

VANISHED

G. W. BOILEAU

Danny's face wasn't like I remembered. It was the same guy, but fifteen years had passed since I had last seen him and the constant influence of time had wrinkled his skin, mostly in the smile lines. He'd gained a little weight around the jaw too, and his fuzzy black hairline was receding back like a tide returning into the ocean on a dark night. He was frozen in a perfect smile, his white teeth contrasting to his dark skin. His wife had a big smile as well. But their baby girl didn't. She was looking slightly off center, at the photographer, no doubt. He probably had a little squeaky duck and was jumping up and down making goo goo sounds. But he wasn't a very good comedian 'cause she looked more scared than happy.

Danny looked happy. He had a beautiful wife and a gorgeous daughter. His dark eyes shone with his broad smile.

"That was taken last week," Bianca said. She sniffed and with a tissue stretched over one finger, she carefully dabbed under each eye, cleaning up the running mascara.

"I really don't think you need to worry," I said. "Like I said, seventy percent of missing people show up in 48 to 72 hours."

"But he wouldn't just leave like that. It isn't like him."

"Did Danny suffer from depression, substance abuse, anything like that?"

"No, of course not."

"Any credit problems?"

"No."

"Sorry I have to ask but how was your marriage? Did he seem happy, had you guys been arguing?"

"No, not at all. I guess we've both been a little tired because of Angel. She hasn't been sleeping all that well, but other than that everything's been great."

I nodded. "Look, Bianca, being a missing person isn't technically a crime, so there's very little I can do—"

"Not this again. That's why I called you Blake. The officer told me the same thing. He said all he could do was file a missing persons report into the system."

"Bianca, I'm in Homicide. I shouldn't even be here, but I've looked around. There's no evidence of foul play. No forced entry. No evidence of a struggle. If anything bad had happened don't you think you would have woken up?"



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“I’ve been tired,” she said defensively, dabbing the tissue again. “He wouldn’t just get out of bed and leave in the night. What about his car? And his wallet? He didn’t take anything with him. It’s not right, something’s wrong, Blake. I know it.”

I breathed heavily out of my nostrils and averted my eyes. “Look, it’s early days. If he left in the night he’s been gone less than twelve hours. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

“So that’s it?” she asked sharply, her dark eyes boring into me, filled with torment and worry.

“I’m sorry, Bianca. There’s really nothing I can do.”

She turned away, hands on hips, looking out the window. Then she turned back to me, tears rolling down her cheeks, her mascara running. “Please,” she said. “Please, Blake. He talked about you. Said you were like a big brother to him back in college. Can’t you just do something? Anything?”

I wanted to tell her that it wasn’t my job to go looking for missing people. But her eyes were pleading with me. I looked down at the photograph in my hands. He looked happy. Then I looked at his baby girl.

I nodded. “I’m not promising anything but I’ll do what I can.”

Her lips tightened, a smile without joy. She touched my arm. “Thank you, Blake,” she said.

“You mind if I keep this?”

“Yes. It’s a copy. Take it.”

* * * *

The door shut behind me and I looked up at the sky. It was pale blue, but there was a chill in the air. I knew I’d messed up. I’d told her I’d look into it, but missing persons wasn’t my business. I checked for foul play and there wasn’t any. So it wasn’t my place to do anything. If I had some evidence, something to bullshit the Lieutenant with . . . but there was absolutely nothing.

I checked the door lock again. The gold handle was scratched up around the keyhole. It wasn’t the strongest lock going around. Someone with a lock pick and some basic knowledge could get the job done. But there was no way of telling if someone had picked it or not. Keys scratch up locks worse than anyone with a couple of tiny lock picks. I shook my head. I was grasping at straws.

I checked the time. 11.47am. I told the Lieutenant I’d be half hour. It’d already been three quarters. So what to do? Go back to the station now and see Schultz a little irritated, blowing at his mustache, or start door knocking and see Schultz with his face on fire.

I folded the photograph in half and put it into my jacket pocket. “Six of one, half a dozen of the other,” I said, then I put on my shades and started for the neighbor’s

house.

* * * *

Door knocking is one of those things in police work. It's a necessity, but no one wants to do it. I always feel like a damn salesman when the door opens, 'cause people look at you with an expression that says, I don't want to buy anything. Then there are the dogs. They yap and they bark and the owner kicks them back but they keep coming and I'm always standing there like an idiot, asking questions while looking at the dog wondering if it's gonna get passed its owner. Cause then I'd be running away like a damn idiot with a Chihuahua on my ass.

I knocked on four doors. Two houses either side of Danny's place. Two of them answered, and two of them didn't. Both who answered saw nothing, and heard nothing.

Then I crossed the street, and did the five houses opposite. Nothing except for a yapping doodle dog. I looked over at Danny's house.

That was it. I tried. What else could I possibly do?

I got in the Crown Vic and pulled off the curb. Then I stopped a hundred yards down the street. At the fourth house down from Danny's place. I looked up at the two story house. Best one on the street by far.

There was a truck parked in the drive. A big, blue, Ford F150.

I left the engine running on the Vic, and jogged up to the door and knocked. A dog barked. A heavy piercing bark.

A man was yelling at the dog to shut up. Then the lock clicked and the door opened.

"Yeah?" The guy was wearing blue jeans, a blue shirt and a blue baseball cap, and his expression said I'm not interested. The cap had a yellow logo on it which read, Brock Pagoda Plumbing. His dog was a Sheppard and he was holding onto its thick collar with a grasping fist. The thing kept on barking up at me, teeth bared.

"Detective Gamble, San Jose Police." I starred at the mutt wondering how strong the man's grip was. The dog barked and the guy yanked hard on its collar. "Shut up!" he yelled. The thing sat back and starting whining.

"I'm asking around to see if anyone heard or saw anything suspicious last night."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Car doors. Shouting. Tires screeching . . ."

"No. Nothing. Is it those damn kids? They breaking into cars again?"

"No. Nothing like that. Is that why you've got those?" I looked up at the camera above the door. There was another one just like it on the front of the house, facing the driveway. It was the reason I had stopped.

"Yeah. Kids broke into my truck a month ago. Stole all my tools, little bastards."

“Why do you park it in the drive?”

“I’ve got the Dodge and the wife’s SUV in the garage. I put up cameras so I could catch the little shits if they ever tried it again. Then I’d let Frank on to ’em.”

I looked at Frank. He wanted to eat my face off. “The one on the front of the house,” I said. “Does it get the road?”

“Yeah. Gets the Murphy’s house, too. Had to clear it by them, but they were glad for the extra security.”

“Any chance you’ve still got last night’s footage?”

“Deletes every 48 hours. So yeah, I’ve got it.”

“Can I see it?”

“What you wanna come inside and watch eight hours of video?”

“No. I mean, can you send it to me or something?”

“Ah, that’s a pain in the ass. I’m too busy. It’ll take time to upload it, and then I gotta send it. What’s this about anyway?” The dog started barking again. Big harsh woofs.

“I’ve got an email address,” I said.

“So does everybody. I’m too busy for that shit. Shut up!”

“What’s it worth to you?” I asked.

“What, the police gonna pay me for it?”

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet. Pulled out a fifty and held it between two fingers. “No. Just me. For services rendered.”

He looked at it. Like he was thinking if this was somehow against the law. Bribery in reverse.

“Alright,” he said uncertainly, and he took it. “What’s your email?”

I gave it to him, then he shut the door. Frank ran around to a window and started barking at me behind the glass. The mutt wanted me alright. I flipped him the bird, then got in the Vic and left.

* * * *

The San Jose Police Department Substation is a modern work of architectural beauty. A police department in Silicon Valley should, after all, represent the very future of policing. A move away from the buildings of yesteryear, of giant functional rectangles made up of hundreds of thousands of little yellow bricks and no nonsense square windows. Buildings which cry out, “I’m reliable. I’m functional. And if you don’t like it you can go fuck yourself!”

At 100 million bucks, it’s the bee’s knees when it comes to police departments. It looks like a giant collage of Kit-Kat candy wafers, all stacked one on top of the other with pure reflective glass in between the layers. It was a beautiful building.

The building I was walking into, however, was the San Jose Police Department.

The one built in 1990. Unfortunately the City doesn't have the kind of cash or the staff needed to fill the new building up with actual cops, so it's used for recruitment, and learning and development, and psych evaluations. So five years on, and I'm still walking into a building that's yelling, "Go fuck yourself!"

The second floor was the hub of the San Jose Investigations Unit. I walked through the usual office white-noise buzzing through the open cubicle offices. Phones ringing, chitter-chatter mixed in with laughter, and the constant crackle of voices over police radios.

I made my way to the offices at the back of the floor.

I stepped into my cubicle and logged onto the computer. Opened up my email. The second from top had the word Surveillance in the subject line. I clicked it open and found a Dropbox link. I clicked it. It was a big file. I clicked download. It was going to take some time.

I heard Schultz's voice from his office. "Blake! Get in here, God dammit."

I stopped at his open doorway. Little block letters across the door read, Lieutenant T. Schultz, HIU. An anagram of Homicide Investigations Unit. He was leaning his ass against his desk, the phone cord pulled around from behind him. His brown jacket was open and the buttons on his shirt were at breaking point. As he spoke, the spider veins on his cheeks glowed pink.

"I said I want them gone!" As the other person on the line spoke, Schultz blew at his mustache. "Sit down," he told me, having two conversations at once.

I sat down and interlocked my fingers over my stomach.

"I don't give a shit," he said into the receiver. "Make it happen."

Schultz spun, unwound the cord and slammed the receiver onto its base. He picked up a white box off the desk and turned back to face me. The box had the logo Psycho Donuts on top with the tag line, Crazy Good.

"Where the hell have you been, Blake?" He reached into the box and pulled out a donut. It had a hockey mask glazed on top.

"The 10-65."

"Your old buddy? That was two hours ago. Is it ours?"

"Don't know."

"Whad'ya mean you don't know?" He took a bite of the donut and glaze shattered, breaking off the donut and running down his front and onto the carpet. "God dammit!"

"I mean I'd like to keep looking into it. I'd like to send CSU down there. Do an evidence sweep."

"No. Not gonna happen. Give it to missing persons and wipe your hands of it."

"Might be more than a 10-65."

"Why? What have you got?"

"Husband and wife go to sleep, talking about dishwashers. Happy marriage. Little

girl in the house. Good credit. No signs of depression. In the morning the wife wakes up and the husband's gone. Not a trace. Left everything behind and just vanished. No keys. No wallet. He took nothing."

"So?"

"I don't know. Something tells me it isn't right."

"What, you think someone broke in and took a fully grown man out of his bed in the middle of the night?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Bullshit. Over 40,000 adults went missing last year in California alone. 35,000 of those were voluntary. Left cause life got shitty and they wanted out. Another two thousand were the kind who can't think straight. Alzheimer's patients, confused elderly people. Do you know how many got written down as stranger abductions for adults? Thirty. Thirty out of a possible 40,000. Guess how many of those thirty came out of Santa Clara County?" He held his fingers up forming the shape of a little donut. "Zero. Now I'm not exactly sure, Blake, but I'd bet my left boot that ninety-nine percent of those thirty abductees were women."

"Get to the point."

"The point is you're in here telling me you think this old friend of yours has been kidnapped. Possibly murdered. And your evidence is bullshit. It's nothing. And we don't have the luxury of time to go chasing geese around. Give it up, Blake."

"I read that report as well, Lieutenant. 40,000 adults went missing last year in California. You remember how many of those went into the category of unknown circumstances?"

Schultz said nothing.

"Over three thousand," I said. "Three thousand people and no one has a clue as to what happened to them. Just vanished."

"Come on, Blake. Let's face it, the only reason you're on this is because the guy's an old football buddy. He'll probably turn up in the next day or two. He's in the 35,000 group. The volunteers. Let this one go. That's an order. Pick up where you left off on the Barrera case. Okay?"

I pushed myself up off the arm rests.

"Hey," Schultz said. "An order, Blake."

I looked at him. "Okay." Then I walked out.

* * * *

I checked my computer. Half way done on the download. I finished up some paperwork and made some phone calls on the Barrera case. By then it was three quarters done.

I got up and made myself a coffee.

I stood there leaning against the counter in the kitchen, doing little circles in the cup with the wooden stirrer, looking off into the distance.

I was thinking about Danny.

I hadn't seen the guy in fifteen years, and yet his wife said he spoke about me. Enough that when she was in trouble, she called around and got me on the phone. I don't know why we never kept in touch. College finished and I went into the academy and he went into sports therapy.

We played college ball together. The San Jose Jaguars. He was quarterback and I was running back. If he wasn't throwing it, he'd be handing me the ball so I could charge headlong into the defensive line. I wasn't the fastest guy but I could take a hit. One guy was never enough, so by the time backup had come, I'd gone another five yards. I was an okay player. But Danny, I thought he'd go pro. He had one hell of an arm. A rocket arm. Lethal, we called him. Then he got injured. The Doctors said his knee was like an injury from a car wreck. So he went into a career as a sports therapist instead.

We were the same age, and we got along like brothers. We spoke on the phone about five years ago. He told me he was getting married and wanted me to come to the wedding. I said I couldn't cause I was working. It was a lie. I just don't like social situations, especially when there's dancing involved.

He said he wanted to catch up after the wedding. It never happened. I was stirring my coffee thinking I should've called the guy. I should've called him and met up for a beer. To talk about old times.

On the phone he seemed real happy about life. It was five years ago, but he was the kind of guy who always had a smile on his face, just like in the photograph. A spring in his step. Life was always good, no matter what. Even when he got injured, I visited him in the hospital and he just said, "It sucks but what can you do, man?" Then he smiled. I couldn't believe it. His football career was over, his knee filled with pins, and the guy was smiling and telling me it was no big deal. But that was the sort of guy he was... is.

I sipped my coffee, then walked back to my office.

The download had finished.

I opened the file. The whole thing went for eight hours. I adjusted my seat and clicked play. The image was like the plumber had said. It was of his front yard, with his blue truck parked in his drive. The field of view took in his entire front yard, and the road, and the Murphy's house across the road, only it was hard to make out anything cause it was dark and filled with speckled noise.

I watched the first minute in real time. Then I doubled the speed, then I doubled it again. Nine cars passed in the first hour, from 11pm to 12am. Bianca had said they went to sleep around mid-night so I discounted them. From 12 to 1am four more passed the house, two from left of screen and two from right of screen. From 1am to

2am another two cars passed by, both from right of screen. An old yellow Honda Civic and a silver Nissan Maxima, or Altima. Then nothing. Just a dark street and not much else. I rubbed my face, thinking about what a waste of time it was. About how I should be working the Barrera case.

I'd been hoping to see Danny walking from his house across the screen, left to right, heading in the direction of Denair Avenue. Because then I'd know for sure he'd just joined the 35,000 volunteers. Then I could do as Schultz said and wipe my hands of it.

A maroon wagon drove past at 3.42am. Then there was a cat fight at 3.50am between a white fluff ball and a gray tabby. The fluff ball won.

I'd given up. I was wasting my time. I had other cases to work. He shouldn't even be a case.

At 4.17am a white van drove past. An old Chevrolet Astro, or maybe a GMC Safari. They both looked the same. A square box on wheels.

I rewound the footage and watched the van again. Then I repeated the process two more times. It came from the direction of left to right. From Danny's house, towards Denair Avenue. It wasn't like the other vehicles. There was something different about it. It was speeding up. The other cars all passed the screen at a constant speed. Some fast, and some slow, but all at a constant speed. The van didn't. The van sped up, like it had just taken off from a standing position about a hundred yards back. And about a hundred yards back was Danny's house.

I thought about that.

Did someone pick him up? A friend? A girlfriend perhaps? Possible. Or was there something else to it? Something more sinister . . .

I rewound the footage and let the van come into view and hit pause. The windows were tinted dark. Not really the kind of vehicle a girlfriend drives. Maybe a friend then. But as I looked at the van I felt something form in my gut. Something which said, this isn't quite right. It's what cops call a hunch, and I had one, and it told me the van was no good.

I took a screen shot of the van and printed it off. I thought of going back into Schultz office with this new piece of evidence, but I knew what he'd say. And it wasn't what I wanted to hear, so I folded the piece of paper up and stuffed it into my jacket pocket.

I thought of how I could get another angle of the van. Intersection cameras would have it caught down at traffic control, but I couldn't get access to the footage right away. It'd take time, and I'd need Schultz to clear it. Not to mention a lot of the traffic cameras aren't all recording either. So it was possible, but not easy, and definitely not quick.

I needed something else. I leant forwards and opened up the NamUs missing persons database. I didn't exactly know what I was looking for but I started ticking

boxes. Starting narrowing the list down. I was just searching around in the haystack and hoping I'd prick my finger on something.

First I took away all the females. Then I narrowed the search to California only. There were 967 cases of missing males in the state. I focused the field to the previous two-years and came up with 183 names. Then I took away everyone aged over sixty-years and everyone aged under eighteen-years. 140 missing men.

Then I narrowed the list down to Santa Clara county and the list shrunk to just eight names. I saw three of the names were more than a decade old, so I figured someone had only put them into the system in the past two years. I was down to five.

I clicked on each of them and toggled through the data. It had all sorts of information on the database. First, middle and last name. Weight, height, race. Distinguishing marks or tattoos. Clothing last seen wearing. Dental information, and the investigating agency and the case file. It was all there. Public knowledge. It had one other thing, too. Circumstances in which the missing person was last seen.

Three of the men had gone missing in the middle of the night. No reason. No trace. Just vanished.

I looked for other similarities. They were roughly the same age, with five years between the three of them, mostly around the same height. Nothing else.

So now I had a list of three men who had gone missing in the last year in Santa Clara all under the same circumstances. I sat back and scratched my cheek. Something was going on here.

I went back over their reports and found the names of the Detectives who had handled their cases. Then I got on the blower and called around. The first two were a waste of time. They had nothing new to tell me.

The third call was playing music into my ear. There was a click and then a woman's voice.

"Missing persons." There was a lot of noise in the background. Phones ringing. Papers shuffling. People chitter-chattering.

"Hi," I said. "Is this Detective Sylvia Martinez?"

"Yes it is."

"Detective Blake Gamble, Homicide Unit, San Jose. I'm looking into a missing persons case. Name's Lawrence Walker. Went missing last year in July."

"Lawrence Walker?" she asked. "Rings a bell. What about him?"

"You processed his missing persons' file. I was wondering if you turned anything up on it. Any leads, anything like that?"

"Hold on, let me get the file up." I heard a keyboard tapping, and then a little click, and click, and click. "Oh, okay. Yes I've got it now. Ah, not much going . . . ah . . . left in the night . . . out of the ordinary, no indication of a reason . . ."

"Did you ask around? Specifically I want to know if anyone saw a white van the night he went missing."

“Ah . . . ” She was reading. “No, no I remember this one. There was no van. Nothing.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Oh, there was one caller who said he’d seen him in the weeks after he went missing. He was real sure of it.”

“What happened?”

“He was a real weird guy. You know the type. Wastes everyone’s time cause he’s lonely and wants someone to talk to. I checked it out. He wouldn’t let up because he wanted the reward money. Tried to call me half a dozen times a day for a week. But there was nothing in it in the end.”

“I know the type. But I’ve got nothing else going right now so I’ll look into it. You got a number or an address?”

“No number. Just a name and address on the file.”

She gave it to me, then I thanked her and hung up.

I compiled the photographs of the three men onto a single document and printed it off. I looked at them. Lawrence Walker, Robert Trumbo, and Erik Jacobson. There was a face missing amongst them. Danny ‘Lethal’ Mooney.

I looked around at Schultz’s office. He wasn’t there. I made eye contact with Jeffries as he drank from his #1 Dad mug.

I exited out of the NamUs database and grabbed my keys.

“Hey Jeffries, if Schultz asks, tell him I’ve gone to see about an old buddy.”

* * * *

I decided to take my own car. One less thing for Schultz to hang me on. It was a ’69 Plymouth Road Runner, with a big block V8. The body was a little dinged up and the brown paint was getting old and faded, but that’s what I liked about her. I wasn’t driving around looking in mirrors like in the Crown Vic. The Road Runner was a one of a kind, and the little dings and paint fades well and truly made her an individual.

The address Sylvia Martinez gave me was in the suburb of Palo Verde on Talisman Drive. I pulled up outside of a flat-roofed house set close to the road, and I thought I glimpsed someone looking out the window.

I got out of the Road Runner and walked up to the door and rapped my knuckles on the wood. The door unlocked immediately, and opened less than an inch. There was a man in the darkness behind the small chain that bridged the gap.

“Yes?”

“Detective Blake Gamble,” I said. “I’m looking for Gerald Prentice.”

“Yes, that me.”

“I just want to ask you a couple of questions about a missing person you called about last year.”

The door shut on my face. Then there was a chain sliding, and the door opened fast and wide and the man stood there. He was a tall guy with a round gut. He wore a cream polo shirt tucked into gray slacks and had a round moon face with a wispy comb-over.

“Please come in,” he said. He was smiling, and his pale, blue eyes sparkled behind silver rimmed bifocals.

I stepped into the house. It wreaked of old spice, and something else . . . rotten oranges.

I looked around the room. There was a single plaid arm-chair beside the window, but instead of facing the TV, it sat at a 90 degree angle. I guessed that way he could keep one eye on the TV, and one eye on the outside world.

Taking up the majority of the room was a dining table, and there was a train set covering every edge of it. It had little fake mountains, and train stations, and trees, and road crossings, and signals. There were even little cows and sheep spaced out on the fake paddocks. The train wasn’t moving.

Mr. Prentice suddenly leapt towards it. He grabbed up a square control box off a paddock and pressed a button. The train started clicking and clacking and moving around the track. He looked at me with a broad smile and sparkling eyes, then looked back at the train.

“Did you want to have a turn, Detective?”

“No. I’m fine, thanks.”

“Watch. You’ll like this.” He pressed a button on the control box and the train whistled up.

“That’s great, Mr. Prentice. Do you remember contacting the police about a Lawrence Walker last year?”

“Yes. Yes, that was me.” He placed the controller box down but the train continued on its exciting journey around the table. “Are you here about the reward money?”

“No. He hasn’t been found yet.”

“Oh. Because I saw him. I told Detective Martinez and she said they were looking into it. But then I never heard back from her. I tried to call a couple of times but she was always busy.”

I nodded. “Can you tell me what you told her?”

“I saw him. Every day for weeks. But I didn’t know it was him at the time. Everyday I’d be sitting in my chair watching a movie or doing my find-a-word, and around the same time, just after Mr. Thompson left for work, he’d go by.”

“Who’s Mr. Thompson?”

“He lives across the street. Over there.” He pointed. “But it was strange because the man always wore a brown leather jacket with a hood and sunglasses. Even when it was a warm day.”

“How’d you know it was him?”

“I’m in the neighborhood watch group in this area. So I subscribe to a lot of crime newsletters. I think I saw it in a Crime Stoppers newsletter. There was a missing persons report and a reward of twenty thousand dollars.”

“But if the guy was wearing a hood and sunglasses how’d you know? How could you even see him?”

“Oh, I could see him. It was him. I’m sure of it. I saw him every day. He was hiding himself you see? Didn’t want to be seen, which is why he wore his disguise even when it was warm. I figured that out myself. But he didn’t get past me.” He smiled again. “Would you like some refreshments, Detective? I squeezed some orange juice earlier.”

“No, thanks.”

“Would you like something else then? Ah . . . ” He looked towards the kitchen, his finger tips twiddling together. “I don’t have coffee, or tea. But, ah, I could make us up something . . . ”

“No, Mr. Prentice. That’s fine. Have you seen him since?”

“No. Every day for weeks and then nothing. Very odd, don’t you think?” He was still looking into the kitchen.

“Which way did you see him going?”

“Oh,” he sprang towards the window and pointed up the street. “Just down that way, there. Didn’t see where he went though. I should have really got out and followed him.”

“Okay, Mr. Prentice. I appreciate your help.”

“If you find him do I . . . ” His eyebrows went up, not finishing the question.

“Do you what?”

“Do I receive the . . . prize money?”

“The reward money? I’m not sure. It’s unlikely I’m going to find him, Mr. Prentice, but if I do I’ll be sure to mention your name.”

He smiled with relief. “Thank you, Detective Gamble.”

“Okay.” I nodded and went to leave.

“Do you have a card I can have?”

“Oh.” I reached for the card then realized my error. I looked at him, my hand frozen in my jacket pocket.

He smiled. “In case he comes back.” His eyebrows went up again and his eyes were searching over my jacket pocket, hungry almost.

I bit my lip. Shit. I didn’t want to give him my number. Sylvia Martinez had said he called her six times a day for a week. I knew his type. He’d find a reason to call me, no doubt about that. But then again if he saw the guy I wanted to know about it.

I reluctantly pulled out a card, but Danny’s photo came out along with it, and floated down to the floor. Mr. Prentice was down there grabbing it before I could

move. Then he came up with it grasped in his fingers, staring at it.

I held the card out to him. He didn't take it. He kept on looking at the family photograph.

"Mr. Prentice?"

"Who is this man, here?" He tapped the photograph on Danny's face.

"Mr. Prentice, I'm a little busy at the moment. Can I have that—"

"I've seen him."

"This man?" I asked, pointing at Danny's picture.

He rubbed his forehead with his palm, then rested his fingers over his mouth, studying the photograph.

"Mr. Prentice?" I asked.

He nodded, then hovered his index finger in front of the photo, stabbing at the air. "Yes. That's him. He walked past the house today. About an hour before you came, just after the two Mormons on bikes."

I sighed, then put my card back in my jacket pocket. "Mr. Prentice. The photograph." I held out my hand.

He glanced up at me. "Oh." He held it out and I took it out of his hand, folding it back into my pocket.

"You know, sir, we're a busy lot down at the SFPD. We don't appreciate our time being wasted."

"What? No. I've seen him." His eyes went wide. "I'm positive. Is he missing as well?"

I stared at him. The man was delusional. "Yes. He's missing."

"Oh." Gerald's eyes moved around in thought. "Well, is there a reward?"

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Prentice." I turned and moved for the door. I grabbed the handle and pulled it open but the door slammed shut, Gerald's palms pressing against it.

He turned to me, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "I'm not crazy, Detective. I saw him. He was walking in the same direction as the man in the brown jacket." His eyes flicked away, going distant. "I'm positive," he uttered.

"Move away from the door, sir."

His focus returned and he starred at me. "It was him!"

"Away from the door."

He stepped back. Then I pulled the door open and left.

* * * *

I sat in the Road Runner, shaking my head. I glanced over at the house and Gerald Prentice was standing behind the window watching me, his hands in his pockets. I starred at the guy for a long moment, then reached forwards and started the engine.

I didn't believe the crazy old man. He was a time waster. I should've known as soon as he wanted me to play trains, and eat sandwiches, and drink old orange juice. I'd dealt with his kind before. Though I wasn't sure if he knew he was full of shit, or if he was delusional and actually thought he was seeing missing people. I saw how it could happen. Every day for decades the guy was staring out his window, thinking, what is he up to? Every time somebody walked past his house they were a criminal, up to no good. Slowly his paranoid thoughts became his reality.

And in saying that, I couldn't help but take a slow drive around the neighborhood. I wanted to find a black man walking the streets. Cause then I could confirm it wasn't Danny. Then the old guy was crazy for sure.

I spotted the two Mormons on their bikes and it only sucked me deeper into Gerald Prentice's delusion. As I drove looking out the window, I was starting to think I was a little crazy myself. Cause I was wasting time on nothing. I had things to do, and yet, I couldn't leave. Cause I wanted to find Danny and bring him home, and I had nothing to go on except the eyewitness account of a madman.

I gave up. I was leaving the area. And that's when I spotted a white GMC Safari sitting in the driveway of a beat-up timber house. I pulled over and looked at the van. There had to be a thousand of them in the City, maybe more. I saw them regularly. The chances of it being the exact one from the Plumber's surveillance footage was near impossible. But there was something else about the van. It had dark, tinted windows . . .

The house wasn't exactly giving off a good feeling, either. The front window was covered over with foil, and the paint had peeled off the wooden slats. The lawn was in need of a mow and the fence in need of replacing.

Okay, Gerald. Let's get crazy together.

* * * *

I passed the Safari, and stepped up to the front door, then pressed the door buzzer and waited. No one answered. I pressed it again. I couldn't hear the bell inside the house. I was about to knock when I got a feeling in my gut. The same one I had when I first saw the van back on my computer screen. It was heavy and twisted at my insides. I pulled my fist back and looked around. Then I headed to side of the house.

I jumped the side fence, and moved in a half-crouched run to the first window. It was covered up with more foil. The next window was covered up too. I was onto the third window when I heard a faint noise. Whistling.

I looked at the foil and spotted a pea-sized hole. I cupped my hands into a funnel and pressed my eye to the gap. I could barely see through the tiny hole. Looked like a large bathroom. A man was moving about, whistling. He came into view, wearing some kind of overalls. Like rubber fisherman overalls, and he was wearing elbow-

length red rubber gloves. He grabbed something. A mop or broom. Then he was moving, whistling. I couldn't see his face. It wasn't a mop, just a wooden broomstick handle, and he stuck it into the bathtub. There was sloshing and his whistle turned into a hum.

Then he pulled the stick out of the tub, clacked it a couple times on its edge, then leant it up against the wall. He removed his gloves, placing them over a rack, then walked out of the room. I waited a long moment. He didn't return.

Music started playing in another part of the house, crackling like an old record. It was the Temptations, Ain't Too Proud to Beg.

I left the window and moved around to the back of the house. The back door was open, but a timeworn screen-door was keeping the insects out. There was a strange smell wafting out of the house. Like bleach, or commercial cleaner.

The twisted feeling in my gut suddenly tightened, like a Chinese burn on my insides. I reached into my jacket, under my arm, and pulled my silver Smith & Wesson out of its brown leather holster.

The Temptations were harmonizing the chorus, ain't too proud to beg, sweet darlin'.

I opened the door. The spring creaked, but the music was loud, and the kitchen area was empty. The house was dark. There was no natural light except coming from behind me, from the screen-door. I stood there and let my eyes adjust to the darkness for a moment.

Then I took a few steps, looking for the guy. I couldn't see him. He was no doubt whistling along to the record, maybe sitting down in his favorite chair, tapping his foot along to the tune.

I knew where I wanted to go. I could see the room just a dozen steps away. I needed to get there, 'cause then I could answer the question that was buzzing in my head.

What was in the tub?

I had my handgun pointed up, my elbow bent, and I scanned left to right as I took long, quiet strides into the room. I could see the bathtub against the wall. The room stank, and the chemicals stung my eyes. It was dark and reminded me of my days back as a freshman processing photographs in chemical baths.

I moved to the door and peeked around. There was a long narrow hallway, and at the end of the hall was a soft light emanating from a room. The room was where the music was coming from. I stepped over to the tub. Looked inside.

I stumbled back a step. My gun hand was already up and I had the crook of my elbow over my face.

A sudden shocking bolt burst through my neck and into my body. There was a popping in my ears. And my muscles froze up and I went stiff like a board, a rigid plank. I couldn't control my mouth or my body, but my mind raced, and I knew.

'Cause I'd felt it before. Fifteen years ago in the academy. I thought I'd be the tough guy and volunteer myself. You never forget it, 'cause it feels like shit, and you think, I never want to go through that again.

I'd been tasered.

I fell to the side and hit the ground with a thump. My right leg was shaking uncontrollably in an electric induced spasm. I couldn't move, my hands palsied. It would last only a few seconds, but that's all it took.

A man stepped over me wearing rubber overalls and I saw his hands. He had a taser in one hand and a cloth in the other. He leant forwards and I saw his face.

It was Danny.

Then he stuck the cloth over my mouth and nose and held it there. I screamed for my body to move, but it was too late.

My eyes were drooping. My arms and legs were flooding with numbness. The music was fading away into nothing. Then my vision clouded, and finally, there was nothing . . .

* * * *

I woke up in a room with a buzzing fluorescent light above my face. The light was intense.

"Ah," came a voice. "Good. You're awake."

I snapped my head towards the voice and a tight burning pulled across my neck. A sudden panic erupted and I tried to move, but found my arms and feet bound. I was laying on something cold and hard. Like a steel table.

"Let me go!" I cried, the words laboring as the anesthetic effects lingered on my tongue.

The man came into view. Danny was holding my wallet and badge. "Detective Blake Gamble," he said, reading my license.

I gazed up at him, his dark skin made even darker by the light behind his head. "Danny, is that you?"

"Oh, I see. A friend."

"What the hell's going on?"

He licked his lips with a pink tongue and placed my wallet down on the table. He leant over me. Then he licked his lips once more as he thought about what he was going to say. "I have some questions. And I need absolute honesty from you, Detective Gamble."

I struggled at my wrists, and something thin and tight bit into the skin. He looked down at them. "Zip-ties," he said causally. "Better than handcuffs in my opinion. They hold firm, and I don't need to worry about bothersome fiddly keys. I just cut them loose."

“Let me go,” I said again. “The cops are on their way.”

“Ah!” he announced with a finger. “Which brings us back to absolute honesty.” He disappeared out of sight and came back a second later. He put something in front of my eyes but it was too close to see. It was silver. Then he lifted it higher and I realized they were surgical needle nose pliers.

“Honesty,” he said, “can only come from two places. One, from a place of trust. Let’s say I trust you, and you tell me something, well I’d be inclined to believe you. Or two.” He held up two fingers. “Pain. I ask you something, and you tell me the truth. If you don’t, there is a consequence.”

My heart was thumping. My adrenaline was burning in my veins. I was breathing hard through my nose. And all I could think was that no one in the world knew where the fuck I was.

“Question number one,” he said. “Are there other police men, or women, coming to this location?”

I stared at him. “Yes,” I said.

He shook his head. “I don’t believe you.” Then he moved and something latched onto my thumbnail. I tried to squirm my hand away from it, but the grip had me. A sudden violent pain erupted from my thumb. There was a sickening tearing sound and a burning as my thumbnail tore away. I screamed out, spitting anger and hatred at him.

“Jesus, Danny! What the fuck are you doing?”

“Now, listen carefully. Answer me honestly, or I will pull every nail from your fingers and thumbs. If you are still lying, I will pull your toenails off. If you are still lying, I will start on other areas. Understand?”

My lower lip quivered with pain and fear.

“Are there other police men. Or women. Coming to this location?”

I flicked my eyes at him and he held up the pliers, shaking them. I shook my head.

“Good. You see, now we’re moving into the land of trust. Tell me, how did you find me?”

“Danny . . .” I said. “You’re not Danny.”

“No. I’m not Danny. I am however, wearing Danny.”

I closed my eyes and a tear rolled off my face. I looked up at him. “You fucking monster.”

He moved his head side to side. “Well, that’s a little mean, but I suppose so.” Then he grinned and a small laugh bubbled out of him. “Was Danny your friend?”

I stared up at the killer, fury in my eyes.

“I’ll take that as a yes? Danny is taking a long bath right now, but don’t worry, you’ll be joining him soon enough. The water’s warm.” He cackled again.

I felt more tears run from the corners of my eyes.

“So,” he said. “Back to the question at hand. How did you find me?”

I didn't reply. The sooner he had his answers the sooner I was dead. I knew what it meant, but it was torture or death. At least torture gave me time, only time for what? I felt completely helpless. The bonds were burning into my skin, thick plastic zip-ties.

"Okay, then." He moved the pliers to my side.

My hand shook uncontrollably. I was twiddling my fingers violently, trying to keep them away from him. He was laughing.

"Stay still little worms."

He grabbed hold of my pinkie and I tried to pull it away, but then I felt the clamp grab onto the nail. Then he paused and looked at me. "Good thing you don't trim them very often." Then he pulled. I clenched my teeth and the nail tore away from the skin.

"AARGHH!" I screamed. "You fucker." Then I spat in his face.

"Oh," he said wiping it away. "Careful. This is a new suit."

"I'll kill you," I yelled. "Help!" I started screaming.

Suddenly he stuffed something into my mouth. A rag. Then he forced it in with the pliers, deep into my mouth until I was gagging.

"Quiet, please," he said. "You have a choice here, Detective. I'd like to know how you came to find me, however if I feel this is a pointless task, I will end your life. Slowly, and painfully, and with this rag in your mouth. However, if you remain quiet, and tell me your story, I will remove the cloth, and perhaps give you a speedy death."

"Nod once for option one, a slow death. Or nod twice for option two; your story, followed by a fast death."

I was choking. Tears were rolling.

I nodded twice, fast and hard, the zip-tie pulling at my throat.

"Good choice," he said, and he used the pliers to pull out the rag.

I coughed out as the rag left my teeth.

"So? Go on, tell me a story of how a detective found my lair?"

"You're insane."

"Careful . . ." He shook the pliers, smiling, only the smile didn't pull at his face. My eyes were adjusting to the light. His face was rubbery, and Danny's wrinkles were faded. But I could see the man's eyes behind the skin. Black beady things, which sparkled with demented joy.

"I got surveillance off Danny's street. Showed your white van taking off. Then I found your other victims on the missing persons database, tracked a caller down, said he saw Lawrence Walker in this neighborhood. Said he saw Danny as well. I came across the van and got—"

"Lucky? Or perhaps unlucky?" asked the man behind the mask. "Hm. Lawrence was last years' fashion I'm afraid. This year black is all the rage. And to think, on my very first test drive someone spotted me. Now that was unlucky."

"What is wrong with you?"

The beady black eyes starred back at me, a glint of light in them.

"I am who I am, I suppose. You wouldn't believe it, but I am quite reserved. I only take one suit a year. And they only last about a month before the rot sets in. I guess it's like my very own Christmas, once a year, and every other month I have to hide away."

His hand pressed against my scalp and I struggled to move from it.

"Don't touch me."

But he continued to press. "Usually it's one suit a year. But this year, two Christmases seem to have come at once. You're not exactly my type, but there is something appealing about your manly features."

"God, no," I said. "Don't you dare."

He smiled again, Danny's lips barely moving. Suddenly the cloth was being forced back into my mouth and I was spitting, coughing at it, but it pressed hard until I couldn't speak or cry.

A scalpel appeared in his hand.

"Trust is a two way street, Detective. But I guess neither of us is very trust worthy." Then he bent my ear forwards and pressed the scalpel into my skin.

My muffled scream was dull. No one would hear me. The blade pressed hard until it scraped against my skull, and the warm trickle of blood ran down my neck. I was thrashing and struggling, but he was pressing down on top of me.

"Keep still, please. The ears can be quite difficult."

There was a sudden knock at the door, and the scalpel paused where it was.

He stood upright and turned over his shoulder. The knock came again.

He placed the scalpel down, and moved to the door. He opened it and peeked out.

I was staring at him, breathing hard through my nostrils, the cloth stuffed into my mouth. I tried to scream out again but the sound was too muffled for anyone to hear.

"I'll be right back," he said with a smile. "Don't go anywhere."

Then he left and pushed the door closed behind him.

I was a dead man. And I'd just been given one window of opportunity to save myself. And I wasn't going to waste it.

I began moving my body, pushing in one direction, then the other. My neck and hands and ankles were bound, but the rest of me was free. And I used that freedom and every muscle I had to rock the table. The thing began to move. Slowly at first, creaking, banging, then banging louder, rocking further, and further. The table hit the tipping point, faltered, then toppled over.

I fell. There was an almighty crash!

I felt like I was back in college, and the defensive line had just thrown me into the turf. Three-hundred-and-fifty pounds of weight crashing down. And as the momentum of the hit landed, I yanked at my arms. My right arm snapped free.

I heard footsteps running down the hall.

I scrambled for the scalpel. It was just out of reach. The footsteps were louder now. Thumping towards the door.

I touched it, fingered it towards me, then grabbed hold of it.

I started cutting the zip-tie at my left wrist and with the taught pressure, the thing snapped away. I had both hands free now.

The door slammed open. My legs were bound awkwardly to the side of the table.

The masked man lunged at me with a hissing cry and I swung the scalpel, cutting across his leathery hand. He jumped back and looked at it.

“No,” he spat.

Then he ran out of the room. I cut the bonds on my ankles and pulled the cloth from my mouth. I stood up, looking for a better weapon. There was a hammer and I picked it up. A scalpel and a hammer. It’d have to do.

But I knew what he was doing. He’d gone for my Smith & Wesson.

I looked down at my weapons again. They weren’t enough. I thought of hiding behind the stainless steel table, but it wouldn’t stop the bullets. I’d made customizations to the pistol so it could shoot off rounds of 45 Super. It’d turn the table into a spaghetti strainer.

Shit!

I stood back and waited. The door slammed open and I threw the hammer. It missed and the man came running in, taser in hand. He hadn’t brought my gun after all. He obviously didn’t want the attention.

He rushed at me, hissing through his teeth, the taser ticking and clicking. Blue light fizzing between the probes.

He swung it at me. His eyes menacing, his skin flopping. He swung it again, and I lunged with the scalpel, cutting his face.

He didn’t react. It was like a damn suit of armor for him. The taser was still clicking as I dodged away from it. He charged again, and I kicked him in the knee. There was a pop and he screamed. Then I stuck the scalpel into his face and he screamed some more. He dropped the taser.

Then he lunged at me, a shoulder attack.

I threw him into the wall but he held on and I went with him. He scrambled for the taser, but I pulled him away from it, wrestled him, but he was slippery. His body was moving around within the skin suit. There was a tearing sound and the skin was coming off in giant flopping pieces.

I thumped a fist into his side and head. I got on top and started reigning hammer fists down onto him. My fists were getting bloody, his blood, and the skin suit was getting smashed up.

I stood up and grabbed his slippery arm and yanked him from Danny’s skin.

“Get out of my friend, you sick fuck,” I cried.

The man was disgusting. Bald, slimy, with peeling skin. Some kind of skin

disease. Then he backed away into the corner.

“Don’t look at me,” he screamed.

He was holding his arms up in front of his face, cowering away from me.

He looked like Golem. Only slimy and more muscular.

“What the fuck are you?”

He peered through his fingers and his beady black eyes met with the taser. He hissed out and lunged for it.

I booted him in the head. Hard. There was a crack as his skull snapped back.

Then I picked up the taser and stuck it into his back and started clicking away. His naked body was convulsing on the ground, a seizure like cry joining the zapping. Then I shut the door, and took a fast walk around the house.

I found my Smith & Wesson on the kitchen counter.

I walked back into the room.

The guy was sitting himself up, holding onto his skull with one hand.

His nose was flat, and his head round and smooth. He didn’t have any ears. The man was a monster. A real life fucking monster.

He looked at me with those black beady eyes.

Then I pulled the trigger. The first bullet killed him. Every other bullet was for Danny.

I looked down at his dead lifeless body, my hands trembling, blood leaking from my thumb and finger, behind my ear. Then I found myself looking at the remains of my old friend. I pulled his wedding ring off his floppy finger, then I ran out of the room and puked.

* * * *

Lieutenant Terry Schultz stepped out of the house and sauntered up to me as I sat in the rear of the EMT van. I had blood soaked gauze wrapped around my thumb and pinkie-finger, and temporary tape behind my ear.

“Jesus,” said Schultz rubbing the back of his neck. “You okay, Blake?”

I didn’t answer, looking down at my trembling hands, my fingers. I was in a daze and I couldn’t stop feeling Danny’s skin under my own skin, touching it, tearing it, beating it with my fists.

“What the hell happened in there?”

I told him how I’d found the guy. Told him how he tied me to the table. Told him how he’d used Danny’s skin as a skin-suit, and that it wasn’t the first time.

“Jesus,” he said again. Then he sighed. “What a freak. CSU is finding some disturbing things in there. You did well, Blake.”

“I got lucky. Mormons knocked on the door and saved my life.” I looked over at them, as two officers took their statements.

“Maybe somebody’s looking out for you.”

“Yeah? Who was looking out for Danny?”

Schultz paused. “Look, Blake . . . I’m sorry—”

“You weren’t to know,” I told him, then I climbed out of the van. Reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my keys.

“You can’t drive,” he said. “You’ve been through a tough time, Blake. You need to go to the hospital.”

I walked past him. “I’ve got something I need to do.”

* * * *

I pulled up outside of Danny’s house, and froze in my seat, not wanting to get out, not wanting to see her. I took the family photograph out of my pocket and starred at it. I thought about our days together back in college. Thought about the laughs we had, the games we won, the girls we chased. I don’t think I’d found a friend like him since. Sometimes you have a connection with somebody, a friendship, an unexplainable bond. Where no matter what, you just feel comfortable around them. You get them and they get you. That’s something rare, something special. I had that with Danny, and I’d given it up, all because I was too fucking busy to make a five-minute phone-call. I should’ve gone to his wedding.

It was a beautiful family photograph. I touched his little girl’s face, then swallowed hard, tears stinging my eyes. “I’m sorry, Danny.”

I folded the photograph over and stuck it back into my jacket pocket, pulling out his wedding ring. Then I stepped out, shut the door, and looked up to see Bianca and Angel waiting for me in the doorway. I clenched my fist around the gold band, took a breath, and walked towards them.

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COMING SOON...

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER:

ONE

The night and rain had come, and there I waited, readying myself for what was out there, deep in the shadows. I could hear her now, somewhere . . . in the darkness beyond. The one they called Jenny. The Nightwraith.

A ghastly scream echoed out from the woods. I stood and unsheathed my sword, the dancing flames of the campfire flashing along its slender blade.

She emerged from the shadows. A floating apparition of horror. Hideous and wretched and as evil as the townsfolk had said she would be.

And in the rain we battled to the death . . .

I died, of course. Seven times in a row. It was on my eighth attempt when there was a hard knock at the door. I ignored it, and continued to slash my sword at Jenny, my thumbs working the controller like mechanical bucking bulls.

The knock came a second time.

The last time I'd answered the door, a black, acne-faced teenager in an oversized khaki UPS uniform stood holding my latest issue of Gamer HQ.

I had complained to the distributor after my monthly issue never arrived, and by complained I mean blasted hell into the receiver. So they sent out a new one, special delivery. The kid asked me for a tip, or as he put it, "Any extra cheddar, my man?" I said no and told him he should get a uniform which didn't make him look like the love child of Steve Irwin and Snoop Dog. He replied by saying, "Go fuck yoself, man. Least I don't look like an 'eighties action-hero homo."

I wondered for days which one he'd meant. At first I thought Captain Riggs from Lethal Weapon, 'cause of the hair. But then I thought he must have meant Russell's

Cash, from Tango and Cash, 'cause of the dimple on the chin.

To be honest, I took it as a compliment, apart from telling me to go fuck myself, which is why I broke his nose with my fist. I got done for assault and suspended from my job for three days.

So when the knock at my door came for the third time, I still wasn't feeling overly enthusiastic about answering it.

I threw a Devil's Puffball at Jenny, but it was as good as useless. She came right at me and I fell to my death for the eighth time in a row. I slammed my fist into a cushion beside me until it split open and filled the air with fluffy white feathers.

The knock came for the fourth time, this time urgent, fast and hard.

I stomped to the window and stuck my fingers in the blind slats; the morning sun practically burned my eyeballs out of my head. Lieutenant Terry Shultz of the San Jose Homicide Investigations Unit had his fists resting on his hips. His sport jacket was pulled back, revealing a button-popping belly, a badge, and his sidearm, an old Colt Python. He'd had the same haircut for the last twenty years, a flat top, only now he was losing his hair, leaving something resembling a blond garden hedge. His mustache had been surviving longer than the hairdo, with various shades of wiry blond and white hair.

I opened the door.

"Blake," he said. "You're not answering your phone." He kicked his boots on the porch, as if readying himself to enter.

"Whad'ya want, Terry?"

"I need you to work." He sniffed the air. "You been drinking? It's morning—"

"No. I haven't been drinking," I lied.

"Can I come in?"

"No. What's the matter? I'm in the middle of something important." I glanced back inside.

"I've got a DB in a garage in Los Altos. I need you on it. Right now."

"It's my day off."

"You're on pager pay, Blake. You don't get days off. You know that. Ryans' already down there but I want you running primary."

"That bad, huh?"

"Sounds awful messy and I don't need Hotshot screwing it up. You ready to go?"

I ran a hand through my hair. It felt greasy. I looked back inside at the TV. Then I turned back. "Yeah . . . yeah, whatever."

"I'll give you a lift to the station so you can grab a Vic."

"I'll take the Road Runner."

"Shit, Blake, how many times I gotta tell you, you can't use your own car. This ain't fucking Hollywood."

"I don't drive cookie-cutters unless I have to. I can go straight to the DB from

here. It'll save time. What's the address?"

He shook his head. "Okay, but first chance you get, come by the station and swap it for a work car."

I nodded and he gave me the address.

"Okay," I said. "Talk later." I went to shut the door.

"You seen the weather report?" he asked, looking around at the sky. "Cold change later. Gonna be a lot of rain over the next twelve hours. That's what they say, anyway."

I eyed him. "What is it, Terry?"

"No, I was just—"

"Last time you did small talk with me was two years ago. What do you want? Something wrong?"

"No, it's—" He was trying to say something but couldn't get the words out. He was practically choking on them. "Look, I know it's been a rough couple of years."

I didn't like where this was going. "Jesus, Terry, just spit it out."

"Some of the guys. They're just a little concerned with your attitude lately."

"My attitude?" An eyebrow went up. "Is this about Jeffries?"

"It's part of it."

"The bastard knew I used creamer," I said, gritting my teeth.

"So you threw your cup at him?"

"I threw it at the wall!"

"It's not just Jeffries, Blake. They're all telling me."

"What're they telling you?" I asked, fast and sharp, crossing my arms.

"That you're . . . well . . . that you're an asshole."

"Jesus, Terry. Are we in kindergarten now?"

"I know, I know." He held his palms up as if I was pointing a gun at him. "I just need to ask, do you need anything, someone to talk to? We have people, you know."

My anger spiked. Terry was old school. He didn't ask cops if they needed someone to talk to. He just told them to suck it up and get on with the job. It's what I liked about the guy. No bullshit. I'd known him for more than twenty years and I'd never heard him ask any cop that question.

And it pissed me off. "I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth.

He nodded a few times, accepting he wasn't getting any further with this. "Okay, Blake. I'll be down at the station if you need me." Then he turned and sauntered away, adjusting his belt as he went.

I shut the door a little harder than I needed to.

"Goddamn princesses."

While I was by the window I twisted the blind levers. The dusty slats creaked and moved in synchronicity, unleashing sunlight into the living room and kitchen.

Clothes littered the floor among other crap; a flat basketball, a skateboard, empty

beer cans. Worn gamer, gun, and muscle-car magazines. Dirty dishes crowded the sink and the trashcan overflowed with pizza boxes, stacked one on top of the other. My very own leaning tower of Pisa.

The whole place stank. Like old pizza, spilt beer, and the armpits of a homeless man.

I went into the kitchen and grabbed a long glass of water and downed it with a couple of aspirin. Then I holstered my Smith & Wesson under my arm, pulled my jacket off the back of the lounge, and snatched my keys off the table.

I eyed the TV one last time. "I'll deal with you later, Jenny."

Then I left to see about a dead body in Los Altos.

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~G

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