like she wasn't sure how he was handling this.

"I use safe, sane, and sober methods in my role playing. I do not really try to hurt my

clients nor will I let them hurt themselves. Now, before we proceed, I need to know that you understand this.”

Guyles nodded. “I understand.”

Lady Pandora smiled. “Now, the safety phrase I often use is heart-pulse.”

There was a vacuous silence.

“You have to say it, honey.”

Guyles cleared his throat, feeling that rushing plummet in his stomach, the roller coaster plunge down that first steep hill.

“Heart-pulse,” he said. “That’s the safety phrase.”

Guyles felt his heart pounding in his temples, his breathing heavy as he crossed the threshold. Lady Pandora had entered the room ahead of him, and she was gently holding his hand.

“Come on honey, just relax. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re safe.”

Guyles thought about dying, how your whole life flashes before your eyes as you get ready to move on to whatever happens next: heaven, hell, the netherworld, oblivion...

He felt like he was crossing into another existence and expected to see a sign, a highway sign, perhaps, something to tell him where he was going. Should he abandon all hope, prepare to purge himself of sin, walk into the light? It was hard to know if this journey was right or wrong. In his heart he felt the possibility of rebirth, but logic told him he’d be ridiculed, ostracized, a slice of hell he knew all too well.

“I’m afraid,” he said.

The room was decorated like a dungeon: gray stone wallpaper, light fixtures shaped like old fashioned lanterns, a padded table with fasteners screwed to the sides. The lanterns shed red light, creating an illicit mood.

Lady Pandora walked around him, closed the bedroom door. She struck a match, the room brightening for a moment, shadows swaying along the wall, reaching for him. The acrid odor of sulfur stung his nose. She lit some candles, the flames casting a wavering light against the walls. It made him a little dizzy. She led him by the hand to a set of manacles mounted on the wall, a pair of handcuffs dangling from each ring.

“On your knees, slave,” she said.

Guyles knelt down, his breath sharp with excitement. Lady Pandora’s smile loomed above him, a distant bridge between large breasts, hair dangling before her eyes. He was helpless, wanting to do anything to sustain that smile. That was his job – to keep her happy, and he wanted to make her happy no matter what.

As quickly as any cop could do it, Lady Pandora fastened the handcuffs to his wrists, suspending his arms above his head. He knelt there like a disciple worshipping his mistress, praying to her.

Lady Pandora’s smile fell to a thoughtful frown, and Guyles quaked with fear, wondering what she was thinking.

“I’ll be right back, worm,” she said.

As he waited for Lady Pandora to return, Guyles felt that pins-and-needles numbness creeping through his hands and arms. He struggled in his bondage. When he tried to stand, a cramp shot through his right thigh, and he leaned forward to straighten his leg as much as possible. The position of his arms and the forward thrust of his weight

seemed to pinch his lungs, and he drew shallow breaths in quick succession as he tried to regain some comfort. He yanked on the manacles and found them firmly anchored in the wall.

“God, I’m stuck,” he said. “Fucking stuck.”

He heard Lady Pandora laugh, unaware that she’d reentered the room. “Such nasty language...”

Guyles felt a stir of supernatural awe. She seemed so powerful, and he felt so helpless, chastised like a kid in Sunday school. He looked down in shame.

She stepped in front of him, sporting thigh-high black leather boots with spiked heels. He craned his neck, saw fishnet stockings, a leather miniskirt. She grabbed his chin, lifted his head, her grasp firm and commanding. It hurt. She leaned forward, nose to nose, her two eyes blending into one unblinking, merciless orb.

“Look at my face,” she said. “I haven’t given you permission to check me out.”

She posed like an underwear model, hands on hips, shoulders back, breasts thrust forward. Guyles tried not to look, focusing on her face, but he did obliquely notice she was wearing a leather bustier, lifting her breasts, pressing them together, an alluring crevice of cleavage. His mouth went dry with envy, and his eyes broke from her face to follow the fault of flesh to the edge of the leather cups barely covering her areola.

“You’ve got it bad, don’t you? You want to fuck me.”

Guyles held his breath.

“Or, maybe, you want to be me. Don’t you?”

She lifted his chin, making him nod.

“Say, yes, mistress, I want to be a girl.”

Guyles couldn't say anything, not even whimper. It was that breathless moment when you get caught doing something wrong, the moment when you see the police car turning around to come after you, the time when your mom catches you with your hand in her underwear drawer, or the moment you're overheard telling someone your deepest secret.

Lady Pandora shook his face, drew menacingly close.

“Say it!”

Guyles felt the truth burning inside him, churning like magma at the core of the earth. Then, he vomited the words.

“Yes, mistress, I want to be a girl.”

The words didn't sound like he'd spoken them himself. It was like listening to a recording of his voice, familiar yet slightly foreign. He felt himself falling away at fantastic speed, his spirit bursting from his body, hovering above it. For a moment, he was suspended above the action, watching his tortured body chained to the wall, crucified with desire, and he saw Lady Pandora step back, a triumphant look on her face.

Is this death?

He watched Lady Pandora walk to the vanity where she selected a short, metallic tube. She pulled the top off, rotated the bottom. A short red tip rose up in the cylinder. Lipstick.

She walked back to Guyles' limp body hanging there in defeat, motionless.

“Ahem.”

She tapped her boot on the floor, waiting.

Guyles didn't respond, or at least his body didn't respond. His consciousness remained suspended in the air, watching, curiously detached, impassionate... free. He expected to see a light, a long black tunnel, but there was nothing of the sort, only the dungeon and the dark. He couldn't see anything else.

Lady Pandora shook his head.

"Hey there, Billy boy, where've you gone?"

He felt himself falling toward his body, caught in a vortex of darkness, and though he tried to swim away from the vortex, he found himself back inside his head, looking at the floor, trying to comprehend what had just happened to him. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was back in the dungeon.

"Yoo-hoo," Lady Pandora's Texas twang rang out. "Are you all right, honey?"

Guyles went limp, emitting a great sob, his body quaking with sorrow. Tears and drool poured from his face, and he ached with shame. Clenching his fists, he struggled against his bondage, pulling harder and harder, trying to free himself but to no avail.

"Calm down!" Lady Pandora's voice screamed. She wasn't the commanding dominatrix, now, but a scared, concerned woman. "Just relax, okay?"

Guyles glanced up, noticed the look of real fear on Lady Pandora's face, a look reminding him of a concerned mother. He stopped struggling.

"Heart-pulse," he managed to whisper. "Let me go."

## Nineteen

Guyles held a hot cup of tea in his hands, letting the warmth penetrate to the bone. His finger tips had gone numb while he was handcuffed in the dungeon, and he was glad to feel something even though the heat was beginning to get uncomfortable. He stared down into the brown liquid, into the shimmery reflection of his own face. If he could just be still for a few seconds, the face in the cup would solidify so he could finally see himself.

Lady Pandora placed a hand on his forehead like she was checking for fever. It was a tender, compassionate touch, no humiliation, no manipulation. This was real, Guyles thought; the role play was over.

“Are you okay?”



His hands kept shaking, the image in the cup refusing to coalesce. A shiver ran down his spine as he tried to take a sip. He wanted the warmth of the tea to spread through his body, but the waves in the cup surged above the edge, splashed his right hand. He recoiled in pain, almost dropping the cup, but he managed some control, set the cup into the cradle of a saucer, filling the room with a nervous clatter.

“I should have known,” Lady Pandora said. “You’re not into games. For you, this is real.”

Guyles stared at the cup, but the angle from the table didn’t allow him to see the contents. He’d spilled half the tea onto the saucer, and he wondered whether he was an optimist or a pessimist.

Lady Pandora nudged a tri-folded information tract across the table. A design on the front page showed the male and female symbols merged together into one circle, the arrow on the top right, the cross on the top left, a question mark on the bottom. Below the symbol he saw capitol letters, “THE TRUTH ABOUT TRANSGENDER.”

“I think you’re transgender,” Lady Pandora said gingerly. “I mean, I’m not a certified psychologist or anything, but I know it when I see it, hon.”

Guyles lifted his gaze toward Lady Pandora’s face. It was blurry at first like a camera lens focused on something close up with a fuzzy background.

“What’s that mean? Trans-fucking-gendered.... Sounds like a goddamn disease.”

His anger was slipping out, not at her, but at himself. It felt like he’d been given a terminal diagnosis, and he knew it was true, he’d been dealing with it all his life.

“What the fuck?” he said in exasperation. “What the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

Lady Pandora sighed. “Explore it. Educate yourself. I’ve seen a lot of people in your situation, and I know you can’t make it go away. I can’t tell you how to deal with it, but I can tell you that you **must** deal with it. If you don’t, you’ll go crazy.”

He knew she was right. He felt such a tenuous grasp on sanity at that moment, his psyche still in the air somewhere, but he wanted to feel grounded.

“Being transgender doesn’t have to be a curse. It can be a gift,” Lady Pandora said. “It could open up a whole new world of possibilities. Not many people understand what it’s like to see the world from the perspectives of both male and female.”

“Transgender? What’s that mean, Lady Pandora?”

She blushed, turned her away, an incongruent gesture for someone dressed as a dominatrix.

“Call me Connie,” she said. “Pandora is my work name.”

Guyles sighed. It felt good, they were finally getting real.

“A transgender person feels like his or her body doesn’t match their gender identity. It means, though you have the body of a man, you have the mind of a woman.”

How could he even begin to reroute his identity at this point? He’d invested too much time trying to be a man, a soldier, a cop. He couldn’t even imagine himself as a woman. He laughed at the idea.

“What?” Connie asked, smiling.

Guyles shook his head. “I’d make one ugly broad.”

Connie placed her hand on his knee, a woman to woman gesture.

“Oh no, honey. You’re quite pretty. I mean, you’d be pretty, as a girl, that is.”

Guyles stared out the window opposite the couch, the only window with a view. All the other windows looked out to other condominiums or stockade fences, but the one he stared through offered a glimpse of dark sky, a few branches swaying in the breeze. The orange glow of street lights illuminated the budding leaves.

Connie cradled his face in her hands.

“Look at me,” she said earnestly. “It’s clear to me now that we’ve been going about this the wrong way.”

She nudged the information tract at him again.

“One of my friends is a therapist. She gave me these handouts in case I came across someone who could use the information. You might think about giving her a call.”

“Does this mean I’ll have to have a sex change?”

Connie stroked his hair. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s up to you. Some people don’t have surgery, some do. Some people transition and live full time, others decide to take a vacation now and then, you know, cross-dressing.”

“What about drag queens? What are they?”

Connie laughed.

“Drag queens are guys with too much fashion sense for one gender. Usually they’re gay men who like to dress up to attract those guys who like the feminine package, but when you unwrap everything, there’s still a man under there.”

Guyles had no idea there were so many different motivations for the same behavior.

“And then you have female impersonators who tend to do it for professional purposes, like entertainers. They’re usually gay guys, but every once in a while a straight guy will do it, you know like Milton Berle.”

“I don’t feel gay. I mean, I’ve always been attracted to women, not men.”

“Honey, you can be transgender and still like girls. It’s not about who you love; it’s about who you are.”

A long silence engulfed the room. Guyles tried to understand what Connie had been saying. He didn’t want to retreat from it like he’d always done before. He’d come all the way to Dallas to see what he’d look like dressed as a woman, and he’d spent at least a couple hundred dollars already. He glanced at a clock on the fire place mantel, noticed it was moving on past 8:00 PM, getting late.

Connie glanced at the clock herself. “Your time is up, Billy, but I don’t want you to leave yet.”

Guyles didn’t want to leave either. He wanted to appease his curiosity, hoping he’d look ridiculous. Then he’d be able to bury this problem once and for all.

“You said I was pretty?” he asked, a bundle of hope mixed with dread.

Connie nodded, smiled warmly.

“Remember when I said I’d make things up to you, for making you wait an extra hour for my naughty client?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I’ve decided I like you, and I want you to get what you really came for.”

Connie led him back to the dungeon, but this time, she turned on a different set of lights, something similar to the work lights of a stage play. The room didn't look murky this time. Connie maneuvered a tri-fold privacy divider in front of the manacles, transforming the room from a dungeon to a boudoir. She invited him to sit down on a cushioned stool placed in front of a three mirror vanity. He studied the three reflections, each of them offering different perspectives of his face.

"The Chinese have a saying," Connie said. "A man has three faces: the one everybody sees, the one only a few see, and the one he shows to nobody."

Guyles understood this; he had a face even he hadn't seen.

"It's time to get to know your third face."

Connie kissed his cheek, a friendly peck, a soothing, sisterly gesture. He exhaled a long sigh, tension draining away.

She opened a dresser drawer, rummaged through a collection of lacy undergarments. She brought out a bra and held it up, shoulder straps in each hand.

"Hmm 42C, or do you want to be bigger?"

Guyles licked his lips. "Umm, what do you think?"

Connie smiled wryly, placing her hands beneath her own breasts, lifting them.

"Big boobs, overrated."

Guyles laughed. Was she really telling the truth? He couldn't be sure. Connie's breasts were voluptuous, practically perfect. He wondered if women debated breast size the way men talked about their penises. Only a well endowed person would say size didn't matter. Yet, despite his questioning, he couldn't bring himself to ask her for a bigger cup size.

“That’ll be fine.”

Connie smiled approvingly. “Off with your clothes, then. Shed that manly skin.”

The next thing Guyles knew, Connie stood before him with the bra spread open. She had him slip his arms through the shoulder straps, stepped behind him to fasten the clamps. When he felt the straps binding around his chest he became aroused, his erection crowding the basket of his blue jeans.

Connie opened another drawer, took out a square box. She lifted the lid, presented the contents to Guyles. He saw two perfectly shaped breasts, complete with realistically colored areola and pert nipples. It was like someone had removed the breasts from a real live woman, preserving them, disembodied. It was eerie to look at, not much different from that thumb-in-the-box Halloween gag he’d encountered as a kid while trick-or-treating.

She pressed on one of the breasts with her index finger. The material retracted naturally. “The wonder of silicone,” she said.

She placed the inserts inside the bra cups, their coolness against his chest making him wince and squirm, but it wasn’t long before the silicone got warm, matching the temperature of his skin. The weight of the breasts felt good, and he marveled at how real they looked. They felt so natural, like finding the missing pieces of a puzzle, completing him, a perfect fit.

“Stand up,” Connie said.

Connie adjusted the breast inserts, stepped back with a thoughtful look on her face.

“Very nice. C cups are perfect for you.”

She looked at his crotch, pursed her lips, a clucking noise.

Guyles looked down, saw the inconvenient bulge, intrusive and embarrassing.

She flicked her finger on the fly of his jeans.

“That, you’ll have to get rid of.”

“What?” he gasped.

Connie grabbed a white towel from a stack of towels on a table next to the door.

“You know? Toss off, stroke the velvet monkey?”

Guyles still didn’t comprehend what she was saying.

“Masturbate,” she said. “Get it out of your system.”

“Oh,” Guyles squeaked. “Yeah, right.”

Connie opened a door leading to a bathroom. She brushed his cheek with the back of her hand.

“While you’re at it, you need to shave that face of yours. There’s some shaving cream and razors in the bathroom.”

Guyles didn’t understand why he felt so aroused. Sure, this whole experience had been highly charged with eroticism, but why did it have to become so sexual? It was just underwear. But when he felt the insert inside the lacy black bra, the buoyancy, he swooned. He grabbed bra cups, pressed the inserts into his chest, imagining nerve endings winding through the silicone. There was something like the phantom sensation of an amputee but in reverse. It felt so natural, so good. So... damn... good.

He leaned against the wall as a wave of ecstasy washed through him, an erotic explosion more intense than anything he’d ever experienced. He slid down the wall, collapsing in a gasping heap on the cold tile floor. He lay there staring at the light fixture

mounted on the ceiling, a half globe of pale white with a nipple screw at the bottom. A breast, Guyles thought, laughing, a fucking breast. Even the mirror was suggestively feminine with rounded contours shaped in a broad oval, like a vulva.

He looked at his face in the mirror. He was clean-shaven, for a guy, that was, but he was starting to have that rough, sand-papery feel he typically got at the end of the day. Makeup might make his stubble more prominent. He found some flower-scented shaving gel in a drawer beneath the sink, some razors. Before long he had his face lathered in a soapy white beard.

Looking down at his chest, the bulbous breasts cradled in the bra, and then looking back up at his face, the incongruity shocked him, disturbed him. He eagerly set to work eradicating the shadow of masculinity accumulating on his face, feeling relief with each careful swipe of the razor.

“I used to be a makeup artist,” Connie said.

Guyles sat in front of the vanity trying to see all three perspectives of his reflection at once, his face a white blur, a blank canvas.

“I used to tour with some of those glam bands from the 80’s, you know, Twisted Sister, RATT, and Poison. So I guess you could say I’ve been making boys look like girls for a long time.”

Immediately, Guyles thought about Dee Snyder, that horrid, grotesque makeup. He’d seen the video of that song *We’re not Gonna Take It* on MTV reruns when he was in the Army, and he was briefly worried that Connie would do that to him. He did not



want to look like a ridiculous caricature of femininity. He wanted to look as authentic as possible.

“I want to look real,” Guyles pleaded. “Not like a drag queen.”

Connie smiled, her face next to his in the mirror. She wrapped a white towel around his neck. “I know, honey. I know.”

Connie grabbed a wedge of sponge and dabbed it into some flesh-colored cream.

“Hmm, let’s try beige,” she said mostly to herself like a painter trying to match colors. She patted Guyles’ chin with the sponge. “Looks good. What do you think?”

She spread the makeup all over his face.

“You’ve got to use base if you want to have a fresh looking face.”

She spent a little more time on the skin directly beneath his eyes.

“Hmm, might need some concealer. You work nights, don’t you, hon?”

She proceeded like she already knew the answer, like she and Guyles were sharing a curious telepathy.

After a few moments, Guyles’ face, covered in concealer and foundation, looked one dimensional, disturbingly blank and lifeless. Connie stretched a nylon wig cap over the top of his head, concealing his hair.

The next half hour went by in a blur of glimpses, time-lapse photography. The first features to gain definition were the eyes, emerging from the beige plain like the sleek bluffs rising out of placid blue pools. The eyeliner accentuated the eyes and yet softened them. The eye shadow added a smoky haze like the Ozark Mountains in the blue morning. The mascara cleared the fog, the trees on the tops of mountains standing strong and proud.

“You have such pretty eyes,” Connie said. “Good thing they’re not wasted on a guy.”

Guyles stared at the mirror. “Yeah,” he said absentmindedly.

Connie leaned forward, their eyes making contact through their reflections.

“You okay, honey?”

Guyles nodded, exhaled a sigh.

She winked. “Lighten up, girl. This is supposed to be fun.”

She grabbed a brush, dabbed it into a circular container of rouge, blew on the tips of the bristles.

“Smile.”

Guyles smiled mechanically, that artificial smile without warmth, baring his teeth.

Connie applied Nike-like swooshes beneath both cheeks. She dabbed the brush into a slightly deeper shade of rouge.

“Then you dust the apples of your cheeks, just below the cheek-line. This will make your eyes stand out more and soften the contour of your face making it more feminine. If you go too high, you’ll look garish, like a whore.”

Connie grabbed his hand, assisted him to a standing position, twirled him like a ballerina. He saw a dress hanging on the closet door, a party dress of rainbow colors, bright with sequins.

“You like?”

Guyles nodded. He especially liked the plunging neckline.

“You have nice legs, so this will be a good outfit for you. A girl’s got to show off her best assets.”

She stretched the panty-line of a pair of opaque pantyhose, rolled the legs into the toes. She told Guyles to step into the stockings, pulled the hose past his calves, up his thighs and around his waist.

After that she told him to raise his arms while she pulled a black satin slip over his head, careful not to touch his face. She pulled the slip down his body. He thrilled to see the thin black straps lying delicately on his shoulders. The bottom of the slip flounced lightly above his thighs, and he twisted his hips to watch the sleek material swirl around his waist.

Connie giggled. "Settle down, girl."

Guyles giggled back, a melodious laugh, surprisingly feminine.

Connie took the dress off the hanger. She unzipped the back, bent forward motioning for him to step into the top. She raised the dress while Guyles placed his arms through the short sleeves. She zipped the back. The dress fit snugly, the cool inner silk feeling like a new skin.

Connie guided Guyles back to the vanity.

"Blonde, brunette, red-head?"

Connie stretched a blonde wig over Guyles' head, letting the long strands cascade down his face, over his shoulders. When he looked in the mirror he saw a glamorous woman gazing back, and he was pleased.

But, from the clicking sound in Connie's lips, he could tell she was not satisfied. Next thing he knew, Guyles had a poofy mane of red hair, something like Ginger's hair from Gilligan's Island, very retro. He was startled to realize how much he looked like his mother whose pictures of her young womanhood sported similar hair styles.

“I wasn’t serious about that one,” Connie said, laughing. “Just having fun. Are you having fun, honey?”

Guyles laughed, too. He **was** having fun, and he was somewhat surprised to realize this. It was great, but also disturbing. He **did** look good as a girl. He’d expected to be appalled at himself so he could easily suppress any further desires to cross-dress, but now what was he going to do? Could he ever resist these urges again? Without going crazy?

Connie placed the brunette wig on his head, a dark brown bob.

“Perfect!” Connie said.

Guyles had to agree. Though he had high, feminine cheekbones, he did have a square jaw. The bob accentuated the cheeks, and the shorter hair made him look more natural, a big change from his masculine haircut, yes, but not such a stark change as the long blonde wig had been.

Connie anchored the wig with bobby pins, brushed the hair forward, curling the front around his cheeks. She got a lipstick tube, rotated the bottom, revealing a dark shade of red.

“This is a good evening shade. It wouldn’t be good for the office.”

She said it like she expected that Guyles might actually wear lipstick to work. She puckered her lips, prompting him to do the same, colored his lips.

Connie smiled. “I like to do the lipstick last. It’s the cherry on top.”

Guyles turned his head left and right, gave an approving nod.

“And you look scrumptious. I could just eat you all up.”

Connie gave him a pair of black stilettos so tall they felt like stilts. After putting them on, he could only stand in place until he gathered a sense of balance. His very first step was as awkward as a toddler's.

Connie, the ever patient coach, offered him tips.

“Try to center your weight on your hips, keep your back straight, breasts forward, and don't just kalumph your feet like you're walking in Army boots. Just step forward, gracefully, like you're walking on tip toes.”

Guyles took another step and then another, shortening his gait. It worked. He managed to cross the room without turning one of his ankles. He stopped, facing the wall, thinking about his physicality, pivoting on his toes rather than his heels so he could turn around. Though he managed the turn without falling, he did not do so gracefully.

Connie giggled. “Pretend you're walking on a balance beam, one foot in front of the other.”

Somehow that imagery made complete sense to Guyles, and he managed to cross the room the second time with a lot more coordination. He realized he'd been walking a thin line all his life trying to live up to the expectations of masculinity. As he navigated the room he understood the need for balance, that he'd been living an unbalanced life, overcompensating. He raised his arms to keep himself from falling.

By the time he turned to cross the room a third time, the muscles in his calves tightened, almost cramping. He looked down at his feet, pretty in those pointy-toed shoes. The opaque hose made his legs look sleek and feminine, and the hemline of the short dress sparkled in the light. He saw all of this just beyond the bulge of breasts on his chest.

Some stray hairs from the wig dangled in front of his eyes, and he knew, really knew for the first time that he had been truly transformed.

At that moment the boudoir really did feel like a dungeon, a prison of the soul. It was a thrill to see himself as a woman, to feel like a woman from head to toe, but the thought of keeping it all within the confines of that room seemed tragically inadequate.

“What’s wrong?” Connie asked.

Guyles found it difficult to speak, his emotions welling up in his chest, building pressure. He tried to keep the surge down, but he whimpered, nearly collapsed.

“I’m okay,” he gasped.

He wanted to wipe the tears from his eyes, but he checked himself, remembering the makeup. He stood there, frozen with indecision, fanning his face, hoping to dry the tears.

Connie grabbed a tissue from a box on the vanity, daintily wiped the corners of his eyes.

“Welcome to womanhood,” she said.

She left the room without explanation. When she returned she had a long black raincoat. Guyles held the coat while she placed her arms through the sleeves. The coat covered her leather corset and mini-skirt, hung down below her knees. She fastened the belt around her waist, grabbed her purse, scrounging for keys.

Guyles thought she was going to leave him alone in the apartment while she went to the store for some more makeup or something. He followed her, watched as she opened the front door and stepped outside.

“C’mon missy, we’re going out. I have a surprise for you.”

He stepped forward to the edge of the threshold, but he was unable to move beyond the line that divided inside from outside. There he was, standing in the door, like he had when he was in the Army at Airborne School getting ready to take that first leap. He grabbed each side of the door frame for support, his legs gone wobbly, and he peered out into the night trying to contemplate where he was jumping, where he might land.

## Twenty

When Guyles stepped out into the evening air he felt two strong sensations: a breeze caressing his legs through the shimmery pantyhose and the giddy thrill of floating, the same kind of rush he felt after his parachute deployed in airborne school. For a few moments, at least, the danger was over and he could enjoy the perspective, listen to the wind as he floated toward the earth. Inevitably, though, the ground would come rushing up faster than anticipated, and he would feel the plunge again, hitting the deck hard, a rude reintroduction to reality. He froze in place at the edge of the parking lot, suddenly afraid to step into the cone of light shining down from a lamp post.

“C’mon honey-pie,” Connie urged. She was walking toward a black Volkswagen Jetta, a sleek and polished vehicle with enough extras to make it look like a luxury car.

Guyles admired its European sophistication. It had a sunroof, a low-profile tail fin, tinted windows, and some nice chrome wheels.

Connie pressed her remote alarm button, and the Jetta beeped a response. The headlights flashed, shined on Guyles, who felt exposed standing in the open, nowhere to hide. He looked up at the dome of sky beyond the light post. There he was, dressed as a woman in public.

In public, for God's sake!

"Oh, shit."

"You look scrumptious," Connie said. She opened the passenger door, stood there while Guyles climbed inside the car. "You're beautiful. You're gonna be just fine, darling."

When Connie stopped her car at the security gate, Guyles noticed the security was still at his post, but, instead of scowling, this time he smiled, eyebrows arched with interest.

"Take care, Ms. Zuniga," he offered.

The tone was more than professional courtesy, Guyles thought. It had a ring of familiarity, and he wondered, for a moment, if the guard had been one of Connie's clients.

The guard bent lower, peeked at Guyles, eyes flashing with delight. "You have a good evening, too, ma'am." Then he winked.

"Ma'am?" Guyles said to himself quietly, not sure how he felt about the word.

Was the guard fucking with him or just being nice?



Connie hit the button and rolled up the window. When they were securely sealed off from the outside world she started to giggle.

“He likes you,” she teased.

Connie drove to the Texaco Station where Guyles had waited earlier in the evening. The store was well lit, a bright neon beacon constructed of bricks and aluminum. The overall effect was antiseptic, but the familiar layout was comforting. Texaco had stores like this all over Oklahoma. Connie parked next to the main entrance.

“Okay, hon. First test,” Connie said, patting Guyles’ left knee. She opened the car door and stood up. “I need to get some cash. Come with me, okay?”

“I c-can’t.”

Guyles saw the clerk, a big woman with short hair, a clone of another clerk he knew back in Oklahoma City. He wondered if she’d been transferred to Dallas.

Connie tightened her lips, pressed them together, pouting. She resumed her dominatrix attitude. “Yes, you can.”

“The clerk, she’ll recognize me.”

Connie laughed, sounding more perturbed than sympathetic. “That’s ridiculous. She doesn’t know you from Adam, or Eve for that matter.”

At that moment, a beat up old pickup truck parked next to Connie’s car, a brown 70’s model Ford Ranger with white spoke wheels and big, bulging tires. The manifold was leaking gas fumes, and the loud engine grumbled, gasped and died when the driver, a Mexican guy with a mullet haircut and a thick mustache, turned off the power. He and the passenger jumped out of the truck, flapped dust off their jeans and walked into the store

talking excitedly in Spanish. Guyles noticed they had construction tools in the back of the truck, a motorized concrete trowel, some shovels and rakes.

“Let’s go, girl,” Connie said. “We can’t hang out here all night.”

Guyles knew he couldn’t win this one. He had come all this way, and Connie was spending her own free time taking him out on the town dressed this way. He flipped down the passenger side sun visor, examined his reflection in the visor’s embedded mirror. The face in the mirror still surprised him. He figured if he didn’t recognize himself, how could anyone else? No matter, by some minute chance, the clerk was the same woman from Oklahoma City.

Guyles opened the door, stood up. One of the Mexican guys was already coming out of the store toting a couple of twelve packs of Budweiser. He looked at Guyles with intense interest, not hostile or suspicious, appreciative. Guyles felt the man’s eyes staring at his legs, his ass.

“Que culote,” the man said.

Guyles closed the car door, walked to the store’s entrance, meeting the other Mexican. With high heels on, Guyles was much taller than the man, and he watched the man’s eyes drift from his face down to his breasts, eyes wide, looking hungry.

“Wow! Como me gustaria cojermela!” the second Mexican said in a lascivious tone.

Guyles didn’t understand the words, but he did understand the intonation. He squeezed closer to Connie’s car, slid past the ogling Mexican trying to avoid any kind of contact. Connie was waiting at the door, a big grin on her face.

“Como me gustaria cojerte,” the Mexican on the passenger side of the truck shouted toward Connie and Guyles.

Connie giggled. “En tus suenos!”

At that, the Mexicans quickly got into their truck. The driver cranked the ignition, shifted the gears, spun the tires as backed out of the parking space. They sped out of the parking lot, into the street yelling “yee-haws,” tire squeals trailing behind them.

Guyles followed Connie, awed by this multifaceted woman who sounded like a small town west Texas hick but who also spoke Spanish. When he walked inside, the clerk stared at him from her checkout island, a circular counter at the center of the store surrounded by a wall of cigarette packages, her mouth slightly open - one of those dry-mouthed, deer-in-the-headlights looks. Guyles felt heat rushing to his cheeks as he realized the clerk had the hots for him, and he made a right face, headed down a corridor of snack chips.

Connie got some cash from an ATM while Guyles lingered behind the Doritos, watching as the clerk continued staring in his direction, averting her gaze only when another customer walked into the store, this time an older guy with short white hair, a striped shirt and a loosened tie. He paid no attention to Guyles and Connie, just got his pack of smokes and left.

Connie and Guyles made it back to the Jetta without any other encounters, though the clerk kept staring, watching as Guyles folded his long legs into the car. After Connie shut her door Guyles exhaled forcefully. Had he been holding his breath this whole time?

“You passed,” Connie said.

“Yeah, almost passed out.”

“You **pass**. Those Mexican guys, they thought you were a real honest-to-goodness woman.”

Guyles had thought they might have figured him out by the way they’d looked at him, laughing and catcalling as they drove away.

“I pass?”

Connie nodded, laughing. “Honey, you look so good. Those Mexican boys were swooning.”

Guyles smiled in spite of himself, very pleased he’d prompted such a strong reaction from a couple of regular guys. “What did they say?”

Connie grinned. “They said, ‘I sure would like to fuck you!’”

This startled Guyles, such a blunt statement, lacking décor, sounding like a threat, a hint of violence in the words.

“The way they were looking at me... It made me nervous.”

Connie frowned, then smiled ruefully. “Welcome to womanhood. Women get looked at. Get used to it.”

Connie drove south on Central Expressway while Guyles marveled at the number of skyscrapers lining one of Dallas’ main thoroughfares. They passed a pair of buildings that looked like mirror images of each other, steel and glass super structures with gold tinting on all the windows. They looked like gold-plated nuggets sticking up in the Texas plain, like a giant had taken a bit out of the earth and left his two front teeth embedded in the ground. It seemed appropriate. Texas, after all, was the land of giants: big state, big reputation, big appetites, lots of money and lots of interesting characters. In comparison,

Guyles thought, Oklahoma was the plainer, envious cousin. The states had a lot in common, but Oklahoma City in particular seemed to lack the pizzazz that made Dallas so exciting.

As they approached Lemon Avenue Guyles could see the downtown Dallas skyline, a flourishing spectacle of light, a giant lighted keyhole on top of one building, a tall, proud structure outlined in green, and that magnificent sparkling dome among many other interesting shapes and illuminating patterns. Back in Oklahoma City, the skyline was dark in comparison. Sometimes, they lit up the Kerr McGee building with a huge white flood light, and they had had big crosses of light on two buildings during the Christmas Season. That's it. Dallas was a burlesque dancer flashing her beauty while Oklahoma City was a restrained middle-aged woman wearing a string of sensible pearls.

When Connie exited at Lemon Avenue Guyles was thrilled to see a cosmopolitan mix of stately high rise apartment buildings, clean neighborhoods with grand old houses. The settled old west and the vibrant new west stood side by side with remarkable harmony. He saw sidewalk cafes and coffee shops, murals painted on the sides of tall brick buildings, not the clichéd displays of western heritage but things like humpback whales curled into a huge yin-yang symbol, a Mayan pyramid. And as they drove down Turtle Creek Boulevard, they saw a Rainbow Pride Flag.

“Thank you,” Guyles blurted. “Thank you!”

Connie stopped at a traffic light at Cedar Springs Boulevard. Though it was still early spring, scores of people were walking about enjoying the evening. Guyles was staring down at the bulges on his chest, watching the light reflect off the sequined bust. He rubbed his legs together, feeling the electrifying friction of pantyhose massaging his

thighs and calves. A giggle escaped his mouth, an involuntary burp of emotion, and he daintily placed his hand in front of his mouth careful not to smear his lipstick.

Connie tossed her head back, her bouncy curls fluffing against the headrest at the top of her seat. She laughed triumphantly. “I know what this is,” she said. “A cross-dresser high.”

The words cross dresser hit him funny. They felt inadequate for some reason.

“Transgender bliss,” Connie corrected, and Guyles nodded absentmindedly, the wig’s bangs bobbing in front of his face.

“You’re so right,” he blurted, feeling higher than ever. His left hand went up in a flourish, floated toward Connie’s shoulder. He tapped her in the way women who are familiar with each other touch, that gentle, reassuring, feminine nudge. He thought he heard himself lisp, and he wondered for a moment what was happening. Something long suppressed was breaking out.

“Why did you do this, Connie? Why are you taking me out?”

“I think you look fantastic,” Connie said, an earnest Texan, no-bullshit tone. “If you’re thinking I’m doing this just because I wanted someone to go party with on a Saturday night, that I do this just for kicks, then you’re wrong. I need to advertise like any other business person, and you’re a nice looking product.”

“A product?”

“Well, not just a product. You’re too cute to be put on a shelf.”

Cedar Springs Boulevard was lined with clubs and cafes, bookstores, video stores and a tattoo parlor. He saw neon lights brightening the night, their colorful hues glowing like a rainbow aura. Out in the street men were walking hand-in-hand, two women openly

kissing beneath the umbrella of a sidewalk table. He saw drag queens, girls with big hair, glamorous, sequined gowns.

Connie stopped the car at a club with a canopied entrance. A smartly dressed, handsome young man stood behind a podium. He tipped his hat, smiled warmly. He was a Latino kid, hair slicked back in fine, even curls, his chin firm and set, indicating a high degree of confidence, and his smile revealed two rows of even white teeth.

The young man approached Connie's car, smiled at her like he knew her well. She rolled down the window, the hum of the motorized crank giving Guyles a feeling of anticipation. He wanted to open the passenger door, stand up, take a tactical over-watch position.

"Welcome to Phoenix Rising," the young man said. "It is so nice to see you Ms. Pandora." He opened Connie's door.

Guyles opened the passenger door, started to stand up, bumping his head on the ceiling, causing the wig to slide down the slope of his forehead, yanking the hairs pinned in back. He pushed the hair back until the bangs looked right, heart pounding in his chest, so close to being found out.

"Thank you, Sergio," Connie said. "It's so nice to see you."

Connie and Guyles stepped beneath the canopy as Sergio spoke to his assistant in Spanish, apparently directing him where to park the car. Sergio grabbed Guyles' right hand, kissed it, and bowed forward in a suave flourish.

"It is nice to make your acquaintance, ma'am," he said. "I am Sergio Valdez."

Connie patted Sergio on his back. "Be careful, honey," she said looking at Guyles. "This one's a charmer. He'll charm you right out of your panties."

Sergio smiled at Connie but still held on to Guyles' hand. At first, Guyles' impulse was to snatch his hand away, but after a moment, he let himself enjoy the attention, swooning from being treated like a lady.

“May I ask your name?” Sergio inquired.

Such a simple, direct question, who are you? And he couldn't think of an appropriate answer. He didn't want to reveal his given name, but he couldn't think of a girl's name at the moment. In all the time he'd spent contemplating this trip to Dallas, driving down to the Metroplex, spending the evening with Connie, he hadn't imagined being asked that question. It was like he'd never considered asking himself who he really was; he just went along with who the world told him he was. He had boxed, played football, dated girls, joined the Army and went to Jump School. He'd become a police officer, had dreamed of marrying a woman and becoming a father. He'd imagined teaching his sons martial arts in a sprawling green backyard behind a house built in the suburbs. But now, everything he ever was, everything he thought he'd be was a haze of static, a television tuned between stations.

Before Guyles could summon a reply Connie interjected, “Oh, this is my dear friend, Delta. Yes, Delta...”

She pointed at the club's marquee depicting a series of images: a bird, a woman wrapped in feathers, no, a drag queen rising from neon flames.

“Delta Phoenix,” Connie proclaimed. “I would like to introduce Delta Phoenix, a profoundly interesting woman of the world.”

Delta Phoenix?

“Oh Miss Delta,” Sergio crooned. “You are very beautiful.”



Guyles knew Sergio was just being polite. Hell, he was paid to say things like that, but it was still nice to be flattered, to be treated like a beautiful woman.

“Flattery will get you everything you want,” Connie joked, winking at Guyles.

He felt an attraction toward Sergio, the first time he’d ever been attracted to a guy. It almost toppled him from his high heels. Was it a real attraction, real sexual attraction, or was it merely a desire to reciprocate Sergio’s generous attention?

Connie nudged Guyles toward the club’s entrance.

When they were a few steps away from Sergio Guyles whispered, “Delta?”

Connie laughed. “I was thinking about debutantes, you know, and I thought, ‘What’s a good name for a debutante?’ so I pictured Delta Burke, you know from that show *Designing Women*? She’s a perpetual debutante, don’t you think? I just love her to death.”

Guyles didn’t respond, just stared at Connie.

“Delta Phoenix,” Connie repeated. “Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it, hon?”

After a moment of consideration Guyles nodded. He had to agree with Connie on that one; Delta Phoenix – it had a ring of destiny, of truth, but he really didn’t understand why that was the case. It just felt right, like a glove. No, more than that - like something that couldn’t be taken off. Like skin! Like the new pink skin beneath the peels of a bad sunburn.

“Delta Phoenix,” he said. “I like it.”

## Twenty-One

Guyles didn't know what to expect as he walked into the Phoenix Rising club. He'd never been inside a gay club except when he was on duty back in Oklahoma City. At those times, the ominous presence of the police put a hush on the crowd. Patrons tried to leave the bar discreetly, or they tried to duck into the restrooms, anything to avoid the searching eyes of police officers looking for someone to arrest. Those caught in the open would turn to face the wall or gather in groups, huddling like football players to protect their anonymity. Any contact with the police, even if it was just a field interview or a crime incident report would provide official record of their presence in the gay club district, proof that employers could use to terminate someone, proof that ex spouses could use to deprive mothers and fathers of contact with their children, and proof that some of the seedier elements of society could use to blackmail closeted public officials, bank presidents, lawyers and doctors, all who felt compelled to explore the shadows on the other side of life. It was a profound experience, to subdue a whole crowd with mere presence. Guyles suspected some officers got off on it. Such power.

But when he walked into the Phoenix Rising club as Delta Phoenix, he saw a whole new aspect of the gay community. At that moment he was just another thread in a

rich tapestry of expressions. People were dancing and laughing, drinking and talking like it was the most normal thing in the world to be hanging out in a gay bar. Minus the guy-to-guy and gal-to-gal public displays of affection and the same gender dancing partners it was just like any other club he'd ever visited.

A woman stood in the middle of the dance floor belting out a Melissa Etheridge song while other women and a guy or two approached her, gave her folded dollar bills, stuffing them into her cleavage, along the straps of her bra showing beneath her black tank-top.

"I'm the only one who'll walk across the fire for you!" she sang, and she sounded good, too. "And I'm the only one who'll drown in my desire for you. It's only fear that makes you run. The demons that you're hiding from..."

She danced toward Connie, squatted bowlegged in front of her, gyrating her crotch. She placed the cowboy hat on Connie's head and pulled her toward the middle of the dance floor, leaving Guyles alone in the crowd, standing next to a large, hairy man wearing black leather chaps, a matching vest and a ball cap with the word "Daddy" stitched on the face.

Though there were many people in the club, it wasn't so packed that one didn't have elbow room, yet Guyles could feel the Daddy man moving closer, so close he could smell the perspiration glistening all over his skin. Daddy was obnoxious, Guyles thought. He wore tight leather with pride, like he didn't give a damn that his expansive belly was spilling over his beltline and that his chest was too wide to button his vest. Oh, god, and the hair... Guyles cringed at the thought of all that hair, all wiry and thick brushing up against his skin.

But when he looked at Daddy's face, he saw a jovial, friendly smile, his gray eyes communicating a depth of tenderness that contradicted his appearance.

"You sure look good," Daddy said. He placed his hand gently on Guyles' shoulder, more like a paw, really, a bear's paw. "Buy you a drink?"

Guyles didn't know what to do. He glanced over at Connie who was still on the dance floor while the cowgirl singer serenaded her, dancing in front of her like a stripper doing a table dance. Daddy tugged on his elbow. Guyles didn't know what else to do, so he nodded and meekly followed Daddy to the bar.

Phoenix Rising was an impressively nice place. It had the look of an underground warehouse with brick walls, exposed duct work (painted black of course) and pipes. Rather than feeling cold and industrial, it felt warm and inviting due to the lighting mounted on various tract systems. Some thoughtfully placed flood lamps shining various colors gave the room a welcoming texture. There was also a big-screen TV at the far end of the dance floor showing the antics of the Karaoke singer and Connie as they danced together like they were starring in a music video. Connie was obviously a regular at the club, a favorite, since many of the patrons shouted greetings to her.

"Go Connie go!" the crowd chanted as she assumed her dominatrix persona while the cowgirl sang on bended knee. Connie acted aloof, then severe, while the singer's voice reached a crescendo of desire.

"She's something else," Daddy shouted. One had to shout with all the loud music. "I just love her to death."

Guyles nodded, afraid to speak, afraid to shatter the illusion of his appearance. He knew, in this context, he was probably taken as a drag queen, but he wasn't sure. Daddy didn't look like a typical gay man, more like a biker, hell-bent and leather bound, brutish.

“So, have you known Connie for a long time?” Daddy said.

Guyles shook his head, shrugged his shoulders. He wanted to respond vocally but the words wouldn't come out. At that point, Daddy's eyes, gray and tender, smoldered with embarrassment, like he knew he was striking out.

Then, finally, as Daddy started to turn away, Guyles found his voice.

“I, uh...” he squeaked. “I just met Connie. She **is** wonderful.”

Now, the surprising thing about this was the way his voice sounded, an octave higher, a little nasal, and for some reason, his words were laced with a lisp. He wondered where that affectation had come from, whether or not it was an adaptation to the situation at hand or the release of a long suppressed personality.

Daddy smiled gratefully, his eyes beaming with fondness.

Daddy was attracted to Delta, a guy smitten. Guyles imagined going home with Daddy on the back of a big Harley Davidson motorcycle sitting sidesaddle, wrapping his arms around the man's broad, hairy chest. This little fantasy shocked him, excited him, and he felt pressure in his groin. The physicality of his excitement reminded him, this masquerade was only a temporary respite from his regular life and all too soon, he'd have to return to living life as a man. He wondered though, if he could transition from this experiment, make the dress-up game into something like real life.

“Are you okay, dear?” Daddy said

Guyles smiled, blinking himself to the here-and-now. He could see Daddy playing Santa Claus on Christmas Eve, imagined sitting on Daddy's lap.

“What's your name?”

Guyles started to say, “Willie,” which surprised him. He hadn't introduced himself as Willie in a long time, not since junior high school. To him the name Willie sounded juvenile, even effeminate. But even that wasn't enough of a girly name at this point, and after a moment of trepidation, he blurted, “Delta,” the name Connie had given him.

It felt good to say it. “Delta Phoenix.”

He absentmindedly extended his hand meaning to clasp Daddy's paw in a firm, manly handshake, but when Daddy presented his own hand, grasping Delta's fingers in a light but friendly grip, she felt disoriented.

At first Delta thought Daddy had a weak, limp-wristed handshake classically indicative of weak character, but then she realized that Daddy had treated her like a woman with a graceful, gentle grasp. Shy and embarrassed, Delta looked away.

“My name's Walter,” he said gruffly, “but my friends (and lovers, huh, huh) call me Daddy.”

“Nice to meet you... Walter,” Delta responded good-naturedly, not sure if she breached etiquette by not call him Daddy. “Why do they call you Daddy?”

Walter's eyes turned from bashful to bold in an instant, and he smirked mischievously, “Maybe you'll get to find out sometime soon, my dear.”

Connie removed her trench coat, revealing the leather outfit she'd donned when she and Guyles were playing forced feminization. Someone had handed her a rider's

crop, and she flexed the thick, leather strap imitating a muscle bound weightlifter bending steel bars. The crowd cheered. A camera somewhere in the club focused on the various faces, displaying them larger than life on the Big Screen TV not unlike those candid shots and sporting events. The team color was overwhelmingly black, mostly denim and leather, some lace and satin. The only bright colors in the crowd were worn by the handful of drag queens parading about: a jade green jumper with white studs, a red velvet dress with a plunging neckline barely concealing enormous fake breasts, a wispy white dress worn by yet another Marilyn Monroe impersonator, and a rubber yellow mini dress with matching knee-high boots worn by a queen with shocking white hair who had a large nose and a gregarious grin, obviously a man in drag.

For a brief moment the big screen TV displayed a shy looking beauty in a rainbow sequined dress. She had short, bouncy brown hair, a bob. She looked like a flapper girl from the 1920's. When Delta craned her neck to see where **that** queen was, she noticed an odd synchronistic shift in the image displayed on the TV. She was watching herself, startled, yet again, by her appearance.

The camera panned the crowd, a whirl of faces, flesh and leather, and focused on two men dancing. Both were wearing black leather vests with metal studs, and one, the taller of the two, was wearing a dog collar sparkling with faux diamonds. The collared guy looked directly at the camera and sneered, a cold, steely look in his eyes. He raised a defiant fist displaying one finger.

“Fuck you!” the man shouted.

Delta could read his lips more than hear his voice over the cacophonous roar of the crowd.

And then she froze, an icy dread filled her veins. Mr. Fuck You bore a striking resemblance to Larry Hicks! And Larry Hicks was staring at her through the TV screen, eyes as big as spot lights.

Delta shrunk back into a shadow, leaving Daddy alone at the bar. She chose a stool near a serving port where wait-staff picked up their orders. Delta wanted to disappear. When the camera panned the crowd again, she searched for Hicks in the sea of faces, heads bobbing up and down to the music.

When the lesbian singer finally finished her song, she gave Connie a warm breast-to-breast hug, and they both cleared the dance floor as a shaven, bald man wearing black leather and dozens of body piercings stepped into the center of the crowd with a microphone.

“Let’s give our old friend County-Fried a big round of applause!” he shouted. He looked at Connie affectionately. “And let’s welcome our beloved Lady Pandora!”

The TV screen showed Lady Pandora bathed in light, graciously blowing kisses to her admirers. She ceased basking in the flurry of attention once the spotlight moved back to the emcee, and she began searching the crowd, stopping when she and Delta were staring at each other from across the room. Connie waved at Delta, encouraging her to join her, but Guyles shook his head, unable and unwilling to step out of the shadows which offered a sense of sheltering comfort, a measure of anonymity.

Guyles searched the crowd, found Hicks standing in a group of guys laughing at something. His dance partner whispered in his ear. In his heightened paranoia, Guyles was sure they’d spotted him, were talking about him. They upped the ante when they



began walking toward the bar and in Guyles' general direction. Here it was, he thought, show down!

At first, Guyles convinced himself that Hicks had followed him to Dallas, that the Oklahoma City Police Department had somehow intercepted his e-mails to Lady Pandora, had set him up in some kind of sting operation. He seethed at Hicks, hating him, remembering that night outside the Habana Inn when Hicks grabbed his dick, the graffiti in the restroom, the way he tried to get him to frisk Jody, his outrageous obsession with gays.

Then he saw Hicks holding hands with the guy he'd been dancing with earlier. They embraced, kissed, a real lip-lock, passionate, complete with groping, rubbing of crotches, hands on asses. The two men turned, still locked in each other's arms. Their physicality attracted attention, and the crowd started to applaud, yelling approval. It was surreal. The two men dressed in leather shorts and matching vests, shod in combat boots looked like oil-down wrestlers. They should have been throwing each other around the room, not kissing and groping. No regular, straight cop would do that, even if he was undercover, Guyles thought, his paranoia assuaged somewhat.

"What a fucking hypocrite!" he cursed softly.

Hicks and his boyfriend didn't break their embrace until one of the drag queens, the one with the white hair wearing the yellow mini-dress, approached them with a camera. After the flash, Hicks reached out, tried to grab the camera. Guyles lip-read Hicks saying, "Fuck off!" He watched with amusement as Hicks chased the queen who retreated to the protection of the crowd.

Hicks' partner tried to entice him back onto the dance floor, but it seemed the moment had been ruined. Hicks had that dark, smoldering frown on his face, the look that preceded one of his violent outbursts, the look he had on his face when he stomped that car thief months before. Hicks faded into some shadows on the opposite side of the dance floor.

Connie suddenly appeared before him, smiling and laughing. She had collected an entourage of friends and admirers.

"Lighten up, hon," she said between breaths.

A trickle of perspiration slid down her cheek, but instead of looking hot and bothered, she glowed, a golden aura of glistening skin. She urged Guyles to come off the bar stool, but he stiffened, resisting her.

"Okay, suite yourself."

She climbed onto a stool next to Guyles, crossed her legs, looking regal. She nudged Guyles' right knee, "Legs together, girl. Poise is primary."

Guyles hadn't realized he'd been slumping, legs apart like a man wearing trousers.

"You don't want to give them a beaver shot," Connie continued. "At least, not yet."

Guyles tried to imitate Connie's stature, hoisting himself, straightening his back, knees and feet together, tummy sucked in. Hell, being a girl was harder than it looked.

Connie introduced Guyles to her entourage, a collection of leather daddies, collared submissives, and at least one transgender. She was tall and skinny with a pronounced Adams apple, and judging by the relatively sparse hair on her crown, she was

styling her own hair instead of wearing a wig. Though she'd made a brave attempt to compensate for male pattern baldness, the overall effect was a feminine version of the hapless male comb-over. She seemed eager to meet Guyles.

“God you look good,” she said, almost drooling. “I’m Monica.”

Guyles extended his hand in greeting. He was about to introduce himself when Connie interceded.

“This is Delta,” she said, proudly, “Delta Phoenix.”

Monica pushed on Guyles’ left breast insert with a long red finger nail. “Oh,” she said, slightly superior. “You haven’t started hormones, yet.”

Guyles almost grabbed Monica’s finger, wanting to bend it backwards, twist it behind her back, grabbing her wrist in a come-along hold. How dare Monica touch him like that! But after a moment of consideration, he blew it off, not wanting to attract attention. He scanned the crowd, looking beyond Monica’s grinning face, trying to find Hicks, hoping he’d left the club.

Monica turned to the side, offering her profile. She stood up straight, arched her back so her dress, a long, black gown with thin shoulder straps, clung to her breasts. “See? They’re real. I’ve been on hormones for a year now, daily dosages of Premarin and Spyrolactone.”

They were just nubs, really, not much bigger than golf balls but not quite as large as tennis balls. Even so, Guyles was amazed.

“No kidding,” Connie added. “They’re real.” She placed her hand beneath Monica’s left breast, cupping it, pushed the flesh so it bulged over the neckline of Monica’s dress.

Monica grinned, clearly thrilled with Connie's attention.

"Wow," Guyles said involuntarily.

Monica smiled, leaned toward Guyles. "I order my hormones on the Internet, cheaper that way."

Connie frowned, looking concerned. "Now, we've talked about this. You need to get a doctor, do it with medical supervision."

To Guyles, it sounded like Connie was making a public service announcement.

Monica shrugged her shoulders. "C'mon, Connie, don't give me such a hard time. I'll get a doctor when I get a job."

With that, Monica departed, swimming through the crowd to meet up with another group of people, but it seemed like everyone wanted to keep away from Monica, a walking tragedy, really. It seemed like they were afraid her karma could rub off on them.

Connie shook her head and clicked her tongue. "Monica's a real sad story," she confided. "Don't let that happen to you, hon. Don't let your male hormones ravage your body longer than necessary. You still have a good head of hair, you know."

Guyles watched Monica walking up to various people, showing off her breasts and generally trying to find a place to fit in, somewhere, anywhere.

He had the cold realization that so-called transgenders don't fit into the gay lifestyle any better than they do in mainstream life, that the best they can achieve is tolerance but not real acceptance. That is, unless they can transition flawlessly and present themselves passably in their innate gender identities. But that would require them

to live with a whole new set of secrets, and he didn't know if he had the energy to carry it off.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

It was Hicks.

Guyles couldn't do anything but look down, wanting fold up into a tight ball, pressing into himself until he disappeared. It was his worst nightmare, come true.

“Yes, I'm talking to you.”

He stepped closer.

Guyles saw the combat boots on the floor, spit-shined airborne boots with the customary band of stitching separating the toe of the boot from the foot and heel. He saw a distorted reflection in the shiny toes, a blotch of color, a pale face trapped in a sea of black. The ground of reality was rushing up fast. His parachute had failed, and he was careening out of control in an emotional freefall.

Connie's black strap stilettos stepped between the jump boots. She bladed her body, wedged herself between Guyles and Hicks, a brave lioness protecting her young.

“Leave her alone,” Connie demanded, using her domination voice.

Hicks blinked, stepping back.

“Hey, Mickey,” Hicks shouted. “When did you start letting so many drag queens in this place?”

The man behind the bar polished a beer mug with a white rag, and he ambled up to the edge of the bar, a concerned look on his boyish face. With his hair slicked back and his ears pierced with tiny iron rings, he looked like a punk rocker. He had a suave cool and a sophisticated air, like he'd seen everything and found all of it all right.

“What’s the problem?” Mickey asked.

“I hate fucking drag queens,” Hicks said.

Guyles looked into Hicks’ eyes. He saw hatred, yes, but not true recognition. He was giving Delta Phoenix a hard time, but he did not seem to know who was hidden behind the makeup. Perhaps his cover hadn’t been blown, not yet anyway.

Hicks leaned forward, grimacing at Connie. He was about to say something when the relative darkness of that corner of the bar disappeared in a flash of bright light.

Hicks twisted toward the source of the flash. It was that drag queen with the shock of white hair, the one with the camera!

She stepped forward offering her hand, a congenial gesture. “Hi, I’m Victorola, and I publish a photo feature in the Dallas Pride. I’m sure you’ve heard of it. *Out and About?*”

Hicks growled. He pushed Connie back and strode toward Victorola, fists balled up tightly, shoulders bowed.

“Craig! We got a problem!” Mickey shouted.

Victorola, feigning bewilderment, stepped back behind a crowd of leather-vested men who turned to face Hicks. A trim but strong looking man jumped down from the DJ’s booth near the opposite side of the bar. The crowd respectfully parted as he strode toward Hicks.

Connie huddled close to Guyles and whispered, “Craig used to be a Dallas police officer, and he’s a black belt in Karate. He can really kick butt.”

Guyles could tell by the way Craig moved that Connie was telling the truth. He glided like an experienced and skillful martial artist, unafraid of battle, yet not particularly invested in using a physical confrontation to resolve the situation.

Hicks took a swing, a big haymaker of a punch, easy to block.

Craig side-stepped the punch, redirected the energy down and left, sending Hicks rushing toward the wall, smashing into the bricks. Hicks spun around, fists raised.

“Mickey, call the police!” Craig yelled.

The music stopped. Mickey grabbed the phone, punched three buttons. Guyles heard the brief but urgent 9-1-1 digital tones, the room breathless with tension, watching as Hicks squared off against Craig.

Hicks’ dance partner nudged past some people.

“Larry, honey, cool it, man. Nobody wants the police here.”

Hicks glanced left and right with furious exasperation, the look on his face melting, betraying fear and embarrassment. The dance partner hugged Hicks, held him, pinning his arms. Craig had his hands up, leaning on his back leg, a cat stance. He looked taut, a feline calmness, focused but dispassionate.

“Get him out of here,” Craig ordered Hicks’ companion.

The man nodded apprehensively. He was an attractive young man with smoldering brown eyes, a sensitive Latin nose, a feminine air about him, not girly but fey. Hicks relaxed his fists, shoulders sinking in surrender. They walked out of the club, Hicks tied up by his companion’s embrace like tired boxers trying to catch their breath.

The door closed, and the club remained silent for several awkward moments. Everyone seemed to be waiting for somebody to blow a whistle, an all-clear alarm telling

them the storm was over, a catalyst to resume the party. Craig retreated to the DJ booth, seized the microphone. A series of guitar twangs filled the sound system, an old, familiar song.

“These boots are made for walkin’,” Craig yelled triumphantly.

Victorola squealed with delight, handed her camera to Connie, shuffled to the middle of the dance floor just in time to start lip-syncing Nancy Sinatra’s voice.

“You’ve been playing where you shouldn’t have been playing,” Nancy voice reverberated through the club.

Victorola danced like a go-go girl collecting scores of dollar bills from admirers who crowded the edges of the dance floor. The raucous fun had returned.

Guyles was still frozen in place, light-headed from the rush of events, almost giddy from his narrow escape. He started laughing in the way a person laughs right after dodging certain disaster, a laugh that relieved pent-up tension more than it reflected merriment.

But soon, the laughter subsided, tears overwhelming the ridges of his eyes. He’d started to cry, a deep, woeful moan escaping his mouth. He leaned against Connie who embraced him, cooing like a mother dove to a chick trying to summon the courage to fly.

“Connie,” Guyles said. “That guy, he’s an Oklahoma City cop.”

Connie seemed to understand, tightened her embrace. “It’s all right, honey.”

“He’s a real asshole back home, acting like he hates gays.”

Weeks of anxiety spilled from his mouth.

“He wrote that I’m a fag on the rest room wall, and he beats up drag queens...”



Guyles noticed a black drop dripping down Connie's bare shoulder. At first he thought it was blood, but then he realized it wasn't thick enough to be blood. It was a tear drop stained by running mascara. He stood up straight, both hands on his cheeks. When he looked at his palms he saw black streaks on his fingers, pools of tears in the pits of his palms like black stigmata.

*The wind groaned against Willie's bedroom window, a lonesome, desperate pleading. He opened his eyes and held his breath. He felt the change in pressure, smelled the moisture of an approaching storm. Lightning flashed, and the room came alive with shadows, expanding like a breath, a lung full of darkness. He waited for the exhale, the return of light, but it didn't come. He heard the familiar bump in the attic, beckoning him.*

*Thump! Thump! Thump!*

*Before he realized what he was doing, Willie found himself walking down the hallway. The night light in the bathroom was malfunctioning, flickering in response to the intermittent lightning outside; the little electric sensor unable to tell if it was day or night. The Zodiac symbols on the wall paper in his unborn sister's bedroom seemed animated between intervals of flashing light, swirling in chaos, growing claws and teeth, huge luminous eyes, a whole new mythology.*

*He opened the attic door, saw the steep staircase extending upward into the shadows. He ascended the stairs, stopped on the landing and looked toward the east window where he'd hung the white dress. The roar of the wind grew louder.*

*Willie ventured into the belly of the attic, stood before the dress, caressing the soft fabric. He wanted to wear it, again. He wanted to dance in the shadows, in the flickering light, hoping the wind would rip off the roof, take him into a swirling vortex, into another dimension. He wanted to find the Land of Oz, follow the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City where he could petition the Wizard of Oz to make him whole.*

*But he steeled himself. He'd won the fight. He was a boy. Time to abandon fantasies, time to live in the real world, to endeavor to become the man he was meant to be.*

*Willie took the dress off the hook, held it in his arms like a child, folded it, making it smaller until it was the size of an infant, a white lump of soft cloth. He found an empty box, put the dress inside.*

*He replaced the lid, pushed the box deep into the shadows.*

## Twenty-Two

The Will Rogers two-shift officers lined up at the lieutenant's desk eager to turn in their paperwork. A supervisor is supposed to review all the reports, sign off on them before they can be sent downtown to the Headquarters building where data entry clerks type the reports into the system. Usually, the lieutenant took the veteran officer's reports, signed them without inspecting them, but the rookies were a different story. Guyles felt anxious as he stood in line. Lieutenant Bowen was reviewing **everybody's** reports in detail.

Guyles sifted through the paperwork in his activity folder, a 6 inch by 8 inch notebook. Jody's assault report was still in there. He didn't think much would be done about the allegation, but he knew Hicks would fade some heat, have to answer some questions, something that would really piss him off. If asked about the report Guyles planned to feign ignorance, claim he was just doing his duty, nothing personal. It seemed

like a good, safe way to jab back at Hicks without seeming whiny or having to resort to insults, threats, or a physical confrontation, all of which could jeopardize a probationary officer's job.

Hicks dropped his reports on the lieutenant's desk, started walking away before the lieutenant called him back, looking through the paperwork with meticulous interest.

"Officer Hicks," he said formally. The other lieutenants mostly used first names. "You missed something on this burglary report."

Grumbling, Hicks snatched the report from Bowman's hands. "What?"

"Pagination."

Hicks retrieved a pen from his front left pocket, clicked it open and wrote page numbers on the top of the two pages: 1 of 2 and 2 of 2. He tossed the report back at the lieutenant and left the room.

"I'm 10-7," Hicks announced. "Out of here."

"Not until 2:00 AM, Sergeant."

Guyles heard the back doors to the station open abruptly, slamming shut. Had Hicks left the station? Bowman frowned, shook his head, lips drawn tight enough to lose their color.

When it was Guyles' turn to hand in reports, Bowman seemed pleased at the stack of paperwork Guyles had generated.

"Busy night? Good..." Bowman said. He checked the details in each report, making sure Guyles had filled in all the blanks, that his grammar and spelling were correct, his handwriting legible.

As Bowman worked through the reports Guyles felt his nervousness growing. He knew Bowman would be especially interested in the report at the bottom of the deck and hoped Bowman wouldn't comment about it with other officers present. He knew they'd find out in due time, the rumor mill being what it was, but he wanted to delay a backlash as long as possible. He wished one of the other lieutenants had been on duty, one who didn't check things so closely.

When Bowman got to Guyles' final report he frowned. "Why didn't you hand this in the other day?"

"I thought I had, but I found it in my folder after lineup."

He'd thought about discreetly slipping the report into the outgoing reports tray at the beginning of the shift, but he'd been afraid another officer might intercept it, make an issue of it like Duncan had.

As he continued reading, Bowman's thick eyebrows knit together, jaw muscles clenched.

Guyles worried that Bowman would blow up at him the way Duncan had at the truck stop, but after a moment, Bowman smiled vaguely, furtive eyes glancing around, looking for a threat, someone reading over his shoulder. He'd spotted an opportunity.

Such a bad poker face, Guyles thought, but thankfully, Bowman didn't comment. He didn't even break stride.

"Good job," he said generically, signifying that Guyles was done and dismissed, officially off duty.

The Will Rogers station had an officer's lounge, a place to relax while on break or at the end of the shift. It had a pool table in the middle of the room, a pinball machine, an

electronic dartboard. Some of the younger officers had turned on the television, a big screen TV that had been recovered from a burglary investigation, left unclaimed by the owner. It was a little rough looking but functional. They stopped surfing through the channels when they found a Beavis and Butthead marathon on MTV.

Beavis had wrapped his shirt around his head, was waving his arms frantically. “I am Cornholio,” he chanted in a foreign accent. “I need some T.P. for my bung hole.”

The guys were cracking up when a female officer, Dana Blunt, walked through the lounge. She was tall and thin, a little masculine in uniform, but she wore her hair in a pert ponytail that danced when she turned her head. For a few minutes, she chatted superficially with the two officers playing a game of pool.

“Busy tonight?”

“Not too bad. Got me a car thief down in the Flats, one of those GBC bangers. He punched the column on a Pontiac Grand Prix.”

“Oh, yeah,” Blunt said. “I’ve been looking for that car all week.”

Guyles watched her ponytail, wondered how it would feel to have a ponytail of his own, then felt his cheeks getting warm. He struggled to suppress the thought, remembering the feel of the wig on the back of his neck.

“Oh, baby!” Butthead’s voice shouted at a big-haired female dancing in a heavy metal music video. She was wearing hot pink short shorts, a skimpy halter-top barely concealing her huge breasts. Butthead laughed his characteristic laugh, a stifled, rhythmic snicker, “Huh, huh, huh.”

Blunt shook her head at the guys, a sour look on her face. “Grow up, you pervs,” she said. “I swear, it feels like high school around here.” She walked toward the door, glanced at her watch. “C’mon, boys, it’s quitting time. Go home, get some sleep.”

Blunt let the door slam, punctuating her comment.

“What a fucking bitch,” an officer named Childress said.

“She’s a lesbo.”

The two officers playing pool finished their game and left the room, but the others remained, the ones addicted to the police comradery, the ones still young enough to feel like a night at work was great fun. They lingered the longest, often playing pool and darts, watching TV well past 3 AM.

Guyles moved closer to the big screen TV, wanting to join the fun, become a part of the group. To his relief, the guys accepted his presence. He reclined in a chair, laughed at the antics of Beavis and Butthead, all of it funnier because he was sharing the laughter with his colleagues. After the show was over, he hoped someone would start a game of darts, thinking himself a pretty good dart thrower and wanting to show off his skill.

Hicks entered the room, hands on his hips looking like a drill sergeant getting ready to admonish his troops. “Why don’t you guys go home?” he shouted. “You know, that’s the place where you sleep, and eat and take a shit?”

The guys ignored him.

“Come on, clear out of here,” he continued.

Beavis responded to a particularly violent music video clip. “Kick his ass! Kick his ass!”

The assembly of officers imitated Beavis' voice. "Kick his ass!" they said in unison before erupting into a cacophony of laughter.

"What a fucking bunch of losers," Hicks complained, leaving. The door slammed behind him.

Guyles could see the guys didn't respect Hicks; they just tolerated him, a great source of comfort. Maybe turning in the report would get Hicks reassigned, do the shift a favor by getting rid of someone incompatible with everyone else.

"That guy is a major prick," Childress commented. He had a shaven head and thick-rimmed glasses. He looked like a perpetual Marine Corps recruit.

Some of the other guys answered with grunts of agreement. A commercial had interrupted the Beavis and Butthead show, so the group was able to focus their attention on discussing Hicks. Guyles leaned in, listening with interest.

Childress, though, turned their attention toward Guyles. "How did you tolerate riding with that asshole?"

"One minute at a time," he said, glad to be included in the conversation. "Longest month of my life."

The officers all nodded. Guyles suspected at least one or two of them had trained under Hicks also.

"I wonder what his problem is," Childress mused. "You got any theories?"

Guyles looked around to see if anyone would speak out, but everyone was looking back at him like they expected him to answer the question.

"He's probably a raging homosexual too scared to come out of the closet."



He had tried to sound ironic, tried to play it off as a joke, but the guys seized idea with enthusiasm.

“Yeah, he’s always overcompensating, acting like he’s the toughest badass cop who ever wore a badge,” one officer said. They called him J.B. He was a rough looking man with acne scars on his cheeks, a perpetual bulge of snuff in his lower lip.

Guyles felt better about turning in Jody’s report. When the word got out about the incident, officer opinion just might slide toward his favor.

“Probationary Officer Guyles,” Lieutenant Bowman’s voice penetrated the discussion. “I need to talk to you.”

The guys laughed, their eyes wide with amusement.

“Oh, someone’s in trouble,” one of them said with comic awe.

Guyles stood up, ready for an ass chewing.

“Where’s the ticket?” Bowman demanded. He’d closed the door to the lieutenant’s office so they wouldn’t be overheard.

Guyles felt Bowman’s eagerness, an opportunity to slam an officer who was constantly defiant toward him. In fact, he was almost salivating. “I thought we weren’t supposed to let people sign a citation when they’re drunk,” Guyles lied. He didn’t want to bust Duncan for tearing up the original ticket.

Bowman eyed Guyles suspiciously, pointed at a citation reference number in the body of the report. Guyles had busted himself, and now Bowman knew he was trying to be evasive.

“I’m sorry,” Guyles said. “I guess I lost it. Got it mixed up with some other report, probably.”

Bowman nodded, eyebrows in a thoughtful knit. He set the report on the desk and studied Guyles. “Do you think he did it? I mean, do you think this Joseph character is reliable?”

Guyles shook his head. “I think Hicks is capable of this,” he admitted, “but the victim, she uh, he’s a drag queen, sir. You know Jody?”

Bowman laughed harshly. “So much for a credible victim.”

A pause of silence grew between the two men as Bowman sat down at his desk staring at the calendar work pad in front of him. The month was incorrect, December of the previous year.

Guyles was nervous. He didn’t think he’d be called in about the report this soon. He wished he’d left the station directly after the shift instead of trying to hang out with the guys.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” Bowman said. “I want you to find Jody, get her, uh, **it** to sign another ticket and update this report.” He folded the crime-incident form, placed it in a file in his desk. He closed the drawer and locked it with his key. “That’s what you’re going to be doing first thing tomorrow.”

Bowman smiled at Guyles, the smile of a shark, all toothy and hungry. It warped his otherwise composed by-the-book studiousness. Guyles felt like he’d been netted into a conspiracy, exposing himself to the knife-edge of scrutiny, a knife that could cut both ways. But, at the same time, he was glad he’d confided in someone who hated Hicks at least as much as he himself did.

“I’m glad you brought this to my attention,” Bowman said.

Guyles took the cue, left the office feeling tight in the chest and short of breath, a little dizzy. The guys motioned for him to rejoin them, obviously curious about his meeting with Bowman, but Guyles plunged through the back door craving a breath of fresh air.

As the door closed, he heard Butthead remark, “What a wuss, huh, huh, huh.”

Guyles went looking for Jody on his way home from work. Obsessed, he patrolled 39<sup>th</sup> street in his personal vehicle hoping to get a glimpse of her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

The pay phone at 39<sup>th</sup> and Youngs had been vandalized; the receiver severed from the twisted metal cord, and the coin laundry was empty at 3 AM, fluorescent white lights spilling their antiseptic illumination into the street, holding the shadows at bay.

He rolled down his window, listened as the growling engine echoed off dark office windows and blank walls. He drove past Phillies, an eclectic diner across the street from a row of gay bars. Four people sat inside the brightly lit restaurant. A young man leaned against the cash register, hand covering his mouth trying to suppress a yawn. The other people sat at the counter staring at cups of coffee: two guys looking weary but reluctant to leave, a flamboyant woman, probably a drag queen, who flirted with the waiter, blowing kisses that he glumly ignored.

When he drove past the Kozan Apartments he saw two characters standing outside. Something went from hand to hand in a furtive, smooth motion. Guyles knew it was a drug deal, but since he was off duty, he decided to ignore it. The two guys turned their heads as he moved slowly past them, quite a difference from the immediate dash into the dark that a patrol car usually provoked.

One of them was the guy who tried to rob him and Dana that night outside Angles. He watched Guyles' car, trying to act cool while the second person, a skinny Native American kid with long hair, stepped back into the shadows. Something familiar about him, too, but Guyles couldn't quite place him.

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When Guyles got home, he found an empty wine bottle on the kitchen table, an ashtray full of cigarette butts. The odor of smoke permeated everything in the apartment, a hazy cloud filling the room. At first, he surged with anger. He'd told Dana to quit smoking and if she couldn't quit, to at least refrain from smoking in the apartment. He was set to storm into the bedroom, roust her awake, but he saw the information pamphlet Connie had given him lying next to the wine bottle, the corner burnt, set afire then snuffed out, a scattering of ashes all over the table. Something had made her reconsider.

Guyles gazed into the darkness beyond the bedroom door, listened for a giggle, a snarl, something. He really didn't know what to expect. After a few moments, he realized Dana wasn't awake, so he listened for the rhythmic hum and sigh of slumber. When the refrigerator activated its motor, he jumped, knee hitting the table hard enough to tip the wine bottle. Some of the remaining contents dripped out as it rolled across the table, leaving a red streak on the burnt information tract. The bottle fell off the table, shattered on the black and white tile. The noise made him cringe, and he listened for someone stirring in the bedroom. Nothing but silence.

Dana knew everything, he realized, worried about what she'd do with that knowledge. Perhaps Duncan was right about how women probe for a man's weakness like Delilah did to Samson. Once they find what they're looking for, they lose all respect for him.

Guyles mustered the strength to stand, walking toward the bedroom. The ambient light from the kitchen revealed the empty bed. Dana was gone, again.

When he lay down on the bed, he couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts ran through his mind, fear and paranoia. Dana was going to hurt him. He knew it. She'd discovered another woman in his life, and **he** was that woman.

He stared at the ceiling, dawn brightening his bedroom windows. He found the triangle in the plaster texturing, more prominent than ever. The seasons were changing. Everything was changing, and the light was more direct. He felt the heat.

The bed shook, and so did the world in Guyles' dream. Then the world started spinning, tighter and faster, a vortex of darkness. Right before he opened his eyes he felt a heavy weight on his chest, the warmth of flesh.

“What's this? Dana demanded. She waved the transgender pamphlet in his face.

Her legs straddled his chest, knees framing his face. He felt trapped, smothered. Instinctively, he bridged his back, grabbed her legs and rolled to the right sending Dana tumbling off the bed. The hollow thud told Guyles Dana had hit the floor hard. Was it a knee or was it her head that had struck the thin carpet covering the concrete?

“Mother fucker!” Dana shouted.

She'd dropped the information pamphlet on the bed. Guyles grabbed it, crumbled it in his fist. “Bitch! What the fuck are you doing here?”

Dana stood up, rubbing her right knee. Guyles felt a bit of relief, glad she hadn't hit her head.

“I live here, asshole.”

“Well, that’s news to me. You come and go, stay gone for days, weeks at a time. Where’ve you been this time?”

Dana pranced like a child, haughty nose turned up. “Wouldn’t you like to know....”

“I can guess. You’ve been fucking around.”

Dana glared at Guyles, but she didn’t deny his accusation. She shrugged her shoulders, held her right hand in front of her, examining her long red nails. She feigned boredom, mimicked a yawn.

“Well,” she said. “I guess we all have our secrets.”

Guyles felt the sting in her voice and winced. The crumbled transgender pamphlet in his hand felt heavy.

Dana dropped her arms to her sides, looked down. Guyles wasn’t sure what to think. Was she angry? Happy? Was she going to make fun of him? Hug him? In that moment, anything seemed possible. She took a deep breath.

“So, you’re transgendered?” she said, voice shaking. For a moment, she looked vulnerable, eyes wide, chin quivering.

“No,” he lied. “This is just some bullshit I found. Thought it looked interesting.” He tossed the pamphlet to the floor like it was an irradiated piece of iron.

Dana stared at him. She wasn’t buying it. She bent down, picked up the crumbled paper, unfolding it.

“It’s true,” she said. “I knew it was something deeper than a fetish.” Her face softened, betraying her tenderness.

Guyles shook his head. He considered telling Dana about Dallas, about Delta Phoenix, but he held back. Seeing Hicks at the bar had brought him back to reality. Becoming Delta full time was impossible. He'd invested too much of his life trying to be a man, and he wanted to see it through, to live out his destiny, whatever that was. He felt his hands balling up, hardening into fists. He wanted to box, to hit something hard, put it down forever.

"I want you to be happy," Dana said.

The grace of her words astounded Guyles, and for a moment, he didn't feel so alone. He wondered what she meant by happy. Was she telling him she loved him so much she'd stay with him through a gender transition? Or was this the coup de grace for their relationship, the final kiss off?

"I want you to be happy," he mocked. "Sounds like, 'let's just be friends.'"

Dana narrowed her eyes.

Guyles couldn't believe Dana could really love him despite his being transgender. It was impossible. He'd never known a responsible, happy, well-adjusted transgender person. He thought about Jody. What a fucking waste. Now was the time to stop it. Dana's understanding and tolerance, her love: just more temptation, illusions. What he needed was a parachute to slow things down, to put the world in proper perspective, to make it possible for him to land on his feet lithe as a cat.

Dana stared at him, not the hard stare of an opponent but the searching gaze of someone trying to understand, her eyes glassy with tears.

"You're afraid," she said, brushing his face with the back of her hand.



Guyles recoiled, turned away, cheeks hot with shame. He slammed his right fist into an open left hand, felt the knuckles jarring the bone at the base of his palm. The pain felt good, invigorating.

“You’re afraid of what the world’s going to think, but you’ve got to follow your truth, be yourself.”

She stared into his eyes, cradled his chin in her hands, face to face. Guyles stood up, slammed his fist into the wall, felt his knuckles penetrating the plaster with a satisfying crunch.

Dana put her hand on his shoulder, tried to spin him around to face her. “Look at me,” she said. “We can do this.”

Guyles’ right hand snapped into action, and before he could stop himself, he punched Dana in the face, sent her whirling against the wall.

For a moment, only a moment, he felt a surge of victory, thrilled to see the woman go down, pummeled by masculine strength and power. It gave him a sense of control.

“You fucking coward!” she screamed.

Then the horror of what he’d done struck him, a hard counterpunch rendering him speechless, breathless. He stumbled backward reeling with self loathing, stomach churning with nausea. He leaned against the door, watched Dana crying on the floor, blood drops appearing on the carpet: one, two, three, suddenly a dozen.

“You fucking asshole!”

She stood up, blood running from both nostrils, a red goatee dripping off her chin, eyes wide with fear. But instead of cringing in the corner or lying down to absorb more

abuse, she rushed at Guyles, kicked at his groin. He pivoted to the left, bringing his right thigh up as a shield. She was wearing sandals, and her exposed toes crunched against his knee. She screamed in pain, fell backward, crying on the ground.

Feeling like he was about to explode, Guyles plunged into the bathroom, knelt down in front of the toilet, spewed the contents of his stomach. The concave shape of the cold porcelain muffled Dana's cries of anger, distorting them like the sound inside a seashell, distant, distorted. The last thing he heard was the front door slamming shut, shaking the walls, the thud reverberating like thunder. He felt every concentric echo until the sound finally faded into the vacant hollow of the toilet bowl.

## Twenty-Four

Nobody mentioned a thing about Dana when Guyles arrived at Will Rogers. He'd been expecting her to call the police, make a domestic abuse report. He'd imagined being swarmed by officers, taken into custody and booked into the jail, but none of that happened. He wondered if Dana was like so many abuse victims he'd seen, plagued by denial and emotional paralysis. He'd often been amazed at the devotion abused women had for their boyfriends and husbands, slaves to their notions of love and loyalty, beaten again and again.

He hoped Dana would be like that, covering her bruises with make-up, affirming her love and devotion. It was a curious thing; when he'd pined for her, she acted aloof, but when he was troubled, even violent, she tried get closer. He resolved to never hit her again, to lavish love and attention on her when he saw her again.

As the second shift officers gathered for lineup, Guyles noticed Hicks was absent, an uncharacteristic event, especially when Hicks was training a rookie. He hoped Lieutenant Bowman had begun investigating Jody's report, placing Hicks on

administrative leave. He felt even better as the lieutenant called roll, when he called Hicks' name. Instead of a cynical, smartass retort, the officers heard a pause of silence.

“Anyone know where Hicks is?” the lieutenant asked.

The officers fidgeted for a moment, then Childress offered an opinion. “Have you checked 39<sup>th</sup> and Penn? Maybe he's hanging out at Saddle Tramps.”

Some of the guys laughed, an echo of snickers spreading through the room. Usually, Bowman admonished the troops for such behavior, but he smiled, started laughing himself. Then everybody was laughing, nobody standing up for Hicks. Guyles tried to remain stoic, detached, unimpressed with the joke. He didn't want to laugh because he knew he'd be the one laughing loudest, drawing attention to himself. Eventually, he surrendered, joining the group of officers in their derision against homosexuals, their collective dislike for someone they'd labeled as a queer.

When the laughter finally died away, Bowman called roll. He advised the officers that day shift was working a homicide at the Kozan Apartments at 2114 NW 39<sup>th</sup>.

“I need a volunteer to relieve them,” he said.

Nobody raised a hand.

Bowman looked down at Guyles, “That's your district isn't it?”

Guyles felt a chill run down his spine. “Not exactly, sir. I ride Adam 9. The Kozan Apartments are in Adam 10.”

Bowman laughed slightly to himself. Nobody rode Adam 10, and nobody volunteered to take calls in that district. Nobody wanted to be the officer officially assigned to patrol “Fagville.”

“Close enough,” Bowman said, ceasing all debate. “They’re almost done. They should only need one unit. The Medical Examiner is already 10-97.”

Guyles was relieved to see the Crime Scene Investigations truck and the Medical Examiner’s van parked in front of the Kozan apartments. That meant they were already processing the scene. All he had to do was report to the homicide investigator, guard the scene, sign the crime scene log and write a short supplemental report, routine stuff. With the ME present, things shouldn’t take too long.

He saw crime scene tape strung up and down half a city block; yellow tape waving in the breeze, a warning to potential intruders. Yet, the bright color, meant to deter the uninvited curious, was attention grabbing, the morbid kind. People peered out from behind drawn curtains. Cars crept by, drivers and passengers gazing down the alley between buildings; a traffic jam of buzzards was forming up and down 39<sup>th</sup> street. A television news crew was setting up a camera just beyond the crime scene tape, and the prim, pretty, blonde reporter grimaced at the wide perimeter. She clutched at her raincoat, checked her watch. The sky overhead had become gray with threatening clouds. A storm was coming. The air felt electrified.

A police officer, an old-timer whose belly drooped over his gun belt, stood there grinning at the reporter. She waved at him to approach, but he remained in place. Her impatience seemed to please him, smiling back at her, mouth twisted with menace. His thick mustache, just a tad wider than regulation allowed, emphasized his malice. He was smoking a cigarette looking bored and apathetic. The smoke trailed away from him like a

retreating halo. When he noticed Guyles approaching, he looked relieved. It was almost quitting time.

“New meat,” the officer said when Guyles got out of his patrol car.

Guyles read his name tag, Hodges. He had never met Hodges before, but he did know about the guy’s notorious reputation for being a slug. Hodges got away with doing almost nothing day in and day out. He cruised one diner after another eating all day long. He hadn’t written a ticket in weeks; hadn’t arrested someone in months. When he handed Guyles a clipboard with the crime scene log attached to it, Guyles noticed sweat stains on the paper. The guy was disgusting. He smelled bad, like a locker room, pungent, laced with ammonia.

Guyles wrote his name, his badge number and time of arrival on the crime scene log, handed it back to Hodges.

“Is it a nasty one?” Guyles asked.

“Nasty enough,” Hodges said, chuckling. “Someone wasted a fucking drag queen.”

Guyles wondered, then worried that the victim might be Jody. She hung out at the Kozan apartments, maybe live there. He felt a deep dread for some reason, but he tried to play it off as irrational; told himself that this was a likely demise for a drag prostitute. It didn’t make him feel any better.

Hodges climbed into his patrol car, left the scene without briefing Guyles about his duties. So, Guyles stood there, staring down the corridor between apartments. The reporter was trying to get his attention, but Guyles ignored her. She stomped her foot in frustration. The wind created a woeful moan as it moved between bare tree branches

adorned with the first buds of spring. Fast moving low clouds gave the world a surreal, dreamy quality. The subsequent drop in temperature made him shiver.

After a few minutes one of the crime scene investigators walked down the corridor. He was redheaded with a chubby face, dressed in dark blue BDU's instead of the regular police uniform. He had a camera around his neck, rubber gloves stained black with fingerprint dust.

"Do you know who got whacked?" Guyles asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Whacked?" the CSI echoed. "That's one way to say it. They beat it to death."

"They?"

"Well, it looks like a bashing, maybe one or two suspects."

"Do you know who did it?"

The investigator laughed. "Not my department," he said. "You need to ask homicide."

Guyles wanted to walk into the corridor, take a look at the crime scene. The victim had to be Jody, but he wanted confirmation with his own eyes.

Guyles read the CSI's uniform tag, Williams. "Do you know who the victim is, Sergeant Williams?"

Williams shook his head. "No, just a Jane Doe, or really, a John Doe. A nobody in other words."

Guyles nodded, not knowing what to say. Yeah, he realized, Jody was a nobody in the eyes of most cops. He understood even if he didn't totally agree with their attitudes.

"I swear, sometimes this job makes me feel like a trash-man," Williams said, laughing. He stood near a trash barrel on the sidewalk, one of those steel drums street

people started fires in to keep warm during the winter. He peeled off the rubber gloves, let them drop into the can then shook his hands to rid them of accumulated perspiration. “Some people are just garbage, you know? They don’t do anything productive for society. They just suck on everyone else, like a parasite. Whoever did this, dumped ole Doe in the dumpster like they knew what needed to be done.”

A man wearing a red windbreaker stepped into the corridor. He had bushy, unkempt hair, a strained, lack-of-sleep look on his face, blanched and dirty. Apparently, he’d been climbing through the trash dumpster.

“Hey, a rookie,” he said with delight. “You been on a homicide scene before?”

Guyles nodded. He’d already worked two homicides in his short career, one of them a shooting, the other a stabbing. Neither of them had been particularly gruesome. From where he stood, the victims could have been mannequins. He didn’t feel any emotional impact or personal desire for justice and retribution. The only difficult thing about those crimes was trying to control the scenes, separating and isolating the witnesses, dealing with the emotional outbursts of friends and family. It was hard to know exactly what happened and why in all that chaos.

But this was different. This scene was like ghost town, nobody milling around or asking questions, no high drama or rowdy crowds swearing vengeance; just silence and apathy, a shrug of the shoulder, a click of the tongue.

The guy in the red windbreaker turned and started back down the corridor. The back of his jacket displayed two large letters, M.E. with Oklahoma County underneath. He waved at Guyles, motioning him to follow. “Come meet Jane-slash-John Doe,” he said. “You ever meet a drag queen before?”



Guyles stepped into the corridor lined with casement windows with tall, flimsy doors on both sides. The cinder block walls had been painted time and again to conceal the constant blemishes of spray paint. This time, the color was yellow like puke, hardly concealing the graffiti beneath: NHC 90's and 107 Hoovers. These crossed out by swaths of red, overlapped by drippy letters: "Snoovers" and "CK's." Disputed territory. The bright yellow glowed luminously, almost like the walls themselves were the source of light.

The walls converged, drawing closer and closer as Guyles walked further and further toward the light at the end of the corridor. The effect was nightmarish, eliciting a sense of claustrophobia. He tried to control his breathing, fast and harsh all of a sudden. He felt like a kid at a Halloween haunted house knowing when he turned the corner he would see something hideous. But this was real. He was going to see a real dead body, someone who'd been murdered. He prayed this one wasn't Jody. No personal connection, he thought, just a corpse, a piece of meat, something to pity but nothing to mourn.

The wall at the end of the hallway had some fresh graffiti. A tagger had spray-painted the word "Echo" near the ceiling in fancy, multicolored block letters, an artistic achievement. Guyles did a left face, walked into the narrow alley behind the apartment complex, an alley rimmed with tall chain-link fences crowned with razor wire. At the dead end of the alley he saw a dumpster. Another crime scene investigator leaned into the dumpster to take another series of photographs.

Someone had backed a gray minivan into the alley. A spiffy looking young man stood next to a gurney. He was wearing a maroon jacket, a blue tie over a stiff white shirt. The guy stood there solemnly, hands clasped in front like he was praying. At various

points on the ground Guyles saw evidence markers, small orange triangles folded from thin pieces of plastic. A homicide detective was making a crime scene sketch as Guyles walked up.

The detective wore a black windbreaker with a badge embroidered over the left breast, a motto sewn into the slippery fabric: “Our day begins when your days end. OCPD Homicide.”

He wore a black cowboy hat and sported a thick, black mustache. He puffed on a cigar, an old school method of dealing with the stench of decomposition.

Guyles hated the smell of cigar smoke, so he held his breath, chest tight, pulse hammering inside his head. As he walked closer to the dumpster his eyes began to water - his body’s involuntarily reaction to the horror of the contents. The second CSI, a wiry Hispanic guy, very short with a broad Native American nose, stepped down from a crate near the dumpster. The odor didn’t seem to bother him at all. He placed the cover over his camera lens and spoke to the medical examiner.

“You can have him,” he said. “Uh – it.”

Guyles read the name tag, slightly offended, but he didn’t say anything. Vargas walked away. He didn’t seem to care about freaking out a rookie.

The medical examiner peeked into the dumpster, nose wrinkled with disgust: an exaggerated grimace, really, probably some kind of theatrical display for Guyles’ benefit. It seemed out of character for this guy to be so grossed out by a dead body in a dumpster. He’d seen things like this and worse.

“C’mon, take a look. Pretty nasty.”

Guyles exhaled slightly, hoping to expel the odor from his nostrils. He tightened his lips. The air was heavy with pungency. He didn't want to taste death. With squinty eyes he pried the top edge of the dumpster and looked down incrementally so he wouldn't be overwhelmed by a big and ghastly sight. He saw fingers first, curled slightly at the tips like a claw extended in stiff intervals, unnatural and agonized. The skin was slightly brown. The elbow twisted back beyond the normal range of function, a broken arm. Black hair concealed the left side of the face, the nose sticking up through the strands, a damaged, bludgeoned nose thick with gore. The mouth was open, not like an O of surprise, merely a slackened jaw jutted forward like it had been knocked out of place. The right eye stared up, almost directly at Guyles, a convicting, pleading stare. And then he knew; he knew it really was Jody.

The shock of the sight compelled him to inhale sharply, a gasp. He felt the stink of death entering his body, every cell heaving with sickness. He staggered toward the yellow wall, vomiting bile from his stomach. Because he hadn't eaten lunch he had nothing of substance to regurgitate. He bent forward, hands on knees, dry-heaved for a few minutes while the medical examiner and the homicide investigators had a good laugh.

When Guyles finally breathed without a shudder of revulsion he managed to speak. "I know who that is," he spewed, tongue thick and cumbersome. To himself, he sounded like a numbed dental patient. The investigators stopped laughing. "I know who that is."

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Joseph David Engle, aka Jody, was in the system. The OCPD had over seven pages of data on Jody, mostly for petty crimes like prostitution, marijuana possession, public drunkenness, and several victim reports - all of them assaults. She seemed to get beaten on a regular basis. Guyles noticed the last assault report wasn't on file, and he wondered why Lieutenant Bowman was sitting on the report.

Guyles found an old runaway report from when Jody was a juvenile. The listed guardian was a woman named Berthe Brown. She lived off Villa, down on Lindley Street in the Mulligan Flats. He saved the data on his mobile data terminal, returned to the detective who was getting ready to leave.

"I found next-of-kin information," Guyles announced.

The detective nodded, smiled without parting his lips, a twist of his mustache.

"Good," he said.

He wasn't rude or unfriendly, just quiet, almost contemplative. Guyles wondered if the detective was thinking through the problems of this crime scene, trying to piece together a sequence of events.

"Any theories?" Guyles asked.

Guyles had a theory, but he was afraid to announce it because it involved accusing another police officer. Hicks had killed Jody in another one of his violent outbursts. He must have sought Jody out so he could finish his business from the week before, to silence her so she wouldn't testify to the first beating. The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed. But, he didn't want to say anything, not yet, not until

he could figure out how he could tell the story without having to answer too many questions about himself.

The detective didn't say anything. He just stood there watching Guyles, perhaps studying him.

The silence between them felt awkward. Guyles began talking to fill the gap. "I'm not a veteran, not by a long shot," he offered, "but it seems like this kind of thing happens a lot."

The detective laughed. "We may never know who did this," he said. "One of those street things; mind your own business. People mind their own business so well around here, you can get away with murder." He puffed his cigar thoughtfully. "Yep, no use getting' your tits in a wad over this one. But sometimes, we get breaks. We'll bust someone, a dope dealer, say, who hangs out here. He wants to make a deal, give us a murderer so we can let his sorry ass go. All of a sudden, a cold case turns hot. Sometimes you got to catch some small fish so you can reel in the big ones."

It made sense. Guyles could tell the detective was a patient, methodical man. "You like to fish?"

The detective grinned. "How'd you know?" He jabbed the end of his cigar against the cinder block wall, extinguished the flame. He tossed the remnant on the sidewalk, kicked it into the gutter.

"Well, time to go," he said.

He climbed inside his green Ford Taurus (all the detectives drove an unmarked Ford Taurus). He shifted the car into gear.

"Can you make notification? That would be a big help. Thanks."

Then he drove off.

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The full moon had risen above the downtown skyline, casting a pallid glow over the neighborhood known as the Mulligan Flats. Some progressive minded people had renamed the area in recent years, had posted signs “Welcome to Westlawn Gardens,” but the new name didn’t change anything. The locals and the cops still called it the Flats.

Even though the Flats was a mere two miles west of downtown, the rustic devastation made it seem like a different world. The wide, well-lit city streets narrowed significantly here. Some of the roads were still unpaved or neglected long enough to have crumbled asphalt. The trees and grass were wild and untrimmed, streetlights shot out or knocked down. Some of the homes were built with scrap lumber and shingles, unequipped with plumbing and electricity. Outhouses were not a thing of the past here in the heart of Oklahoma City, neither were chicken coups, barnyards with pigs and goats. One guy in the neighborhood had a llama.

Ironically, the Flats had the lowest call-for-service rate in the Will Rogers Division. The people there did not rely on the police – they minded their own business, casting distrustful eyes at police cruisers as they rolled by. Sometimes, they turned off the lights in their houses when one of many kids riding bicycles in the neighborhood shouted “Po-Po!” alerting everyone that the police had arrived. Not long after that, the streets would be vacant, an eerie quiet.

Guyles could see numerous beer cans and liquor bottles littering the street near SW 2<sup>nd</sup> and Tuttle. He knew if he bothered to look closer he'd find discarded syringes, plastic vials as well. Reality in the Flats was a harsh thing. Escape at all cost.

He stopped at the corner, facing east as the moon appeared from behind a patch of clouds, shining full force on the landscape. The branches on the trees had just begun to bud so they were still bare like spidery veins on the night, pulsating with the breeze, the sway, an homage to the orb of night.

In a field directly in front of him, Guyles saw the Mt. Carmel Pentecostal Church, a clapboard house the congregants had refashioned into a worship center. They constructed a modest steeple on the roof, crowned it with two iron bars welded together to make a cross. The full moon had begun to pass behind the steeple; the cross dissecting the moon into quadrants. A cold feeling gripped his heart as he realized that the cross, illuminated this way, resembled the cross-hairs in a rifle scope. He felt exposed, the weight of the bead drawing down upon him. He winced.

Guyles turned down Tuttle, north one block to West Lindley, a narrow street running parallel to some railroad tracks atop a short mound. The street wasn't well traveled, littered with abandoned automobiles stripped down to their frames, overturned trash barrels, a dead dog, bloated and ready to pop.

The houses were dark, all but one, an oasis in this land of desolation. The occupant managed to make a nice home in the Flats, very modest and clean with a recent coat of paint, a trimmed yard, an intact chain-link fence. The front room glowed intermittently from television, shadows growing and shrinking with the fluctuating light. This was the house, Guyles realized, Jody's home of record.

He knocked on the door, heard someone walking on the creaking floor boards, saw the shadow of someone staring out the peephole.

“Hey, I can hear you in there,” Guyles shouted. He rammed the butt of his flashlight against the door hard enough to dent the wood. “Open up, it’s the police!”

Guyles heard a female voice from the back of the house, reluctant footsteps trudging toward the door. When the door swung open, Guyles saw a barrel-chested young man with long, dark hair, a stoic Native American face. He looked Guyles up and down with his brown eyes. They narrowed with scorn when he glanced at Guyles’ badge.

“What do you want?”

Guyles took a step toward the young man, attempted to enter the house. The man started to close the door, bladed his body to block the entrance. He looked stout enough to be some trouble in a fight, but Guyles didn’t back up, feeling a trickle of adrenaline surging through his body.

The young man packed his right fist in his left hand, raised it to face level, a challenge. Guyles saw the letters N-D-N tattooed on the back of his left hand. A glance at the right hand revealed a fist and another tattoo “Native Pride” on his forearm.

“I need to speak to Berthe Brown,” Guyles said.

“Why?”

“It’s a personal matter.”

“You can tell me, and I’ll tell her.”

Guyles pulled a notebook from his right breast pocket, grabbed a pen from his other pocket. He flipped open the notebook and clicked the pen.

“What’s your name, then?” Guyles asked, all business.



The man stepped back, tried to close the door, but it bounced against Guyles' left foot.

“Why'd you come here? Just to hassle us?”

Guyles knew this guy wasn't afraid to go to jail, but he swallowed his anger, tried to maintain a cool demeanor. He wished he had an excuse to arrest this asshole.

“I need to speak to Berthe Brown. Unless you want to give me your name for my report...”

An elderly woman pushing an aluminum walker appeared behind the young man. She shuffled across the floor tiles with her dirty, pink slippers, a blanket woven with many colors: red spears, green zigzags, yellow circles, all set to a blue background draped across her back. She wore a pair of big, round glasses. Her sad, tired eyes blinked behind the lenses, sage and worldly, like an owl.

“Leonard? What is it?” she asked in a frail voice, not apprehensive, just weary.

Leonard glared at Guyles. “Look what you did. You disturbed my grandmother.”

Guyles ignored him. “Mrs. Brown?”

She nodded, looked down like she already knew she was going to receive bad news. “You can leave, now,” she said to Leonard with soft authority.

Leonard turned away, stomped to the back of the house.

“Come in, please,” the grandmother said. She ambled her way to the kitchen at the far end of the living room. “Do you like coffee?”

Guyles followed behind her. He wanted to blurt out the news about Jody, be on his way, but the grandmother's frail state made him worry about her falling over from the bad news. She tinkered in the kitchen, scooped some ground coffee into a filter, poured

some water into the back end of a coffee maker. Soon, Guyles heard the gentle purr of the machine, smelled the pleasant odor of hot coffee. The woman's glasses kept slipping down her thin nose, and she pushed them back up again and again.

Guyles instinctively knew it wasn't time to speak, so he stood there garnering as much patience as he could. The grandmother seemed content with the silence between them. Finally, Mrs. Brown invited him to sit down at the kitchen table, an old style from the 1950's with sleek steel legs, a wide steel band around top, boomerang bubble shapes on the off-white surface.

The house was small but cheerful, cozy and simple. They didn't have anything extravagant furniture-wise: mostly Wal-Mart stuff, but there were intricate hide paintings on the wall, dream catchers, things that Guyles assumed the grandmother had made herself. Most of the paintings had Native American designs, patterns similar to the blanket she wore. One of the paintings was a real work of art, a rich tapestry of native life complete with people and buffalo, teepees and horses.

The television blared in the background, reflecting off grandmother's glasses. She poured some coffee into some simple, white mugs.

"You bring bad news," she said.

Guyles nodded, felt the weight of a frown on his face. He choked up suddenly, blinking back some tears. He took a deep breath to steel himself, held it firmly in his lungs. He couldn't understand why he was reacting like this. The grandmother reached out to him, gently placed her hand on his right shoulder to console him.

He exhaled slowly, took a sip of coffee and tried to smile. "Are you kin to Joseph David Engle?"

Grandmother nodded. “Jody...She likes for us to call her Jody.”

Leonard stomped into the living room. “She?”

Grandmother smiled. “She is my...grandchild.” Her eyes appraised Leonard, and she tilted her face forward to subtly assert her statement. Her big eyes shined across the room.

Leonard grabbed a jacket that had been draped over the back of a rocking chair. He threw it over his shoulder as he walked out the front door. Guyles heard him hawking up a gob of phlegm as the door shut. He bristled for a moment, knowing that Leonard was going to spit on his patrol car. He scooted back, the chair legs scraping on the linoleum floor, and started to stand. But the grandmother’s tranquil gaze held him in place. That’s when he noticed she bore a remarkable resemblance to Jody.

“She?” Guyles asked, revealing more than professional curiosity.

“Winkte,” she said. “Before we’re born, we’re given a choice of which thing to take with us: a bowl or a bow and arrow. Winkte take both. They show us that we can heal the most basic thing that separates one human from another, man and woman. They were holy, special people.”

Guyles listened, spellbound. He didn’t know what to say, but he wanted her to keep talking.

“Jody wanted to be called she.”

The grandmother’s words resonated with the question of his life, offered a solution, perhaps. The idea, that someone like Jody could be accepted as she was, appealed to him. But then he remembered how things turned out for Jody, how she’d become a prostitute, how she was killed and left in a dumpster.

“Jody’s dead,” he said plainly, unable to be more delicate. “Murdered...”

Grandmother’s eyes moistened, but she remained stoic. No outburst of grief, Guyles thought thankfully. But after a few moments of silence he realized he would have preferred the usual reaction. Truth be known, the grandmother’s strength unnerved him.

“They were people of good fortune,” she continued. “When we lost them, we lost our luck.”

Grandmother took a sip of coffee. “People like Jody don’t fit into the white man’s world. They do not want to heal the separation.” She looked down. A single tear dropped on the right lens of her glasses. She took them off and laid them on the table.

She looked at Guyles directly. “You must try to heal the separation. The spirits must make peace.”

Guyles didn’t know if she was referring to white people in general or to him specifically. Either way, he felt convicted, accused and found guilty. He couldn’t quite comprehend the implications of such a statement. What kind of person has two spirits? Surely, by anatomical design alone, one must be either male or female – there wasn’t any room for something in between. A third category does not, cannot, possibly exist...Right?

He stood up, started to leave the house, but grandmother’s presence wouldn’t release him. There was something soothing, even beautiful, about her gentle resignation.

“Please, sit down,” she invited. “Finish your coffee.”

## Twenty-Five

When Guyles got home later that night, he noticed Dana had moved her stuff out of the apartment along with most of his stuff. She took his television and stereo, his music CD's and videotapes (all the good ones, anyway), some of his clothes and all the pots and pans. One of his uniform shirts was missing, a pullover knit shirt with an embroidered badge on the front and the word POLICE printed in big letters on the back. The shirt also had his name on it. He grabbed a wine glass Dana left on the kitchen counter, one stained red with dried wine. He made to throw it at a curio cabinet Dana had mounted on the wall above the kitchen sink, but that was gone, too.

She was really gone.

His fury drained away, replaced with a sense of hopelessness.

A lot was missing, his home a crime scene, a perfectly executed burglary. Power cords and speaker wire dangled off the dusty, pressboard shelf he'd used for an entertainment center. Dana had spelled *Fuck You* in a layer of dust.

Guyles yelled, "Fuck you, too!" voice echoing through the apartment.

This was how Dana was making him pay. She hadn't called the police, and he wasn't supposed to either. Fine, he thought. He could replace the TV and stereo, the music CD's and videos. A job? Now, that would be a whole lot more difficult.

He saw his phone message machine sitting in his easy chair. The table and lamp that had been next to the chair were gone also. He pressed the flashing red button expecting to hear Dana's gloating, vindictive voice.

What he heard instead was a lot worse.

"You sure like to talk a lot of shit. Don't you, asshole."

The voice belonged to Larry Hicks.

"You're a dead motherfucker. I've got you figured out. Your days are numbered."

Guyles sat in his apartment cradling his Glock in his lap, waiting for a brick to fly through the window, a spray of gunfire, rocking back and forth in his easy chair, measuring his breathing like he did in the boxing ring.

He knew he had to hit back.

Sitting in the shadows he affirmed his suspicion about Hicks being the suspect in Jody's murder. Who else? The beating and the dumpster – everything echoed that assault report. And, Hicks was absent from work that day!

It was all too plausible.

The Homicide Office was on the second floor of headquarters, an awkwardly constructed building near downtown. A terraced approach, tall columns and large, picture windows dominated the front of the structure giving it an updated look, updated compared to the old, rectangular west wing constructed decades before. The designers must have decided to maximize the use of the two buildings by connecting them with a three story sky bridge, a concrete graft, an homage to the conflict of progress and the past.

Tucked in an isolated corner of the Investigations Bureau, the Homicide Office felt like a world unto itself, an elite club of officers who shared a morbid fascination with murder and a taste for gallows humor.

Guyles stepped into the office and was immediately intercepted by the secretary, a brutal looking woman with a 1960's bun hairstyle, thick, black-rimmed glasses, the corners of which curved upward to sharp points. She glared at Guyles like a carrion bird guarding its meal.

Guyles leaned forward, almost bowed. "Uh, I'd like to talk to an investigator," he said hesitantly.

The secretary reclined in her chair. She had that seen-it-all cynicism characteristic to veteran police officers. "Of course you would," she said.

He stood there a moment while she stared at him, her glasses sliding to the tip of her nose. Her eyes without the lenses looked smaller, reptilian. She glanced at the red finger nails on her left hand sharpened to points like talons, brushed them against her drab brown knit sweater and yawned.

“I’m Officer Guyles, assigned out at the Will Rogers Division?”

No response, not even a wrinkle of her eyebrow.

“I’m here because I was on a crime scene yesterday?” He hated the way he felt intimidated, hearing the questioning in his voice, worried the secretary would interpret his nervousness as weakness. “I think I have a lead on who killed Joseph David Engle.”

The secretary smirked then shouted through the office door, “Hey Murray, someone’s here to see you.”

A man stepped through the door adjacent to the secretary’s desk. He was wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots, a windbreaker with a buzzard embroidered over the left breast. Beneath the buzzard were the letters OCPD Homicide. He had a five-o’clock shadow at only 1:30 PM, a sleepy gaze, bloodshot eyes.

“Murray’s doing an interview,” he said, smiled beneath a broad mustache. “Can I help you?”

Guyles felt grateful for the man’s relatively warm greeting and glad Murray was busy. He’d started to reconsider ratting on Hicks, realizing there could be some unintended repercussions: isolation from fellow officers, retaliation from Hicks, problems getting back-up on the street, a reputation for being a whiner... But before he could back out, the friendly detective ushered him into the office.

The homicide office was a dozen desks, two rows of six, in a small room illuminated with fluorescent lights. The dirty white walls and smoky ceiling tiles betrayed a time when detectives chain-smoked over typewriters. Now, with the ban on indoor smoking, there were several desks with Styrofoam cups and Diet Coke bottles filled with tobacco spit next to computers.



The detectives had some interesting mementos on or near their desks. One guy had a collection of sports trophies (mostly golf and bowling) on the window sill next to his desk, a crowded city-scape the center of which had a statue of Atlas hoisting the whole world on his shoulders. Another guy had a deer head mounted on the back wall, a nine-point buck with two pairs of women's panties hanging from its horns. There was a photo of two oiled-down, muscled young men standing close to each other with faces of President Clinton and Vice President Gore superimposed on their heads.

One bulletin board had the words DEATH ROW scrawled on the top with pictures of notorious criminals underneath. A prominent one featured a man named Roger Dale Stafford: Justice received 7-1-1995. Another large photo showed Timothy McVeigh: Justice pending.

A dry eraser board at the head of the homicide office had a list of names, suspects and victims. One of the few victim names unmatched to a suspect was Joseph Engle AKA Jody. Guyles saw the vacancy, felt the injustice. Anger rose like bile in the back of his throat, and he knew if he didn't purge his suspicions he would get sick.

The detective patted Guyles on the shoulder. "Look here," he said. He took some photo albums off a shelf, dropped them on his desk with a loud thud. "This is some gross shit."

Guyles saw a name placard on the desk, Inspector Carlton. He had numerous framed citations on the wall, some dating back to the mid 1980's. He was one of those guys who would retire from the homicide detail or die, whatever came first. He opened one of the albums. They contained crime scene photos from solved cases.

“Murray’s gonna be awhile,” he said. “But go ahead and take a gander, enjoy yourself.”

Guyles wondered why these homicide guys were so interested in sharing the morbid details of their jobs with rookie officers. It must be some kind of initiation. Even so, he paged through the album, a murder-suicide at a beauty salon. Apparently, a jealous boyfriend entered the business with a sawed-off shotgun, shot his ex-girlfriend in the abdomen and turned the weapon on himself. The guy must have stuck the barrel in his mouth before shooting; the whole top of his head was gone, his body lay collapsed in a fetal position, the blood spilt on the floor like it had been poured from a large bucket. The woman died, too, but not instantly. She had time to realize her guts were seeping out of her belly. She lay on the floor clutching her large intestine, her eyes wide with horror.

Guyles churned with anger, stared at the woman’s almond eyes. “Fucking asshole,” he hissed.

Carlton tossed another album in his direction. “Think that’s bad?”

When Guyles opened the second album he was expecting another gore-fest or maybe an advanced de-comp. What he found, though, shocked him to the core. The first picture showed a man wearing high-heeled shoes, fish-net stockings and a tight black corset. He was hanging by the neck, handcuffed behind the back, three large crescent wrenches tied together with a length of twine hanging from his balls. His scrotum was swollen and red like two angry balloons about to burst. He wasn’t just hanging by the neck from a light fixture in the ceiling; he was perched on a length of iron bar mounted to the wall. If he sat up straight, he would have enough slack to breathe, but if he leaned too

far forward he would tighten the noose. To breathe this guy had to balance on his tail bone with the iron bar high up his ass cheeks.

Guyles felt his chest constrict before realizing he'd been holding his breath sympathetically. When he exhaled he groaned with horror and disgust.

Carlton snickered. "Real sick motherfucker," he said, echoing Guyles' thoughts. "Tell me," he continued, pausing for dramatic affect. "What kind of person did this?"

Guyles imagined the suspect had to be the most sadistic serial killer ever. Someone like Lady Pandora, perhaps, who made a living introducing people to their darkest fantasies, but this dominatrix obviously liked to take it to the ultimate level.

"Be careful not to jump to conclusions," Carlton cautioned.

He stared at the photographs, transfixed. It did seem obvious the unfortunate bastard had an accomplice to help him get into this contraption. How could someone do that to himself?

"Did you ever catch the other guy?" he asked tentatively.

Carlton laughed. "That's the thing. We also assumed there had to be an assistant, but when we noticed the sick bastard had a video camera aimed at himself, we checked the tape."

Carlton grabbed a video tape from a top shelf, pushed it into a VCR, turned on a television mounted on a tall metal stand. After a few moments of broadcast snow, the victim appeared on screen, an extreme close-up as he adjusted the camera: a large ski-slope nose, pockmarked skin, a crooked, toothy grin with blackened teeth. When he backed off, Guyles could see the man's fetish attire: the corset, the fishnet stockings, and

the high-heeled shoes. The guy didn't try to appear feminine. The women's clothes were an additional insult, a part of this masochistic nightmare.

Guyles told himself he wasn't like that. He didn't want to humiliate himself, didn't want to denigrate women. He wanted to be...

Then, Guyles saw the crescent wrenches swinging from the guy's balls stretching the genitalia into unrealistic proportions.

What's he doing? Guyles wondered. Was he trying to emasculate himself? Was this bizarre behavior the result of a lifetime of trying to suppress feminine desires?

The guy reclined in a chair, started masturbating.

The action on screen sped up as Carlton activated the fast-forward. Guyles watched the guy playing with himself in fast motion, laughed to relieve his mounting tension. After a few moments, Carlton slowed the tape again.

The victim grabbed a pair of handcuffs, clasped them around his wrists and stepped through the loop of his arms to get his hands behind his back. He was thin and limber. By then, Guyles understood this scene was a do-it-yourselfer, that there was a lesson to be learned here. "Holy shit," he said to himself.

Carlton grumbled with disgust. "Don't jump to conclusions," he said matter-of-factly. "Look at all the evidence first."

Guyles felt the weight of Carlton's stare, knew it was there before he turned to look at the detective's stern gaze.

The victim climbed onto the mounted steel bar, thrust his head through a noose dangling from a bracket in the ceiling. He leaned forward to tighten the noose.

“You can’t see it on the TV screen,” Carlton said. He paused the tape. “But this guy constructed a safety measure. He attached a hose to the bathroom sink and set the water at slow speed. When the bucket got full of water, it was supposed to make a counter balance that would trigger a release.”

Guyles nodded, already understanding that the safety precautions had failed.

“Needless to say,” Carlton continued. He laughed. “It didn’t work.”

Carlton activated the fast-forward again. After another minute he slowed things down. The victim leaned back and forth at intervals, choking himself deliberately. His face was red with strain, but the look on his face was ecstatic. He was really enjoying this, that is, until the bucket fell. He heard a loud thump off screen, some secondary thuds as the safety apparatus fell apart. The mounted bar remained fixed to the wall.

“The bar was supposed to fall and let him dangle freely. His weight would have broken the noose.”

The victim’s eyes bulged out of his strained face, and he grimaced with surprise and pain.

Carlton paused the tape, again. “That’s the moment he knew he was a dead man.” He let the horrible visage linger on the screen for a few moments too long. Guyles turned away, disgusted, feeling nauseous.

“It took him forty-five minutes to die.”

Guyles heard the whir of the fast-forward, the wheels spinning video tape. He dared himself to take a look, saw the guy struggling to sit up straight, collapsing when he got exhausted. These actions were gruesome, even in fast motion. To breathe, he had to

maintain perfect posture, balanced on a narrow, uncomfortable surface. Any deviation from perfect center caused the noose to tighten more and more.

The fast-forwarding VCR hummed vacantly in the room as Guyles and Carlton watched the man die, held fast by morbid fascination. Their silence stretched the minutes, an eternity of gasping.

Carlton slowed the speed. "He's dead, right there." His pointing finger touched the screen, left a smudge mark on the dying man's face.

The victim sat up straight one more time, cast his eyes upward like he was trying to glimpse heaven. "Oh, God, I'm not ready to go."

He leaned forward one last time, convulsed for a minute, then stopped moving altogether. Carlton finally hit the stop button. The picture of the hanging victim shrank to a small dot of light, and then, even that disappeared, gone, like a bad dream.

"After that, his muscles spasm for awhile, but he's dead. Pretty disgusting, huh?"

Guyles nodded vacantly. That had been the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. He was mad at Carlton, felt like this whole thing was a set-up, that the homicide detectives had contrived a plan for him to watch the tape, to show him how perverted he might become.

Guyles was staring at the floor when Detective Murray walked into the office. Preoccupied with the accidental hanging, he had almost forgotten why he went there in the first place.

"You here to see me?" Murray asked.

Guyles snapped out of his funk, grateful to shift gears mentally. He physically shook his head to clear the image of the hanging pervert from his mind.

“You okay?”

Guyles felt embarrassed. “Yeah, didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Carlton groaned sympathetically. “Join the club.” He stretched and yawned.

Murray walked over to a coffee machine, grabbed a Styrofoam cup, poured some coffee and handed it to Guyles.

Suspicious, Guyles refused the cup at first. Because of his heightened paranoia, he thought Murray’s friendly gesture might be designed to disarm him before they started questioning him. He wasn’t guilty of a crime, he knew that, but he felt guilty, even convicted.

Murray’s tired eyes insisted that the offer was genuine. Guyles took the cup, held it in his trembling hands. The hot liquid sloshed inside the cup, threatened to spill over the top and scorch his fingers. He took a sip and burned his mouth, stifled a grunt of pain, swallowed the coffee and felt it burn all the way down.

Murray laughed sympathetically. He was much friendlier than he had been on the street the day before. “Looks like you’ve already had your share.”

Guyles forced a laugh, content to let Murray believe his trembling hands were from too much caffeine. “I think I know who might have killed Jody,” he blurted.

Murray looked interested. “Really?”

“Yes. I work the area, and I know a guy who’s been hassling Jody, but I didn’t think about it until last night, uh, after I got off duty.”

At that moment a uniformed officer walked into the homicide office. He was a day shifter, thin and balding, a blanched, cynical face and a sun-tarnished badge. He seemed to recognize Guyles. They had crossed paths several times at the Will Rogers

station during shift change, but they had never spoken to each other. Old timers like him didn't say much to rookies.

“What do you got for me?” he asked cheerfully, nodding at Murray.

Murray opened a door with a sign hanging from a nail near the top: Interview in Progress. He addressed the occupant of the room gruffly, “On your feet.”

The uniformed officer followed Murray into the interview room. Guyles heard the grinding sound of handcuffs clamping down on someone's wrists. Murray's voice trailed into the homicide office. “Mr. Bolden, you're being charged with first degree murder. This officer, here, is going to take you to jail. Do you understand?”

“Fuck you,” came a weak retort.

Guyles heard the handcuffs tighten a few notches.

“Oww,” the suspect complained. He didn't sound like Hicks, Guyles thought. “That hurts.”

The uniformed officer marched the suspect out of the interview room. The suspect had a swollen left eye (an older injury), some fading bruises on his left cheek. His appearance was rough and dirty, a mass of tangled black hair. He smiled defiantly at Guyles, revealing broken, missing teeth.

Guyles had seen that face but couldn't quite place it.

“I know you,” the man growled. He looked directly at Guyles.

A flood of images filled Guyles' mind, then stark fear. The suspect was the robber he'd pistol-whipped that night when he and Dana went to Angles. He didn't respond to the man, just looked down trying to act anonymous, afraid this Bolton guy would blurt out that he'd seen Guyles hanging around a gay bar off duty.



The man grinned at him ruefully, “So, you’re a cop...”

The uniformed officer tweaked Bolton’s wrists.

“Oww, asshole...”

They marched out of the homicide office. Bolton’s protests echoed down the hall. Murray and Carlton glanced at Guyles with questioning eyes. Guyles felt like he’d been placed in a spot light, under the gleam of an interrogation lamp. He struggled to maintain his composure, swallowed hard.

“I did some undercover work for Impact a couple months ago, some John traps on 39<sup>th</sup> and Penn.”

Carlton laughed, eyes narrowed discerningly at Guyles. He nodded, and Murray nodded back. They were partners.

Murray turned to Guyles, “So, you were saying?”

Guyles wanted to tell Murray they had it all wrong, that Hicks was the one who killed Jody, but he wasn’t as sure as he was a few minutes before. Certainly, Bolden was ruthless enough to kill someone. He’d pointed a gun at Guyles’ head that night, threw Dana to the ground. Perhaps they did have the right guy. He remembered what Carlton said about the videotape – don’t jump to conclusions. Examine all the evidence.

“That’s the guy I wanted to talk to you about,” Guyles lied.

During lineup, Lieutenant Bowman read a letter of accommodation issued to Probationary Officer William Guyles.

“Your actions on October 22, 1998 resulted in the saving of a human life,” Bowman recited. “You are a great credit to yourself, your profession, and the Oklahoma City Police Department.”

The assembled officers applauded with varying levels of enthusiasm, but Guyles himself was stunned. He hadn’t expected such an affirmation this early in his career. Yet, the words, “You are a credit” made him feel proud and confident, like he’d finally earned the right to be called a police officer. He was so overwhelmed with sincere gratitude he almost cried.

“You’re to receive a life saving bar,” Bowman continued, “during this year’s award’s ceremony at the Annual Police Officer’s Banquet.”

He brandished two shiny tickets in his right hand, waved them ceremoniously like he was trying to bait the wind, letting the other assembled officers get a whiff of success.

“Award recipients get free tickets and a night off.”

Bowman motioned for Guyles to take the podium, the center of the small briefing amphitheater where all eyes would be on him. Guyles tried to wave the lieutenant off, but Bowman insisted. The other officers smiled at him, more amused than supportive, watching and waiting. Only Hicks scowled, staring at Guyles impassively.

“The mother and the boy you saved will be there,” Bowman explained. “They want to thank you, personally.”

Guyles remembered the boy’s face, all purple and contorted, gasping for breath. The boy knew he was going to die, Guyles thought. The sucking chest wound, the sound of life vacating his body reverberated in Guyles’ mind. At the time, Guyles was just treating a patient, no personal involvement. He didn’t seem to notice the fear in the boy’s

eyes, the fading spark of life. But now, his memory swelled with the pleading eyes, and he knew why he responded the way he did, why he resisted Hicks' disgruntled admonishments for him to stop and wait for the ambulance.

Guyles glared at Hicks, the man who would have stolen this moment of affirmation, the man who would have let a child die of asphyxiation. He hated Hicks with a hot passion.

Hicks looked down, averting his eyes, clenching his fists.

Guyles laughed to himself, feeling like he'd won a pre-match stare-down.

After lineup, Guyles sat in the briefing room waiting for the other shift officers to clear out. He endured several sincere congratulations, which he was grateful to receive, but he wanted to talk to Bowman, to check on the status of Jody's report. He hoped the assault report might bring up some questions. At the very least, he wanted Hicks to face some scrutiny, maybe an internal affairs investigation. Maybe, he hoped, Hicks would twist off on him, and then he'd have the opportunity to thrash Hicks in a fight.

After two-shift left the station, dayshift began straggling in. It took another twenty minutes before the lieutenant's office was empty of patrol officers turning in their paperwork. Guyles felt the need to approach Bowman as covertly as possible. He didn't want to risk being overheard.

When the office was clear, Guyles approached Bowman who was deeply engrossed in a use-of-force follow up, one of Hicks' arrests. He stood at parade-rest, a habit from his Army days, and waited.

Finally, when Bowman looked up, he scowled at Guyles and glanced at his watch. “Shouldn’t you be 10-8 by now?”

Guyles quaked in place. “Yes sir. But I need to talk to you.”

Bowman glanced around, stood up and closed the office door. It seemed like he knew what Guyles wanted to say. “What’s the problem?”

Guyles spoke cautiously, tried not to sound too eager. “Lieutenant, you remember that report? The report that Jody, uh, Joseph Engle, made?”

Bowman nodded slightly, lips tightening. He stared back at Guyles, shrugged his shoulders.

“What report?”

Guyles couldn’t believe this. The lieutenant hated Hicks as much as he did. “Sir, you know...that assault report against Hicks?”

The room was silent, a vacuum. Bowman stood there, motionless. The expression on his face became blank. He looked down. “What report?”

At this point Guyles began to understand what was happening. The report was gone, and he was supposed to forget he ever wrote it. Someone had decided the assault report posed an inconvenient problem, best to get rid of it before it makes the department look bad.

“You’re getting an award. That ought to make you feel good, right?”

Guyles sighed. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said, turning to leave.

Bowman followed him to the door, put his hand on Guyles’ shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

Here it was, again, Guyles thought. The routine. He shrugged his shoulders, unable to speak.

The lieutenant turned his chin down, but his eyes remained fixed on Guyles, an imperceptive nod urging him to give the correct answer. “Are you okay?”

Disillusioned, Guyles stepped back, staring at Bowman. What would happen if he said, “No?” Would they fire him?

Suddenly, it didn't seem worth it. After all, Jody was a nobody, a street-walker. She'd merely succumbed to the law of averages, the longer you're a prostitute, the more likely you'll be murdered. It wasn't rocket science.

Guyles stretched his lips to bare a smile. “I'm okay,” he said.

The words tasted like bad medicine.

## Twenty-Six

Guyles read the tri-fold information tract given to him when he arrived at the banquet.

*The National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Museum honors the pioneers who carved their names into history by taming the American West.*

He was early. The police chief's office called him, told him to meet a reporter from KWTW Channel 9 for an interview. They wanted to do a story about how he saved the kid with the sucking chest wound.

At first glance the reporter, Sydney Cole, was an attractive woman with auburn hair, a thin face, but a second look revealed she wasn't so pretty; she just seemed that

way. She had a long nose that made her look predatory, a wide smile, a little garish on such a skinny face. She looked hungry.

Ms. Cole discussed the interview with her cameraman, a tall, bald man with Celtic tattoos spiraling down his forearms. He had several piercings on his left ear, a single, prominent ring in his right lobe, and he sported a neatly trimmed goatee. As fierce as he looked, he seemed polite and soft-spoken. Judging from their discussion, Guyles surmised they wanted to shoot the interview with a portrait of John Wayne in the background.

Guyles faced the painting. John Wayne stood with a rifle in his left hand, grasping the barrel. It looked like a Winchester. With his right hand he grasped the white grips of a revolver like he was on the verge of drawing it out of his holster. He was the good guy of course, wearing the wide brimmed white cowboy hat, a rugged leather vest, and a red bandana tied around his neck.

Guyles swallowed hard, tugged at his collar and tried to loosen his tie.

“Are you ready?” Ms. Cole inquired.

When Guyles turned around the cameraman had the camera on his right shoulder. A mounted light flashed on, brightened the room, blinding him. As his vision recovered he saw the wide, dark lens staring at him, a black hole absorbing everything it saw, absorbing the images, transforming and transcending truth.

Sydney Cole turned toward her cameraman. “How do I look?”

He shot her a thumbs-up. Yet, she primped in front of the camera anyway, like she could see her reflection in the rounded lens. “I want John Wayne looming over his left shoulder. Got it?”

“Got it.”

She thrust the microphone at Guyles, asked him to state and spell his full name. While doing so he mistakenly referred to himself as Willie Guyles. Something about all this attention made him feel like a child again, the satisfaction he experienced when his dad found him boxing Tommy Culbertson. He was happy to receive the affirmation but worried whether or not he could sustain the image. He felt John Wayne’s shadow on his shoulders.

Once an admirer of John Wayne films, Guyles learned John Wayne was really nothing like his projected public persona. He was just an actor. His real name was Marion for goodness sake. He was never a real cowboy. He never served in the military and never saw actual combat. Yet, he became this icon of masculinity. Hell, even the Green Berets bought his bullshit by making him an honorary member of the United States Special Forces. Marion managed to act his way through life, creating an off screen image that reflected his movie characters. In his last movie, “The Shootist” John Wayne refused to let his character shoot someone in the back because the scene contradicted his image.

“John Wayne,” Guyles said imitating the Duke’s swaggering style of speech.

“Giddy up, pilgrim.”

Ms. Cole grinned patronizingly. Her rolling eyes made it known that she thought Guyles was being corny. She addressed the camera, her smile broader but lacking warmth.

“I’d like to introduce you to one of Oklahoma City’s finest,” she recited, “a real hero...”

After that Guyles' mind clicked into automatic. He became a robot parroting to the reporter what he knew she wanted to hear.

The Sam Noble Special Events Center inside the National Cowboy Hall of Fame was a spacious room adorned with huge paintings of western landscapes. Each scene had three separate frames depicting one unified image. The paintings were almost twenty feet tall, more than twice as wide.

Guyles recognized the Grand Canyon as seen from the bottom up. In another series of images Monument Valley in Utah looked so real he thought he was actually there gazing out at the curious rock formations from behind huge windows. Another suite of paintings depicted an apocalyptic sky over a western mountain range, probably somewhere in New Mexico.

The paintings felt like invitations to a different world. Their scale made it seem like he could step into the landscape of his choice. He felt drawn to the series of images depicting Point Lobos on the Pacific Coast near Mt. Carmel. It looked so serene and far away. The clatter and chatter of arriving guests faded from Guyles' mind. He concentrated on a spot near the horizon, willed himself there. He heard the sea shore, the squawk of seagulls and felt a cool breeze on his face.

"Officer Guyles," a gruff but friendly sounding voice interrupted the day dream. "Congratulations."

Guyles recognized the man from a set of photographs at the Will Rogers station, a wall where they posted the officers' chain of command. This man was the Uniform Bureau chief, Deputy Chief Swanson. He was a handsome man, youthful, an athlete's



face with a broad chin and a charismatic smile. His light brown hair was starting to thin on top, revealing a tall forehead that made his eyes and nose seem smashed together, lost between two vast plain of skin.

“Thank you, sir,” Guyles responded.

“Good work, young man,” Swanson said superficially. He extended his hand for a shake. Swanson’s grip was strong, too vigorous. Guyles didn’t manage a firm grasp with his own hand so he tried not to wince as Swanson mashed his fingers together. The deputy chief held his hand longer than normal, tightened his vice-like grip.

“A potato chip sack? How in the world did you learn that?”

Guyles inhaled sharply to brace himself against the pain in his fingers. “Army training, sir.”

Swanson seemed impressed. “Really? What unit?”

“82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, sir.”

Guyles wondered when Swanson would release his hand. It had begun to feel like a game of mercy, a school boy challenge. The one to say mercy first was labeled a wimp.

“Seen any combat?”

“Just Cause in Panama and Desert Storm.”

The deputy chief had a sparkle in his eye. “Any confirmed kills?”

Guyles looked down. Although he made a combat jump into Panama, the Rangers and Special Forces had already secured most of the objectives. The 82<sup>nd</sup> was the relief force. The only shots fired at them came from a sniper hiding in a demolished barracks. Luckily nobody in the squad was hit. Guyles’ fire team, Alpha Team, lay down a curtain of suppressive fire while Bravo Team bound around the building, engaged the shooter

from an oblique angle and took him out with a grenade launcher. The whole thing took only a few minutes. During the exchange Guyles was so scared he pissed his pants.

“No,” Guyles said vacantly. At that point his fingers were hurting bad. He squirmed out of the handshake and stepped back.

“Too bad,” the deputy chief said, smiling. “Were you scared?”

Guyles could tell Swanson had never been in a fire fight. How could he ask a combat veteran if he was scared unless he didn't know what it was like? Guyles answered the question with a John Wayne impersonation, “So scared I pissed my pants.”

Swanson laughed. “Now, that's funny.” He patted Guyles on the back and moved on through the crowd.

Guyles went to the bar and asked for a cold beer. He held the frosty glass in his right hand letting the ice soothe the pain in his fingers.

The Chief of Police stood on a make-shift stage at the far end of the events center. The tables had been arranged u-shaped around a sizeable dance floor made of a series of hardwood inserts. A drum set, amplifiers and mic stands glittered in the background as a spotlight swung on the chief who took out a handkerchief and patted his forehead. He looked uncomfortable in the limelight, a little surprising for someone who'd achieved such a high rank.

After wiping his brow, the chief stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets, hunched over the microphone instead of adjusting it to accommodate his height. He was a tall, skinny man with big ears and an ordinary face, the boy next door all grown up, skin

weathered with age. He looked distinguished with lines of grey on both temples. The chief wasn't handsome – just wholesome, a good 'ole boy.

“Hello, folks,” the chief said amiably. “I'm Chief Grady.”

One of the officers at Guyles' table laughed. “As if we didn't know,” he snorted. He was a major, the director of the training center. Guyles couldn't remember his name. His wife punched him in the arm affably. She was much younger than the major, a platinum blond dressed in a cheap imitation of Jennifer Lopez' famous Academy Awards dress, the low cut one with emerald sparkles. She was trying to be the sophisticated lady, but her heavy makeup and seductive manner, her flirtatious eyes were clear evidence of a trophy wife, probably a woman the major had picked up in a nightclub or strip bar. The other officers at the table had similar taste in women, Guyles observed, all except Captain Clooney, the Will Rogers Division administrative officer. He had an ordinary looking wife, a woman with kind eyes and unfashionable hair, a bob worn more for comfort than appearance. She wore glasses and was slightly overweight. Clooney was a proper family man while the others were just skirt chasers, but somehow, with all the talk in Oklahoma about family values, Clooney seemed less respected, regarded as a nerd.

Chief Grady presented an award to a detective who had diligently tracked down a serial rapist who'd terrified the city's northwest side for almost two years. The detective was a star, too, Guyles realized. He was the kind of guy people wrote books about.

Guyles glanced at the program of events. He was next. He anticipated the crowd's applause, the chief's accolades, the flash of cameras. Here it was, his moment, the affirmation he craved his whole life. After this, he thought, he could bury Delta Phoenix

forever. After this, he would be a hero, and he vowed to do whatever it took to remain a hero. Nobody, not even Hicks, could tarnish this....

“On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998, Probationary Officer William Guy-less used extraordinary skill and initiative to save a human life,” Chief Grady said, reading the award recitation.

Guyles winced. What was so hard about his name?

The chief lowered the award certificate and spoke plainly from his heart. “After I read about this incident, I knew we had hired someone special, someone with a heart, the kind of someone we need in our police department.”

Guyles felt a chill running down his spine as he prepared to stand.

“I am pleased to present this life-saving award to Officer William Guy-less.”

The crowd applauded as Guyles stood. A spotlight shined on him, followed him to the stage. He walked toward the chief who smiled warmly at Guyles as they shook hands.

This is the best moment of my life, Guyles thought, reeling, intoxicated from the attention.

The chief placed a medallion dangling from a red and white ribbon around Guyles’ neck. The medal was surprisingly heavy, something substantial. He handed Guyles an open jewelry box with a uniform pin displayed inside. It looked like a piece of peppermint candy, a sweet piece of metal he could wear on his uniform the rest of his career.

“Police officers hardly ever get to see the results of their good work. They may get the satisfaction of putting a bad guy in jail, but you can’t really call that a happy

ending can you?” The chief spoke to the crowd, his arm around Guyles like a proud father presenting his accomplished son.

“Sometimes, police officers get to have a special, positive impact on a person’s life.” He paused, looked warmly upon Guyles. “Ladies and gentleman, I would like to introduce you to Terrell Brooks and his mother Leona.”

Another spotlight flashed over to a table close to the stage. A large black woman dressed in a purple, African style dress stood up. Next to her was a tall, thin boy wearing khaki slacks and a brown corduroy jacket. Not the pinnacle of fashion, Guyles thought, something like a thrift store purchase. Even so, the woman and her son looked wonderful standing there, smiles as big as the moon. They climbed the stairs to the stage.

Leona wailed with emotion, a happy outcry. When she reached the stage she ran at Guyles as quick as a linebacker. Before he could move to either side, the woman closed the distance, grabbed Guyles in a vigorous hug. She squeezed him so hard he lost his breath, rocking back, almost lifting Guyles off the floor.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she cried. “Thank you for saving my baby boy!”

The crowd laughed and yelled congratulations. Some of the laughter, Guyles feared, was at this large woman’s incredible, smothering strength. She had her arms around his neck, yanking his head toward her breasts. Trying to avoid further embarrassment, Guyles returned the embrace, tried to restrain Leona’s exuberance. They jostled in place for a moment as Guyles tried to gain control. After that, Leona collapsed into his arms. They stood motionless in mutual support, leaning on each other,

precariously balanced. Leona's cries of joy melted into sobs of gratitude. She held on to him; the tears streaming down her cheeks wet his face.

"Thank you so much, officer," Leona said. She lifted her face, and they gazed at each other. They shared a moment of intimacy, a transcendent union beyond the grasp of sexual encounter, a coupling of yin and yang: Guyles' skinny to Leona's girth, his masculine stature to her nurturing maternity, his rigidity to her softness, different yet complete.

The laughter of the crowd had changed tone, from celebratory chuckles to amused guffaws. Finally, the chief interceded. He nudged Leona away from Guyles, directed her toward the audience.

Guyles, glad to be released from Leona's embrace, stood there, lightheaded, feeling like he could float away. The boy stood next to him, fidgeting in place, obviously uncomfortable with the attention, maybe embarrassed by his mother's display of emotion. He and Guyles locked eyes. In them Guyles saw heart-felt gratitude, moist with tears. The boy didn't speak any words, but the look on his face, that twisted, quivering smile, revealed volumes.

He was alive!

After the awards ceremony, the assembled police officers and guests finished their dinners and deserts. The band positioned their instruments, tuned them and played some experimental riffs. Some of the guests floated over to a cash bar and knocked back some drinks as the band began playing their opening song: Friends in Low Places by local favorite, Garth Brooks.

Guyles watched Duncan and his wife walk to the dance floor. Duncan looked especially dapper in a tuxedo; his wife, elegant in a sapphire evening gown with thin shoulder straps, a plunging neckline and thigh high slits. Her hair glistened in the lights. They circled the floor clockwise, two-stepping.

Guyles waved at Duncan who snubbed him. His emotions on overdrive, he found himself fighting tears, chest aching, wounded.

Standing in line waiting for a drink, Guyles felt alone. Every once in a while, someone nodded at him, grunted congratulations, or said hello, but nobody really talked to him. He began to wonder if he could tolerate life as a cop for twenty to twenty-five years – all the posturing, the pressure, the heartbreak, and the fear. The isolation.

He had hoped the award would be an affirmation, a sign of acceptance, but now he feared it would be just another thing that made him different, separate from his peers. Getting an official nod of approval from the top brass was turning out to be a mixed blessing.

Guyles considered getting drunk, imagined making a scene with Duncan out on the dance floor. He wanted to cut in on his wife, tell her the truth about her husband's affairs, tell her how beautiful she was, tell her she was too good for her husband.

One of the guys from the shift, Childress, accidentally bumped shoulders with Guyles. He was turning to leave the long line of people waiting for their drinks.

“This is bullshit,” Childress complained. “I don't want to pay five bucks for a watered down drink. I'm going to the real party at the Glitter Dome.”

Guyles nodded vacantly. The Glitter Dome was the law enforcement only bar at the back of the FOP lodge.

Childress motioned at Guyles. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

“But, I’m still on probation until next month.”

Childress laughed. “So?”

“You know. I’m not allowed, right?”

“Who told you that? You’re a member of the FOP. You have a right to be there.”

Guyles nodded, shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t want to cause any more trouble.”

“What?”

Obviously, Childress hadn’t heard any rumors. Maybe there weren’t any. Good thing.

“C’mon, Bill. I’ll buy you a beer, he-ro.”

On their way out Guyles paused to look at a statue: a drooping horse, head bowed, tail between its legs. The rider was an Indian warrior, spear and shield dangling in his hands, slumping over the horse, exhausted and defeated.

Childress stopped at the door. “What’s the hold up?”

“I’ll catch up,” he said. “See you there.”

Guyles stood alone in the entrance hall. In the dim light he thought he could see the horse and rider breathing, sighing at the moment of collapse. Funny, he thought, how the first piece of art one encountered at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame was an exhausted Native American. He felt a profound sense of sorrow, remembered the wise, sad eyes of Jody’s grandmother. Something had changed, an era ended. He read the plaque at the base of the statue – The End of the Trail.

Suddenly, he felt very tired.



## Twenty-Seven

The first thing Guyles saw as he walked through the door at the Glitter Dome was a life-size cardboard poster of Clint Eastwood. Dressed in black, he gazed down with narrowed, menacing eyes; lips twisted in a sneer. Guyles almost heard the words of Dirty Harry Callahan, “Go ahead, punk. Make my day.”

Dirty Harry had his signature .44 cal Magnum in his right hand, the barrel almost as long as a rifle. Harry also had two holes in his chest, probably .357 cal rounds. They had penetrated the poster cut-out as easily as one of the cardboard targets at the qualification range. Guyles laughed to himself, realizing he wasn't the only one scared by ole Clint. He looked forward to hearing the story behind that one.

Guyles stood next to Clint Eastwood, waiting in line behind another young officer while a doorman checked credentials. He didn't bring his badge because he'd been told that probationary officers couldn't carry their badges and guns off duty. He was about to turn and leave when the doorman laughed, a note of recognition. “Hey, it's the potato chip sack guy.” He grabbed Guyles' hand, shook it vigorously. “Hell of a thing you did there.”

Guyles didn't know the guy, but he was gratified to be recognized by someone who appeared to be a salty veteran. No contemptuous silence or harsh tone of voice but a genuinely friendly greeting. The guy had creases in the corners of his eyes, a round face - the friendliest face he'd seen all evening. Immediately, he felt a little less nervous.

The Glitter Dome didn't measure up to expectation, Guyles thought. It was just a bar like any other with rowdy patrons, loud music, and a subversive, menacing atmosphere. The only difference was that all the patrons were cops, close personal friends of cops, or cop groupies (so called badge bunnies who chased police officers).

The bar at the back of the FOP lodge seemed like an after-thought, covered with chipping Formica, faded and stained, even melted in places. The clapboard walls were bare, punctuated with two fist-sized holes. One wall had a concave collapse as wide as a large man. It looked like things got pretty rowdy in there.

The dim light and the star-ball rotating in the middle of the room made the bar feel more like a club, but the dance floor constructed from pieces of fitted wood was empty. All the patrons, mostly Oklahoma City cops, gathered in their various cliques. Guyles recognized a group from Will Rogers Division at the far end of the bar. Childress was with them.

Duncan sat at the center of the Will Rogers group, holding court with his never-ending war stories, his nonstop advice about womanizing. Guyles had learned that Duncan wasn't respected as a real go-getter on the street (actually he was regarded by most as being a little sluggish), yet he was still well liked because of his charismatic braggadocio, his fierce loyalty to his friends, and his quick, sharp wit.

Guyles hung back at the edge of the group; strained to hear Duncan's latest wisdom.

"Now guys," Duncan said with authoritative suave, "if you decide to sample other women..." The group huddled closer as Duncan's voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone. "You can't afford to mess with someone who doesn't have as much to lose as you do."

Guyles wondered what he meant by that. It seemed that Duncan viewed relationships as some kind of emotional détente.

Childress echoed Guyles' thoughts when he asked, "What do you mean by that? What do I have to lose?"

Duncan's eyes rolled like a sage tolerating the foolish questions of a novice disciple. "Your reputation. Your job."

Childress bowed his head in deference.

"You can't shit where you eat. You can't mess with other officers' women. You shouldn't date strippers or waitresses. They don't have much, so they don't have much to lose."

The gathered officers nodded in unison, grunted in agreement.

"Try to target the classier chicks like the ones working the perfume counters at the mall..."

Still hurt from Duncan's snubbing at the awards banquet, Guyles thought about the truck stop waitress.

"What about Carla?"

Duncan wiped some sweat off his forehead, rubbed his hand on his pants and stroked the corners of his mustache. He twisted on his bar stool and grimaced at Guyles.

The other officers looked toward Guyles with wide, amused eyes. They seemed to be holding their breath.

Duncan's face changed expression. His eyes widened with delight, a warm smile, and, for a moment, Guyles thought Duncan was smiling at him indicating that all was well, that they were still friends. He felt a lithe hand on his back, someone trying to nudge past him. The odor of her perfume confirmed who it was before Guyles turned to see Dana glaring up at him with an *I-dare-you* look in her eyes. She didn't say a word, just brushed past him, went straight to Duncan's open arms. She nestled close to Duncan, kissed him on the cheek.

Dana may have tried to conceal it with makeup, but the bruise over her left eye was still visible, vague but noticeable to someone who knew what to look for. The swelling was still there, too, just a little. Yet, the remnants of the injury felt like a glaring accusation, a talisman of shame, and Guyles backed away, a muddle of emotions churning through his mind, not the least of which was self loathing. He felt every eye in the room. He wanted to disappear.

The music from the jukebox stopped; a song ended, and the bar became a cacophony of voices, shouts of laughter, a few grunts and groans. A couple of guys rushed the jukebox, filling the slot with another role of quarters. Guyles heard them arguing over Rock songs verses Country and Western. That's when he saw Hicks standing by himself at the far end of the bar, arms folded, feet planted in a shoulders-wide stance. He glared at Guyles, a menacing twist curling his lips. The Clint Eastwood cut-out loomed behind him.

“Hey, asshole!”

A chorus of voices crooned in unison, “Ooo...”

Challenge!

Guyles felt the hairs standing on the back of his neck; a trickle of adrenalin straightened his spine. His mind cleared, focused sharply on Hicks, and he felt a euphoric rush envelop his body.

Time to fight!

The patrons of the Glitter Dome unconsciously formed an arena around the dance floor, just about the size of a boxing ring.

Hicks walked to the middle of the dance floor, fists clenched, enraged. Guyles raised his fists, covered his face, crouching, a good fighting stance. Hicks hovered outside Guyles’ reach, taunting him.

“What kind of mother-fucker do you think you are?” he yelled. “You don’t do that to a fellow officer.”

The crowd grew silent for a moment, then some murmurs rustled from person to person, unintelligible but distinct, like wind blowing through leaves. The rush of voices grew with intensity. Though Guyles couldn’t understand precisely what they were saying, he could feel the meaning. They were making fun of him because of his misadventure in Dallas. They knew he was queer. The nightmare of his life was coming true. Things had come full circle – there he was, again, surrounded by a hostile crowd being taunted by a bully.

Hicks continued to talk shit, but Guyles couldn't quiet his mind long enough to discern what he was saying. It didn't matter, though. He'd had a whole lifetime of experience with bastards like Hicks. They always said the same things.

"What's the matter?" Guyles shouted back, a verbal block setting up a verbal jab. "Did your boyfriend break up with you?"

Hicks stopped, eyes wide with horror. "What?"

Guyles had spoken a body blow, hitting below the belt. "Did he go straight on you, or did he decide you weren't man enough."

The crowd ooded again, entertained by the exchange. Someone in the background chanted. "Fight, fight, fight..."

A female voice yelled. Was it Dana's? "Kick his ass!"

Guyles knew she was cheering Hicks. Of course she would, he thought, after what happened between them. Another wave of self loathing washed over him, and he lashed out wanting to stifle his shame.

"You're just a fucking fag!"

Hicks closed the distance, swinging for a knockout.

Guyles' boxing instinct clicked into gear. He side-stepped the blow, slammed Hicks in above his left kidney.

Hicks stumbled, falling against the crowd. Duncan, still aloft on his bar stool, slid backward while Hicks banged his head on the bar with a hollow thud.

"Two for one," Guyles mumbled. He squared up to defend another attack.

Hicks turned around, more enraged than ever, plunged toward Guyles, grabbing his waist. Hicks twisted his body, pulling Guyles to the floor, slamming him hard. Before

Guyles could prevent it, Hicks was on top, pinning his shoulders with his knees. Then, Hicks grabbed Guyles' neck with both hands.

Guyles bridged his back, sent Hicks tipping forward. The added weight on his neck made Guyles see a ring of darkness, tightening as he teetered toward unconsciousness. The weight on his chest squeezed the last remnants of breath from his body.

Blind with fury, Guyles twisted to the left, slammed his right arm against the fulcrum of Hicks' left elbow. Hicks fell back, screaming while Guyles struggled to get away. The ring of darkness faded, replaced by a red haze pulsating to the beat of his heart, a strident, vital pace.

Guyles gulped some air, lifted himself to his feet. Still a little woozy, he hung back, bounced up and down to invigorate his body. Hicks retreated from Guyles like a wounded tiger, left arm hanging like dead weight.

Sensing victory, Guyles leapt forward, wanting to take advantage of Hicks' injury. Without being able to defend himself with both arms, Hicks was easy prey. Guyles started smashing his face, blow after blow.

After a few punches, Guyles' fists went numb. They started feeling like five pound sledge hammers swinging at full force. He heard the crack of bone; didn't know if he'd shattered Hicks' cheek or his own knuckles. It didn't matter. He was in a rage, and nothing but blood would satisfy him. When Hicks' nose exploded in a rain of gore, Guyles heard himself laughing maniacally.

Guyles felt himself falling away. And, for a moment, he thought he would launch through the ceiling, past the clouds into deep space. Soon though, he felt strong hands gripping his arm, the sinewy biceps of a big cop beneath his chin. He heard the shouts of people screaming for him to stop.

Hicks lay on the floor, his face a bloody mess. His left foot twitched back and forth, writhing in pain. A crowd of guys swarmed him, helped him to his feet.

Guyles, still in the grips of battle rage, kept talking shit, “Yeah, who’s the fag, now?”

He felt triumphant. He wanted to keep stomping Hicks, to do a victory dance on his chest. He wanted to show the world that, without a doubt, he was a real killer, someone people shouldn’t mess with. But even cops have their limits. The laughing and shouting of the crowd succumbed to a flutter of whispers and then an uneasy, brooding silence.

The three restraining cops carried Guyles to the door, shoved him toward Clint Eastwood. “Get the fuck out of here,” the biggest one said. He must have been an undercover guy since he had long blond hair and a goatee. He looked like a biker, complete with tattoos swirling around his biceps.

Guyles stood in the doorway offering defiance, glared back at all the people in the bar. He suddenly didn’t want to be one of them. They seemed corrupt and twisted, full of secrets. They weren’t what they had taken oaths to represent.

Dana huddled close to Duncan like a scolded child seeking protection from an indulging father. She peeked over his shoulder with disbelieving eyes, the kind of eyes



that met a stranger, the kind of eyes beholding something grotesque. It was like she and Guyles had never been intimate.

Hicks, punch drunk and unsteady, was oblivious to Guyles. He slumped in a chair, staring down at his bloody shirt. His head looked unsteady, like it would float away from his body if it wasn't attached to his neck. It swiveled deliriously from left to right, then fell to one side, apparently unconscious.

Guyles felt a sudden, deep remorse as the adrenaline seeped from his body, and he fought the urge to cry, feeling abandoned, like a dog tied to a short, thick chain rooted deep in the ground, the collar, tight around his neck, restricted his breathing. He managed to choke back the tears, summoning an indignant rage. When he turned to leave, he stood face to face with the Dirty Harry cut-out.

Dirty Harry Callahan, he thought, what a fucking joke. He grabbed the cardboard cut-out, tore it from the wall and ripped it in half.

## Twenty-Eight

Guyles fish-tailed out of the FOP parking lot, drove north on Agnew. Packing Town was empty at that hour, dark and forbidding. Cattlemen's Steak House had a bright light on upstairs, maybe another one of those infamous high stakes poker games running

late into the night. By the time he crossed the river bridge he was going over 70 miles per hour. He expected some blue and red overheads to erupt behind him, thought he might just go ahead and make a run for it, but there were no cops in sight. In fact, he managed to make it all the way back to his apartment without seeing a single police car.

“Everyone knows!” he screamed.

His voice disturbed the quiet courtyard garden outside the apartment. A light lit a window upstairs, and a shadow loomed behind Venetian blinds, eyes peeking through a gap between slats.

Guyles hugged the edge of the hallway, crouched in the shadows and held his breath. The last thing he wanted was for someone to call the police on him for a noise disturbance.

The shadow stood up straight and backed away from the window. Then, the light went out, again.

Exhaling slowly, carefully – the loud thump of an adrenalized heart in his ears – Guyles padded toward his front door. He fumbled with the keys, unlocked the door and let himself inside. The darkness felt good, and he stood for a frozen moment, listened to the stomping of his neighbor upstairs. He closed the door as quietly as he could manage it, moved toward his bedroom.

A light danced in his bedroom, a feeble flicker from the screen-saver on his computer monitor. Dana must have returned to the apartment to use his computer, and the damned girl left it on. Guyles concluded she must have been looking for incriminating e-mails, searching for evidence with which to blackmail him.

“Bitch!” he grunted. The echo of his voice startled him.

When he clicked the mouse, the screen blinked on. The computer was still stuck at the log-in page. Dana hadn't been able to access his files. He'd changed his password to keep her from poking around in his personal business after that night with the pantyhose. He tried to type his password – suprcop – but his knuckles were starting to ache. He had to hunt and peck the letters, then pressed enter.

Guyles logged on to his Internet server and found he had several e-mail messages, all of them spam, except for two. The two e-mails were from Lady Pandora.

He fought the urge to delete the electronic messages, wishing he could simply delete the last few months of his life, or maybe just the gender identity crisis part. If it weren't for that one thorn in the flesh his life would be nearly perfect. He realized, though, that it hadn't only been the last few months. His gender conflict had consumed his entire life; every choice he'd made was an effort to suppress his desire to be a girl: boxing, the military, law enforcement. Hell, he even chose his car to appear more masculine, his clothing and hair style, the music he listened to, the movies he watched, the books he read, all chosen with a conscious desire to suppress femininity, to avoid being thought of as queer.

But, he couldn't quite do it. His finger hovered above the keyboard indecisively. If only he could press the right button...

Then, as he'd always done, he yielded to his curiosity, plunged into his shadow world. It occurred to him that he was losing the fight, that he was being battered to death. Delta Phoenix demanded attention like a starving infant screaming for nurturance. He opened the first e-mail message. Connie wrote:

Hi there, Gorgeous,

I've been thinking about you a lot. We sure had an interesting night together, didn't we? I'm hoping we will meet again and explore your new self some more. I like Delta. You need to let her out some more. Don't keep boxing her up. She's a beautiful person. You're a beautiful person.

Love,

Connie

Guyles almost cried. Determined to suppress another emotional outburst, he held his breath, but the truth of Connie's message was clear. It expanded inside his chest, constricted his diaphragm. His chest ached. Some of the air escaped through his lips, leaking out in tiny spurts. He was on the verge of fainting when he finally relaxed and exhaled. The release made him feel a little euphoric.

He wondered what might happen if he finally embraced Delta, if he could unify his identity and achieve balance. He sighed with longing, feeling so tired, more exhausted than he'd ever felt. He was that boxer at the end of a heroic fifteen rounds, the fighter who was dead on his feet, who knew he would be put down for the count after only one more good shot.

He opened the second e-mail.

Connie's second message was a multimedia presentation. Music from the Moody Blues filled the room. It took a minute for Guyles to recognize the song; The Other Side of Life. The pulsating beat hammered passionately, echoing the beat of his heart, the ethereal synthesizers inspiring a sense of whimsy. He launched into a trance, daydreamed

about crossing the various divides of life: right and wrong, good and evil, black and white, day and night...male...and...female.

After a few moments the monitor blinked. A blank rectangle formed in the middle of the screen; the mouse arrow turned into a flipping hourglass. A photograph appeared: it was Delta and Connie standing together, smiling. Guyles remembered that experience as a night of emotional upheaval, but the photograph presented a very happy Delta who smiled easier than Willie ever had. She looked natural, photogenic. All the pictures of him from childhood and beyond looked posed, but this one – this one picture – portrayed a person at ease with herself.

The graphics flickered, and the photograph faded. Soon, another one emerged, one showing Delta talking to the valet guy. Again, he was amazed at how pretty Delta was. This could have been a paparazzi snapshot of a young starlet shaking the hand of her chauffeur. He felt giddy. It was amazing to glance in the mirror as Delta, he thought, but seeing these pictures was something else entirely, an outsider's view devoid of emotional baggage and personal delusion. He saw Delta the way others saw her, and he lusted for her the way he did when he saw other attractive women. That familiar twinge, the ache in his chest, spurred him to fantasize about what it would be like to be that woman.

“But I am that woman,” Guyles spoke reflexively, vomiting the truth which echoed against the walls. He began to understand what he had to do.

The photographs began flashing in time with the music one after another. That drag queen, Victorola, had taken more pictures than he realized. Still it was all fun to watch.

He swooned when he saw a picture of Delta talking to the biker guy as he remembered how gratifying it felt to be desired by a man because that man thought of him as a woman.

The next photograph showed Hicks dancing with that guy. Guyles bristled, pulled out of his daydream by the appearance of his nemesis. Another photo showed Hicks and that guy kissing, each man wrapped in the other's arms passionately. He started feeling better. No more shit from Hicks. Now, he had proof.

The last picture flashed onscreen: Delta and Hicks together, Hicks glaring with contempt, Delta cowering in the shadows, eyes wide with fear. Guyles hated that fear, was tired of it. He didn't want to be afraid anymore.

The only way to make it is to take that step  
To the other side of life tonight...

The music stopped.

Someone pounded on the door, not a polite rap requesting permission to enter, but a loud, persistent, urgent thud – the knock of a cop.

“Officer Guy-less,” a voice demanded. “Open your door.”

The official cadence in the man's voice told Guyles he was in trouble. He knew it. He knew it in the depth of his being. He trembled with dread, considered grabbing his weapon and going out in a blaze of glory, but he knew how it would play in the news – Hero to Zero in one night.

He heard Ms. Sidney Cole announcing his death, the outcry of the public, the calls for more thorough mental health screenings of police applicants. He would be a national

disgrace if only for a moment before the public and the media found another sad, sordid story.

The police officers pounded on the door three more times. Each impact shocked Guyles' system, vibrating down to the tips of his toes. He knew they would end up kicking in the door sooner or later if he didn't come out.

"Officer Guy-less, we need to talk to you. It's urgent."

Guyles left the bedroom, stumbled through the darkness of his apartment, eyes still dazzled by the monitor's hollow glow. He approached the door, grabbed the door knob.

"I'm coming out," Guyles shouted.

He heard feet outside shuffling backwards, guns clearing holsters.

When he finally opened the door, someone shined a bright flashlight in his face, blinding him. He felt, for a moment, like he would crumble to dust in that light, but he remained solid, resolving to face the consequences of his actions, to accept defeat with dignity like an old champ after his last fight.

Guyles raised his hands, offered no resistance. Another officer stepped close, grabbed his left wrist, slammed a handcuff against the bone. After the clasp tightened against his skin the officer twisted the short length of chain between cuffs. The metal bit into his flesh, twisted his wrist. The pain demanded compliance, and Guyles turned toward the pressure, offering his right wrist.

After he was handcuffed Guyles stood against the door of his apartment. The light shining in his face ceased, and he struggled to see who his arresting officers were.

"Find his badge and gun," someone said.

Guyles could dimly make out his face. It was Lieutenant Bowman.

Bowman stood with him while the other two officers went into his apartment. He wouldn't look at Guyles, wouldn't say anything. They stood there avoiding each other's gaze. After a minute or so, Bowman shuffled his feet and coughed nervously.

"Hey, lieutenant," a voice sounded from inside the apartment. "Check this out."

Guyles worried for a moment that the officer had found some kind of contraband in the bedroom, or, rather, had planted some contraband, realizing he didn't have the utmost confidence in the integrity of his colleagues at this point.

Bowman strode into the apartment. The officer who handcuffed Guyles grabbed his left elbow and escorted him back inside. He recognized the officer. It was O'Connell from 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, a mean bastard.

When they got to the bedroom, Guyles saw the other officer, Baxter from his academy class, staring at a picture on the computer monitor. Here it is, he thought, the moment of exposure. He felt weak in the knees.

"Look, El-tee," he said. "It's Hicks." He hit the space bar on the keyboard activating another cycle of music, the slide show of photographs. After another minute the two officers and the lieutenant gasped in unison when they saw Hicks all clad in fetish leather dancing with another man.

When the picture of Hicks kissing a guy flashed on the screen, the three police officers cursed loudly, repulsed yet delighted by the image. They weren't angry, more like amazed.

"Of course!" Bowman shouted.



The last picture flashed onscreen, the one with Delta and Hicks together. Guyles expected the officers to gasp aloud like they did about Hicks, but they just stood there.

“Who’s the chick?” Baxter asked.

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The Oklahoma County Jail is about a half mile west of downtown Oklahoma City, a big star-shaped, red-bricked monstrosity. Built in the late 1980’s, the 12 story complex was supposed to be escape proof, but like many boasts about engineering and design, this too was proven wrong. An exceptionally determined prisoner had once used a shank to scrape through the mortar between glass bricks, was able to smash a hole big enough to get through to the outside. He’d tied lengths of shredded sheets together and slid to the ground before any of the detention officers knew he was missing.

Guyles wasn’t thinking about escape so much as wishing he could disappear. If his life had come to this, he wished he had never been born. The world looked quite dreary from the back of a police car. He shimmied back and forth trying to find a way to keep his weight off his hands which had been handcuffed behind his back. The metal cuffs dug into his flesh, and his fingertips were numb.

Baxter ended up being the transport officer. He wouldn’t talk, but Guyles caught glimpses of him through the rearview mirror. He looked concerned, even through his thick, black-rimmed glasses, his shaven head glistening with perspiration. He could tell Baxter was conflicted about taking another police officer to jail and that he was determined to remain professional and objective. Guyles really respected Baxter for that, was glad he didn’t end up with O’Connell who would’ve cursed at him, belittling him.

As Baxter drove south on Shartel past NW 4<sup>th</sup> street, Guyles saw the jail building, a gothic tower with low clouds hovering near the top floors. He knew that hideous, unspeakable things happened in there: beatings, rapes and murders, not to mention the scarcity of humane treatment from the detention staff. They let prisoners know they were lower than pollywogs beneath the mud at the bottom of a lake, unfit to suckle the scum off the belly of a water snake. He didn't expect to be treated any better. In fact, things might be worse. The inmates would hate him because he put some of them in there; the detention staff would hate him because he betrayed one of his own, had broken the laws he had sworn to uphold.

Baxter drove the patrol car into the sally-port on the south side of the building. Waiting for Guyles was Lieutenant Bowman and an assembled welcoming committee of black-uniformed detention staff, Captain Ellis, the watch commander, and a television reporter with his video camera at his shoulder ready to record the drama.

Guyles slumped in his seat trying to avoid the camera lens. He suspected the media was there to add public shame to his criminal charges. The story would break during the morning news show and be repeated all day. They would probably have a story in the Daily Oklahoman newspaper the day after that: Oklahoma City Police officer arrested after a fight. Blames homophobic rage.

He blinked back tears as he leaned away from the camera. The gravity of his situation was bearing down on him, and he felt lethargic. Terrified, he couldn't move fast enough to satisfy Baxter and the detention officers when they opened the back door of the patrol car. They yanked him out, tweaking the handcuffs behind his back. The pain cut through the numbness.

Guyles yelled in protest, “Hey that hurts! I ain’t gonna fight, c’mon.”

The detention officers practically carried Guyles all the way to the entrance of the jail with most of his weight falling on his wrists.

A big, white guy with a shaven head and a gleefully mean face whispered to Guyles, “It doesn’t hurt as much as it will when Bubba fucks you up the ass.”

The booking entrance consisted of two sliding doors that opened one at a time. The first door was already open so they ushered him into the foyer between doors quickly. The outside door activated and slammed shut. The second set didn’t open right away. They waited between freedom and incarceration for several agonizing moments.

“You’re being charged with aggravated assault,” Lieutenant Bowman said. “You know that’s a felony charge don’t you?”

Guyles didn’t say anything, just nodded, hung his head in shame.

“And you better hope he doesn’t die.”

Guyles looked up. “Die?”

Bowman stared at him. “You mean you didn’t know?”

Guyles felt numb, not from apathy but shock. His body, his brain and his mind were overwhelmed by the implications of Hicks dying. “I’m going to prison.”

Bowman seemed gleeful. “Hicks passed out after you left, possible brain hemorrhage. They’re going to do a cat-scan. You fucked him up really bad.”

All Guyles could think was, Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

He felt weak in the knees again, almost collapsed. He would have fallen on his face if the detention officers didn’t have a firm hold on him. The added weight put more

pressure on his wrists, and the detention officers twisted his hands back. The pain shocked him out of his stupor of despair. He straightened his legs and tried to stand tall.

Baxter pressed the button to a speaker box mounted next to the inside doors.

“Need to open these doors ASAP,” he demanded. “We have a prisoner.”

The doors moved but stopped after opening only a few inches then they slammed shut, again. The big bald detention officer pounded on the thick shatter-proof glass which already had spider-web cracks from prior abuse. Baxter activated the intercom again and shouted, “Get your act together and get these doors open. We have a high priority prisoner.”

Bowman leaned close to Guyles, “How long have you known Hicks was gay?”

The question felt loaded. It wasn’t really a question but an implication applying the old adage, “It takes one to know one.”

Guyles stared at Bowman. “Fuck you,” he whispered.

The doors finally opened, and they ushered Guyles into the booking section, a place he’d been dozens of times over the last year. Now, though, he felt frightened. A couple of holdover cells were on the right, full of men waiting to be taken to their perspective cells. They were still in their civilian clothes looking ragged and tough, unshaven and disheveled. Some of the men had wild, violent eyes in thick, battered brows. Others had that feral, aloof look like they didn’t care what happened to them. Nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing left to lose. The smell of body odor permeated everything, the musty, sweaty kind of body odor accumulated from days on end without a bath. The air was thick, contaminated.

One of the detention officers shouted, “We got a cop here. We need to prepare an isolation cell.”

The holdover prisoners reacted with interest, twisted their heads in unison like a wild pack of dogs after getting a whiff of new prey. Guyles felt their scrutiny, struggled to look tough even though he wanted to crumble into a fetal position and cry until he was wrung dry of emotion. He blinked back tears, set his jaw trying to look dispassionate or grim. “You can’t cry,” he told himself. “You can’t show weakness. It’s time to be tough. It’s time to be strong. It’s time to take it like a... man...”

Like a man...

The thought bewildered him.

He was about to enter a world where the slightest deviation from an exaggerated masculine pose could mean certain death, and he didn’t know if he could sustain that pose for another hour much less the rest of his life. That’s how it would be if Hicks died. He’d most likely get a life sentence or worse. He felt more trapped than he’d ever felt before.

The detention officers sat Guyles in front of a desk with a thick glass divider shielding a tired looking woman in nurse scrubs. She was middle-aged with curly blond hair, the kind that comes from a too-tight perm. She wore the barest hint of makeup. Her lips were thin, stretched into a frown. She went through a litany of questions about Guyles’ health status. He knew the routine, answered the questions without thinking. The only question that gave him pause was, “Are you homosexual?”

He hesitated.

The nurse almost smiled, a light of amusement sparked in her eyes. Guyles could tell she surmised the answer for herself.

Guyles really couldn't answer the question so simply. Everything had become so complicated. He knew, though, that he must deny any association with being queer.

"No," he said, worried that he didn't sound sincere enough.

The bald detention officer stood behind Guyles and smirked. "Yeah, right," he mumbled to nobody in particular.

Guyles felt a rising surge of resentment, but he stopped it before it peaked at anger. No more fighting, he thought.

After that, they took his personal property: keys, wallet, money, a watch, shoes and socks. A detention officer searched him, stuck a rubber gloved hand between the cracks of his ass, felt beneath his scrotum. He felt violated but knew the officer was only following policy. He'd seen it done many times, had even laughed at the protests of humiliated inmates, but now he understood their indignant anger better than he ever wanted. They gave him a pair of flip-flop sandals about two sizes too small. Ordinarily, they'd place him in the holdover cell with the other men while the police officers prepared their reports and filled out paperwork, but Guyles was a special case. He needed an isolation cell for protective custody.

They led him down a corridor where people sat on benches with one hand cuffed to bars cemented into the concrete wall. A couple of the women were crying; their mascara streamed down their cheeks in black rivers of grief. A man with a pink shirt and a flamboyant haircut stared at him. He looked terrified, and he seemed to be searching Guyles' eyes for a hint of comradery. Guyles turned his face away knowing that when

this guy got into general population his life would be hell. Some of the cops who were already at the jail booking their prisoners lined up to get a look at their colleague, a veritable gauntlet of gawking and grinning law officers. Guyles lowered his head with shame, unwilling to look anyone in the eye.

At the end of the hallway was a door he'd never been through. It led to a darkened complex of isolation cells, most of which were empty. The cells weren't separated with steel bars but thick glass and gray cinder blocks. The plates of glass were polluted with scrapes and scratches: phone numbers, names, tally marks, and gang graffiti. In a few places he saw horizontal lines of glass bricks just beginning to glow from the dawn of a new day.

The detention officers stood him in front of a steel girded door, twisted the keys in the lock, opened it and told him to step forward and bend over at the waist. They unhinged his handcuffs and removed them. The release of pressure sent blood surging through his hands and down to the finger tips. The return of sensation was painful. He stared at the wall in front of him, deliberately kept his back toward the detention officers. They slammed the door, and he stood there, stoic, until they left the complex and turned off the lights.

The gloom gathered around Guyles like a wet blanket. He felt smothered by the small space, no bigger than an average closet. He had just enough room to lie down on his back without having to bend his legs. He sat down on a stainless steel bed, absent a mattress and stared at the stainless steel toilet at the opposite wall. No toilet paper.

He began to assess his situation. Hicks had pushed him to the breaking point. The threatening phone call, the photographs of him in Dallas, all these things could help him

explain his actions; give him a chance for leniency, dismissal or acquittal. Hicks was the aggressor. He could prove it.

The main thing he had to do was tell the truth. The promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in a court of law resonated in his mind, and he knew it was his only chance. The truth might just set him free. He had nothing left to lose.

Guyles noticed a row of glass bricks near the top of his cell. He stood on his bed trying to look through them. It was nearly time for sunrise. He couldn't perceive the shape of anything through the bricks; the glass was too thick and distorted, but the light raised his spirits. He took heart. The world was still out there, and he wanted to rejoin it sooner or later. Sooner, he hoped.

Guyles seized on that word, hope, grabbed it like a lifeline. A mantra of hope looped through his mind and spilled from his lips:

I hope Hicks doesn't die.

I hope they drop the charges.

I hope I can be strong no matter what happens.

I hope I have the strength to tell the truth.

I hope I can muster the courage to be...me...

"I hope," he prayed. "I hope. I hope. I hope."

Some outside light filtered through the glass bricks, condensing to a single spot on the wall of Guyles' cell. It was just a white spot at first, but as it started arcing upwards, he could see a spectrum of colors, a rainbow.



END