

The stale stink of piss snatched Ray away from the comfort of sleep. It was sweating from the walls, coupled with the stench of body odor and old cigarettes. His damp pants clung to his legs, stiffened by the holding cell's air conditioning. At first he thought he'd pissed himself, adding to the aroma of the room, but then he remembered how he'd gotten arrested. And why.

The ice machine was as good a place as any to fall asleep. Los Angeles' thick summer air drove most transient folks to the shore; cool Pacific winds and the dampness of the piers the only respite from the heat, but Ray didn't care much for the beach. Sand snuck into every pocket and crevice, buried for months in his only change of clothes. He preferred to suffer through the heat rather than find sand in his skivvies come January.

He remembered the sting of the sun-baked concrete. It seared his feet through the soles of his worn shoes as he walked the cracked sidewalk of the 101 overpass. A strip of seedy hotels on Sunset Boulevard, vacant in the daylight and popular only by the hour, offered small pockets of shade in their outdoor hallways. Ray could easily loiter there as he dug through the treasure troves of discarded soda cans next to the vending machines.

Huddled behind a wall of crumbling stucco, stewing in his own filthy juices, Ray watched a resident of the StayInn fill a towel with ice. The man, exhausted and hungover from the friendly exchange of venereal disease, let the cold air of the ice machine pour over his protruding belly before belching and stumbling away.

Making sure he wasn't being watched, Ray stuck his head inside the machine, the refrigeration cooling the dust-streaked sweat on his forehead. Frost soothed the ache building in his body and the world went away as he basked in the sterile smell of stainless steel and filtered water.

A door opening down the hall pulled him out of his daze and he closed the ice machine's lid. Beads of sweat immediately set up camp on his exposed skin. The frigid case beckoned to him, and opening the door again, he climbed in. The cold was sharp, but the dull bites of false winter were welcome after the beating he had taken from the sun pulsing in the cloudless sky.

He knew it was smart to get drunk before he tried his little experiment. A sober body couldn't have taken the constant cold and the mixture of bourbon in his veins and ice on his skin produced a comforting tingle that lulled him to sleep.

As his eyes slipped closed, he knew he'd made the right decision. When it came to the amount of paperwork a cop was willing to do for arresting a trespassing vagrant, liquored up was much easier to process than crazy. Ray also wasn't the kind of guy who got off on assaulting tourists at Hollywood and Highland.

A meth addict peered down into his field of vision, reminding him he'd accomplished his mission.

"You holdin'?" the gaunt man slurred, noxious gas billowing from behind his rotting teeth.

Ray sat up, his temples exploding as his eyes opened to the light in the room.

"Sorry, pal," Ray said.

Drugs and weapons were at the top of the list of things that didn't make it through processing, but those in need of a fix don't necessarily thrive on long-term memory or common sense.

"Ask him," Ray pointed to the bloated man with running sores on his face and neck. If the fuzz chose to not do an extensive sweep on anyone, it was the dude who might have given them leprosy. Meth Man didn't care either way. He would have licked the tubby guy's pustules dry if someone told him the juice was lined with buzzard dust. He shuffled across the room, leaving Ray to take in the rest of his roommates.

It had been a slow night for the Los Angeles Police Department. Two other drunks remained dead to the world, one wrapped around the steel communal in the corner. Decades of filth clung to his mouth as he drooled into the bowl, his lower lip stuck to the diarrhea-sprayed rim. A group of gang members had taken over the far corner of the cell. They'd managed to hang onto a deck of cards and were playing an odd variation of blackjack.

Ray stood up, bracing himself for the stiffness in his joints and swelling of his brain. He made his way over to the toilet and unzipped his fly. Doing his best to avoid splashing the bowl's current occupant, Ray stared hard into the reflective piece of metal bolted to the wall. If he was in the wrong cell or was given the wrong information, all the bullshit had been for nothing.

As his bladder finished evacuating, the final drops splattering the drunk's cheek, Ray's eye caught the small curl of paper from underneath the mirror. Tucking himself back into his ragged pants, he glanced over his shoulder. The poker game had become more heated and Chunky Sores had obviously been holding, because he and Meth Man were engaged in figuring out the best way to ingest said substance without arousing suspicion.

Ray turned his attention back to the mirror, standing as though he was still urinating, though the familiar ping was not reverberating off the bowl. He leaned forward with one hand held straight out to brace himself, like he was trying to pass a kidney stone, and began to finger the edge of the paper, prying it out from its hiding place.

He crumpled it into his palm and bent down to flush the toilet. The loud rush of water didn't awaken the sleeping drunk, he merely clutched the metal toilet tighter and darted his tongue out to lick the drops of Ray's piss off his cheek. Ray's stomach turned and he whipped around, a tattooed chest blocking his way.

"What you got there?"

He brought his eyes up from the dirty floor. Towering a good foot taller than him, one of the gang members breathed halitosis into Ray's face. His beard was shaved into a thin line at the sideburns, but gave away to a scruff of hair at the chin. One of his eyes was lazy and Ray couldn't figure out how to make eye contact with him.

"Bacon Cream!" Ray screamed.

"What muthafucka?"

"Happenstance would bequeath frosty bacon cream onto your majesty's jowls!"

A fist as large as Ray's head realigned his jaw, sending him to the ground. The impact caused his hangover to burst and the vomit burned his throat, stomach acid stinging the hole where one of his back molars had come loose. Crazy talk usually worked with the tough types, but Lazy Eye didn't care how crazy he was, his curiosity was already piqued by what Ray held in his hand.

"You puke on my kicks muthafuck?" Lazy Eye wrapped his hand around the back of Ray's neck and lifted him to his feet.

"You gonna lick that shit off them 'til theys clean, crazy muthafucka."

One eye bore into him as the other drifted off to some unknown focal point.

Ray's tooth slipped loose and dark iron began to fill his mouth. He spit the molar out and it bounced off of Lazy Eye's forehead, leaving a pink streak of blood and saliva between his caterpillar eyebrows.

"Cobb!"

Lazy Eye's rage was halted as all heads turned toward the voice beyond the bars. Ray raised his hand ever so slightly to indicate he was the one they wanted, and felt Lazy Eye's fingernails dig deep into the flesh of his neck before letting him go. By some miracle, he had enough sense to give the attending officer his name the night before. If he had been a John Doe, he might not have made it to the end of the day.

Raymond Cobb staggered out of the holding cell and down the hallway of the county jail to be released back into the world. In one hand he held his swelling jaw, and in the other, the last will and testament of the man Ray knew as Ernie Politics.

2

Nick Archer was on his fourth Foster's, a final swig lingering in the rounded basin of the large can. He wondered if it would be worth the story later to approach the strange woman winking at him behind too much blue eye shadow at the other end of the bar. There was just enough alcohol flowing through his bloodstream to give it serious thought, but he figured it would be an embarrassment to tell people he caught syphilis from its Patient Zero. He sucked down the final drops of warm beer before shoving off the barstool and into the street.

The air hit him hard as he stepped onto the sidewalk. He passed by a dirty man in a goose down coat rifling through a garbage can.

"Gotta quarter?"

Nick waved him off and kept walking.

"She should be asleep by now," he said to himself, looking at his watch.

He had taken to leaving his cell phone at home just so his mother wouldn't be able to reach him. It was an awful thing to do considering the state of her health, but his moments of solitude were scarce and precious.

The doctors said it was a combination of asbestos and cigarettes that caused his mother's emphysema and eventual cancer. Early retirement from the world of textile manufacturing left her with a healthy pension, but an unhealthy dose of Mesothelioma.

When the state went smoke-free she stopped leaving the house. It was the only place she could smoke while doing all the things she loved, but eventually everyone but Nick stopped coming to her. Her friends refused to leave the beautiful comfort of their new senior center to aggravate their angina in the less desirable part of Mid-City.

Sweat emerged from his receding hairline and rolled down his forehead as he ascended the steps of the house he grew up in. The atmosphere changed as he opened the front door, not necessarily for the better. The cold breeze of central air and cigarette smoke produced a haze thicker than the smog on the 405 and Nick was beginning to wonder if he wouldn't get emphysema himself just from living in the house. He tried to make the best of his situation and he loved his mother, but his tolerance deteriorated every time someone commented on how much his clothes stank.

Janice Archer was in front of the television, passed out in her easy chair. In one hand she held an unfinished crossword puzzle from Parade magazine, and in the other, an uncapped ballpoint pen. There were tiny black lines written on the arm of the chair from the times she had stirred. A cigarette with a long ash hung from her lips, pieces of charred tobacco and menthol dusting the paper in her lap.

Trying not to disturb her, he pinched his thumb and forefinger together to pluck the cigarette from between her lips. He pulled it free, a dark ring of lipstick around the filter. Nick found it amusing that she took the time to make herself up every morning, though she knew he would be the only one to see her. She joked that if he spent every day looking at her "without her face on," he would be dead long before her.

Janice Archer had a self-deprecating sense of humor that Nick inherited and appreciated. It kept them both from taking life too seriously.

The removal of the cigarette brought her back to life and she sprang awake, hacking with a low and familiar cough. The expulsion of air from her lungs blew the long ash from the cigarette onto Nick. He wiped it off his shirt before grinding the remains of the butt into a nearby ashtray.

“Ma, you gotta watch the falling asleep while lit up.”

“Ah, I ain’t dead yet. The Good Lord will take me with my lungs burning from the inside or outside.”

“Yeah, but then I’ll have no place to live.”

“Sorry. Next time I get sleepy, I’ll be sure to ponder the current state of the housing market and put out my butt. You happy?”

“Thank you. C’mon, let’s get you to bed.”

“You forgot your phone again. The department called while you were out.”

“Ma, I told you not to answer my phone.”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t such a Mr. Forgetful, I wouldn’t fret that you were missing something important.”

“Even if I were, there would be no way for you to call me to pass on the message, so who cares? Just let it go to voicemail.”

“Like I want to be your secretary anyway, big shot Detective Archer.”

“You gonna start with that again?”

She shrugged.

“What’d they want?”

“They said you should come in an hour early tomorrow. Something about a backlog of cold cases. I don’t even know what that means, just what he told me to tell you. Made me repeat it back to him. That Jenkins you work with is a condescending prick, you know that?”

“You don’t have to tell me. I know. Thanks for getting me the message, Ma, I appreciate it.”

“There you go, that wasn’t so hard, offering a little thanks to your mother who you leave all alone to go drink swill and not come home with a girl.”

He hated when his mother baited him into talking about anything remotely resembling his love life. He was glad she cared, but the last thing he wanted to talk to his mother about was picking up some chick at a bar and bringing her home to hump in his boyhood bedroom.

“I had one, but she was about twice your age and half as good looking.”

“Hey, take what you can get. Maybe she has a brother for me.”

“All right, enough banter with you, it’s late. You need any help getting up the stairs?”

“You gonna put me on your shoulders and piggy back me up there? I’m fine. Go watch some TV. But not too late, remember, early to rise in the morning.”

“G’night, Ma.”

Nick watched his mother cough thick phlegm into a handkerchief as she steadied herself on the wooden banister. He waited for her to disappear into the bathroom before he went to the refrigerator to grab a beer, hoping to ride his buzz into dreamless sleep.

Flipping the bottle cap into the ashtray on the coffee table he stretched himself out on the couch and stared up at the tar-stained ceiling, wondering what kind of horse shit Jenkins was going to throw at him in the morning.

3

...the government is using race relations to keep the common man from uniting and bringing down the imperialist pyramid system. The racial tensions have been eased with the civil rights movement, but branched out into the Arab peoples, who in turn oppress their women. The establishment fuels the fires of negative racial and gender relationships by publicly condemning the oppression of women, while privately encouraging proper gender roles with the sales of things like Barbie Dolls. This association of women with the perfect body image and infinite sweetness, causes internal struggle for both men and women as they try to grow into the modern world, while trying to hold onto the All-American tradition of the nuclear family. This constant tension keeps society focused inward on their own problems and not on the outward problems of big government committing crimes against humanity. John Q. Public trying to be sensitive and well rounded, while still being the breadwinner and Jane Q. Public trying to make her way in the modern world establishing an able minded identity while still being able to take care of the family and bake them goods like strawberry shortcake....

The splash of cold, rusty water couldn't wash away the images of Ernie Politics ranting on the corner of Franklin and Vermont, throwing doll heads at passing cars. Ray stared back at his weary reflection in the gas station

bathroom mirror, remembering the last time he saw his friend alive, but couldn't shake the crime scene photos his imagination had constructed.

He could see Ernie's thin arms, the pink translucent skin sawed off at the wrists where his attacker had removed the hands. His face was contorted into permanent shock. Streams of dark crimson flowed down his cheeks, a hot spring bursting forth from the pits where his electric red eyes once lived.

After the police interviewed Ernie's known acquaintances, the file went into a pile of unsolved transient murders, the "to do" stack of a retiring detective in the Robbery-Homicide division. In the movies, it's always one last case that draws the old, grizzled officer back into the fold, tying up all the loose ends. In reality, it's like any other job. On their last day they're ready to get the hell out, spend some time with their grandkids and enjoy midday naps, leaving that pile of cases for the next guy.

The case did have some interesting particulars. An albino with missing appendages caused a bit of a stir. But with no motive, no real background, and no known enemies, curiosity quickly deteriorated into a theory that the murder was part of a gang hazing. Ernie was singled out because of his big mouth and unusual appearance. Now the ashes of Ernie "Politics" Gaffney sat on a shelf in a plastic bag, waiting the requisite four years before the Los Angeles County coroner's office tossed it into a mass grave along with the remains of a thousand other unclaimed bodies.

The gas station owner banging on the restroom door pulled Ray from his memories. He dried his hands and face with a wad of paper towels and unlocked the door.

"Get outta here before I call the cops."

Ray stopped and stared at the gray-faced man just long enough to make him uncomfortable, then tossed the used paper towels at his feet before walking past him.

He stopped at the outer pumps, pulling a stick of gum out of the pack he'd pocketed while asking for the bathroom key, and looked at the prick across the street. With Ernie gone, he figured he'd never have to talk to that son of a bitch ever again, but there he was, enlisting the asshole's help for the second time in forty-eight hours. It only seemed logical to go to the man who knew Ernie Politics best, but Ray hated Benny 7-11.

Benny always made a point of his appearance. He didn't wear the same ragged clothes day after day. He would go to the Goodwill donation bin on Hollywood Boulevard at dawn, just before the place opened, and would pick out the most original ensemble. Then he would give himself a hobo shower in a public restroom, even taking the time to shave his cheeks and chin, but he never touched his disgusting mustache.

It began to take on a life of its own, growing well over his lips and beyond the creases of his hustler's sneer. The ingrown and dead hairs acted as a filter for all of his meals, preventing the wettest remnants of his food from reaching his mouth. The effort he placed in making himself look somewhat respectable was always undercut by the pride he took in neglecting the hideous creature on his face.

Benny made his living soliciting change from people who frequented convenience stores. He would greet the patrons politely, opening the door for them, asking that they not forget the doorman on the way out. As he opened the door for them again when they left, he would hold his paw out for a polite donation. Sometimes the ploy worked, sometimes it didn't, but Benny 7-11 always had a smile on his face. Regular customers at the handful of stores Benny had in his rotation were amazed at how upbeat Benny was when he opened the door, no matter how many people decided his service wasn't worth their spare change. It was because Benny had a special secret.

When business was slow, Benny 7-11 would go into the store. The shopkeepers tolerated his presence because whatever money he could finagle out of their patrons, he usually reinvested in their merchandise. He was good-natured, never obstructed the entrance, and never hindered their business. He would slowly wander the aisles, plucking a Grandma's Cookie or pack of sunflower seeds from the shelves. He'd spent time building up the clerk's trust, so they figured they didn't have to watch him too closely, knowing he would never shoplift. But when their eyes were turned away, or focused on other customers, Benny 7-11 would make his way over to the coffee station and grab a handful of to-go coffee lids. Those lids made their way into the waistband of Benny's pants and eventually came to rest on his sweaty, never washed, hairy as his upper lip, balls.

He usually did one more lap of the store before returning to the coffee station and pulling the lids out of his drawers, checking them for stray pubes, and putting them back into the stack at random intervals. He'd pay for his item and resume his post back outside the door, grinning from ear to ear every time he was ignored by a person holding a coffee cup, right before they took a nice big gulp of mocha java laced with his rancid nut juice.

Benny 7-11 sent Ray into lockup after he started poking around for information. A few weeks earlier, Ernie Politics had been arrested for aggravated assault and ended up in the same cell Ray had recently occupied. Like most of L.A.'s homeless, Ernie had a few previous arrests, most of them misdemeanors: trespassing, public intoxication, disturbing the peace. Usually he did nothing more than putter his 99-cent store shopping cart up and down the streets of the City of Angels. After he was found dead, Ray went looking for Benny to find out what really happened. And, of course, Benny had a long-winded story to tell.

“So, Ernie attacks this spic kid, don’t know who, probably just some asshole in the wrong place and was real quickly taken into custody, right, and shoved in the clink to cool off. Now, you and me and everybody else knows, you spend a day in holding then you’s done. Released. Finito. Maybe they send him up to Gateways for some antipsych meds. But he don’t move. Ernie was in holdin’ seven whole days. They didn’t process him to be moved to general population to await trial, didn’t do nothing with him. About day three at the L.A. County Bed and Breakfast, he starts to get real paranoid, like they’re never coming for him and are gonna let him rot. So he starts beggin’ around the room for a paper and pen like they’re hookers and blow, finally getting a ballpoint out of some dude covered in shit and a stack of post-it notes out of the pocket of some corporate dude with a double limit DUI blow. And then, they finally come for him.”

“He starts rantin’ to me about how they only let him out ‘cuz they were followin’ him and wanted to keep tallies on all his known associates before finally doin’ away with him, and that all his secrets and final thoughts on the matter were, and I quote, ‘In his will.’ You want some answers? Get yourself arrested and look behind that metal slab they call a mirror in holdin’ number two, hopin’ you get yourself lucky enough to be placed in holdin’ number two. All I know is, he tells me this whole tale and three days later they find him without his hands or eyeballs. He may have been crazy paranoid, but that shit is worth a look. Now, I’d go myself, naturally, but I have a livelihood to protect here. I’d hate to have mom and pop towelhead in there see me get dragged into a squad and then find themselves tellin’ me to move along. You get my drift, Cobbsy?”

As much as Ray hated to admit it, Benny 7-11's intelligence had checked out, even if he was one tooth poorer for it. Now, perhaps Benny could be of more assistance.

Ray found him in West Hollywood at his usual perch on Santa Monica Boulevard, wearing a bright pink windbreaker and some loud golf pants.

"Looks like you had some jaw trouble there, Cobbsy," Benny called to him as he nodded politely to the old Asian man entering the store.

"The bulls didn't take too well to you sleepin' in an ice machine? Nice choice, by the way. You couldn't have gotten pinched for anything more pussy, like disrupting a feather convention or givin' out too many free hugs?"

Benny laughed at his own joke. Ray wasn't in the mood.

"You wanna put your bullshit slinging aside for a minute and see if you can make heads or tails of this nonsense?" Ray asked, holding the crumpled piece of paper out to Benny.

He snatched the paper out of Ray's hand, trying to appear tough. Benny 7-11 saw the burning hate in Ray Cobb's eyes and realized that with Ernie gone, he was definitely down a few friends and up a few enemies.

"Well?" Ray asked with an impatient tone, Benny unconsciously looking up at every person entering the store without him there to dutifully open the door.

"What're those, phone numbers or somethin'? Addresses? I dunno," Benny shrugged.

"Those numbers, that pattern. You've never seen it before?"

"You knew Ernie, man, he was always writing some crazy shit you could never make heads or tails of. There was always some theory about somethin' or another. Maybe it was the last year's average lotto numbers, like he was looking for a pattern, or maybe he was countin' how many people were in that cell with him from day to day. I sure as hell wish

he was ‘round right now so I could ask him, but far as I know, it was a dude who was hallucinatin’ with paranoia, wrote some crazy shit on a scrap of paper and stuck it behind a mirror. Probably don’t mean nothin’.”

“If you thought Ernie was just talking nonsense, why the hell’d you send me in there?”

“You mean to say you didn’t enjoy the air conditionin’ none?” Benny joked. The throaty laugh scraped at Ray’s ears.

“Turn it over,” Ray stared through him, trying not to grit his teeth and irritate the hole where his molar used to be.

“Sometimes I wondered how that see-through bastard ever got to writin’ so small. Can’t make it out too good, my eyes ain’t what they used to be, pretty sure I’m getting a cataract or somethin’ in the left one, but that ain’t no English. Looks like Russian or Spanish or somethin’. Only word I can make out is here at the top. Looks like,” he squinted at the paper, “Manifesto. Jesus, that little bastard had a one-track mind.”

“Do you have a copy of Ernie’s manifesto?”

Ray never took the time to read the entire 1300 page rant on everything from how Black Friday was a communist conspiracy to how public buildings and bookstores use the cheapest brand of toilet paper to irritate the bowels of the lowest common denominator. The manifesto was Ernie’s life.

“Naw, man. You know he changed that shit every few days, scribblin’ stuff out, addin’ notes in the margins, writin’ extra pages. Last version I read was like two years ago, after that I’d just take ‘em from him and throw ‘em away. With Ernie, man, if he brought up some new thought on the proletariat or whatever, and explained it in that book of his, I’d just nod and smile at him right through it, repeating somethin’ he said earlier in the conversation so it sounded like I was listenin’.”

“Glad to know you were such good friends.”

“Now don’t you put that shit on me,” Benny started to get upset, “Ernie was a good dude, always good for a talk and a laugh, but you couldn’t take him all the time neither, so don’t play mister innocent over here.”

“I didn’t come here to play the ‘who was a better friend’ game. I could give a shit. I’m just trying to get some answers and you apparently are the dumbest fuck in L.A. County.”

“Would you care to repeat that, Cobbsy?” Benny asked, his anger swelling.

Ray got as close to Benny’s face as he could, navigating past his mustache.

“You heard me.”

The bell on the door rang over Benny’s shoulder, neither of them taking notice.

“Get out of here,” a heavy accent said from behind them, “I will call the police for you hanging out at my store!”

They broke their gaze and both turned to face the dark-skinned clerk who stood quivering on the sidewalk, brandishing a broom handle. Ray had taken one good whack to the jaw in the last twenty-four hours; he wasn’t looking forward to another one. Benny just waved his hand at the man before hurrying around the corner with Ray behind him.

Once out of sight of the storefront, Benny changed his tone.

“Listen, Cobbsy, I don’t wanna fight you on this. We both wanna know what happened to Ernie, right? So why don’t we work together to figure out what this shit says? Find one of Ernie’s latest manifestos. Fuck this big ego bullshit.”

Ray looked down at the creased and stained paper in his hand.

“Seems to me, if you really wanted to know what this was, you would’ve gone after it yourself.”

“What you want, Ray? You want me to admit I’m a chickenshit for lettin’ you do the dirty work? Fine, I’m a chickenshit. Now gimme another look,” Benny reached out for the paper as Ray shoved it in his pocket.

“I think I’m about done with you,” Ray spoke softly, letting all the rage he felt toward Benny throb at the base of his spine.

“You wouldn’t even have that shit if it weren’t for me. You’d still be cryin’ over that cardboard box Ernie called home, wiping your tears with the shit stains on his underpants.”

“Time to walk away, Benny,” Ray’s hands remained in the pockets of his coat, but he could feel the electricity running down the tendons of his forearms, his fingers starting to shake as he held tight to the worn lining.

Benny stepped back and reached into his own pocket, pulling out a battered hunting knife. Ray remembered the day Ernie gave Benny the weapon, after Benny was mugged on Skid Row. Ernie slipped it into the cast where Benny’s wrist had been broken and merely said, “For protection,” before going back to handing out handwritten pamphlets. Ray looked down at the knife and back up at Benny. Sweat ran down Benny’s face and spackled wisps of hair to his forehead.

“Really?” Ray asked without moving.

“Just give it here. Didn’t wanna hafta do this, but you had to be stubborn.”

Ray had seen people stabbed, beaten, shot, raped, and killed over stupid arguments and items of little importance, but Benny was a different brand of scumbag; he didn’t pull out the knife unless he had to protect himself and his cash flow. Ray knew the note was more than just a piece of paper.

He looked at the dull blade, shaking in Benny’s unsteady hand.

“Now’s about the time I’m gonna make you admit you’re a chickenshit. Chickenshit.”

Benny flinched as he realized Ray wasn’t going to relent to his empty threat. The thrust at Ray’s gut was predictable and sloppy. The telegraphed movements gave Ray plenty of time to dodge the blow as he grabbed Benny by the greasy hair and slammed his skull into the cement wall.

“Listen up, you coffee-lid-dick-wiping motherfucker. I’m sick of your fucking face!”

Ray spit on Benny as he spoke, spittle catching on his mustache like rain droplets on a canopy of banyan trees. His fingernails dug deep into the tendons of Benny’s wrists, causing the knife to drop to the concrete.

“If you didn’t think this note meant anything before, you sure do now.”

Ray kicked the knife out of Benny’s reach and let go of him.

“I don’t know shit!”

Benny was holding one hand to the gash above his left eyebrow, while the other was clumsily trying to gather the change that flew out of his coffee cup after being kicked in the struggle.

“Where’d you toss those manifestos?” Ray asked through clenched teeth.

“What?”

Ray kicked him in the guts hard and he doubled over on the cracked sidewalk, coughing.

“Ernie’s papers, you dim shit! When you didn’t read them, where’d you toss them?”

“In the garbage, fuckstick,” Benny gasped in, trying to regain his breath.

Ray stamped down hard on the hand Benny was using to gather change and heard a snap as his shoe sandwiched Benny’s middle finger with the cement. Ray silenced his shriek by giving him another sock to the midsection.

Grabbing the scruff of his shirt, Ray raised Benny up to meet him face to face.

“I know you’re dumb, but you’re not stupid enough to deposit those papers where you knew Ernie would find them. You and I know that Ernie was about all you had.”

His breath was fire on Benny’s cheek.

“This little beating I gave you doesn’t compare to what could come your way if you don’t give me some answers. So unless you wanna lose the use of both of your hands, I suggest you quit fucking around, or you’ll spend the rest of your days masturbating with your feet.”

“Lindberg,” Benny rasped out between coughs and tears.

“You’ve seen what I can do to you, Benny. What’re you feeding me?”

“Lindberg, I swear. Use my name. You’ll get access.”

Ray dropped the sobbing mess that was once Benny 7-11 to the ground.

“You know what happens if you’re lying, right?”

Benny just nodded, trying to keep himself in a little ball, not knowing where the next blow would come from.

“I’m going to need some insurance.”

Benny looked up at him with glossy, shocked eyes, no idea what “insurance” meant and scared out of his mind to find out. Ray reached down, grabbed Benny’s mustache, and yanked hard, pulling a huge section of it out by the roots, leaving a bloody gap. Ray shoved the hunk of hair into his pocket.

“Just a little collateral. If Lindberg pans out, you’ll get it back.”

Ray looked around to see if anyone bothered to take notice of his little battle. His hands were shaking as he grabbed the knife from the ground and tossed it into a storm sewer. Taking one last look at the damage he’d done, his mind unable to process what caused him to snap, Ray tried his

best to control his breathing. The accelerated beating of his heart started an engine in his legs and he disappeared into the neighborhood.

Benny slumped against the wall, his middle finger broken and askew. He wiped the blood from his eyes and cried heavily to himself, cursing Ray Cobb under his breath.

Penny's eyes flicked back and forth over the computer screen, her finger lingering over the mouse, waiting for her brain to send the go-codes. All she had to do was click one little button and she would strike a blow for abused executive assistants everywhere.

Gabriel stepped into her cubicle and she clicked off the page, revealing the quarterly costs spreadsheet open on her desktop.

"O. M. G. Have you seen what Margie is wearing today?" Gabriel whispered between his cosmetically altered teeth.

"I try not to notice anything about Margie," Penny joked in her tiny voice. She swallowed her words and the quip came out flat, causing Gabe to ignore it and burst into his diatribe.

"Seriously? It's as though she spent the morning finding a vintage furniture store, digging in the dumpster for a discarded couch, and cutting herself a blouse out of the upholstery."

"I'm doing my best to avoid her today, probably a good thing I did," Penny said.

"Thank the Lord above, because, honey you would lose your lunch over that wonderful little scarf you've chosen to

accessorize with today. Where ever did you get that little piece?"

"Oh, I found it on sale at Bloomingdale's," she lied. There was a discoloration hidden by the knot at her neck, an irregularity that landed it in the clearance bin at Marshall's.

"Matches the low cut blouse you have on there to a tee. Way to show off the goods today, Pen."

She blushed. Penny supposed she had a good figure, despite the time she spent scrutinizing herself in the mirror, pinching a bit of fat here, sucking in to flatten her tummy there. She'd spent a lot of time at the gym lately. Not because she had some fitness obsession, it was more to avoid spending her entire life stuck on her couch reading magazines and eating peanut butter from the jar with a spoon. She had trouble hiding her glee that Gabriel would take notice of her. That anyone would notice her, really.

"All right, enough of the gabbity gabbing gorgeous, we've got a budget meeting in forty minutes and I've got a few expenditures I have to reconcile. What's the best way to get a reimbursement for going to Bardot and getting silly on Grey Goose martinis?"

"You could call it celebntertaining."

"My stars and garters, I'm stealing that. I knew you'd have an answer. Peace."

"Bye, Gabriel," Penny smiled, giving him a little wave.

Penny turned back to her computer, but before she could return to what she was doing, a gargoyle's voice approached from behind her.

"Penelope?"

Margie and her mother were the only people on Earth who called her Penelope. As a child, she didn't mind the name; she actually reveled in its relative rarity. But when she was in junior high, Penelope came up in her Greek Mythology unit of English class. Delighted that she'd received her namesake

from the wife of the great Odysseus, she couldn't wait to get home and ask her mother about it. She never regretted a question more in her life.

"Mythology? Honey, you were named that because you were conceived in the parking lot of Penelope's World Famous Chicken Fried Steak in Colorado Springs. Me and your dickhole daddy were on a road trip to see ELO in concert in Denver. I don't know about World Famous, but they gave me the runs somethin' awful for 'bout a week."

She never wanted to be called Penelope again.

Margie, however, when she hired Penny, saw her full name on her Social Security card. She determined that the name Penelope was much more pleasant sounding than plain Penny, no matter how many times Penny tried to correct her. She actually took pleasure in thinking she knew the best thing for Penny, down to what she should be called on a daily basis.

Penny swung her chair around and looked up at Margie, having trouble hiding her disdain for the rotund banshee standing before her.

"What can I do for you Margie?"

"Well, Penelope," Penny ground her teeth at the sound of her name, "When I asked you to put together this presentation for our new corporate branding proposal, I specifically asked that the previous brand logos be collated by color and not chronologically."

"You told me to place them in order of where we've been and where we're going."

"And in what way does that imply chronology?"

Fireworks burst beneath the surface as Penny's exterior revealed nothing but a sudden flush in her cheeks.

"I'm sorry I misunderstood you. Next time I'll ask you to be more specific," Penny said, swallowing her words in veiled hatred.

“It never hurts to ask. There are no stupid questions, but the ones that go unasked,” Margie’s nostrils flared, her condescending tone punctuated with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Now you’ve created twice the work for yourself. Please rearrange these. Standard rainbow spectrum from Red to Violet. I don’t think I can get more specific than that. Oh, and Penelope, we do have a dress code here, let’s try to keep the twins in check, shall we,” she smiled through her over-applied lipstick, waving her finger in the general direction of Penny’s chest.

“Sorry, I’ll get right on it,” Penny said, lowering her eyes. Her fingernails dug deep into the upholstery of her ergonomic desk chair, all of her rage channeled into the plush fabric. Margie flashed her coffee-stained, crooked teeth at Penny before turning like a soldier and huffing back into her office.

Penny looked down at her barely showing cleavage, unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, and opened the web page back up, hitting the “Order” button with no reservation. Soon Marjorie Wells would be receiving a rather disturbing package and Penny would have her revenge.

Nightfall began to cover the sky in soot before Ray made his trek down to Lindberg Park, but he didn't dare start his journey without consulting Crispy Morgan first. Even on the streets there was a hierarchy, a protocol for achieving certain gains, much like the gang system in a prison. Beating an answer out of a scumbag solicitor worked on occasion, but sometimes going through the proper channels was the way to get things done. Ray had heard too many stories and knew he couldn't go down to Lindberg blindly. He had to play by the rules.

Where Beverly Hills swoops around to the underside of West Hollywood, Peter "Crispy" Morgan held court at the far end of a Mobil station, monopolizing one of the few remaining public pay phones in Los Angeles. Crispy was a barterer; reveling in the philosophy that one man's trash is another man's treasure. He knew when you had nothing, everything was worth everything, nothing was worth nothing, and everything was worth nothing. He was a good person to know.

Crispy was using a penknife to empty the contents of several discarded butts into a napkin to make one good

cigarette. He was so focused on the task he didn't notice Ray until he was almost on top of him.

"How's it going, Crisp?"

Crispy looked up, pulled out of his trance. It took him a second to register the face of Ray Cobb with the swollen jaw and the speech impediment to accompany it.

"Well, Shiiit. If it ain't Ray Cobb. Sit on down, you weary lookin' mu'fucka."

Ray did as he was told, sitting opposite Crispy's current project.

"Put 'er there, pal," Crispy offered, extending his pink, scared claw.

When Peter Morgan was part of the real world, he was a fry jockey at a popular fast food establishment. His whole life hinged on that useless job. At the time, it seemed like his only goal was to finish high school and get out of the house. The men in his family followed a vicious cycle; working minimum wage to barely pay the bills, then deciding to disappear or take drastic measures, like his father replacing the whiskey in his Coke with Drano. He wanted to make sure it wasn't going to be his fate, too. He got his high school diploma—his diploma, not his equivalency. He did it right, with his name announced and his momma crying in the auditorium and everything.

Peter Morgan was going to get out, maybe even apply at Los Angeles City College and get a degree in appliance maintenance or carpentry, considering how much he liked working with his hands. But then his momma was hit by some asshole in a '92 Chevy Cavalier as she crossed the street with her groceries. Bastard ran a red light at one-thirty in the afternoon, so drunk he could have been chugging embalming fluid. The accident broke twenty-seven bones in her body and put her into a coma. They couldn't afford name-brand macaroni and cheese, let alone health

insurance, and Peter had to stay at his job just to meet the minimum payment on the medical bills.

One day, after working a double shift, Peter got an idea. Federal disability and worker's compensation insurance were removed from his paycheck weekly. It was money he knew was going to nothing, so he figured he should do something about it.

An extra-large order of fries came over the counter, and instead of dumping in the bag of prepackaged fries, he thrust his right hand into the boiling hot vegetable oil, all the way up to the elbow. Tortured screams escaped his throat as he held his hand underneath as long as he could, smelling the sizzle of his flesh under the steaming oil bath. To this day, if he uses what's left of his right hand to wipe his nose, he swears he smells pork rinds.

Of course, he never got his worker's compensation or his disability. The corporate investigation's official ruling was that his injury was self-inflicted and in no way the company's fault. Several witnesses testified to seeing Peter shove his hand into the oil and hold it there, despite his protestation that he went in after a rogue chicken tender and got his finger caught on the vent at the bottom of the basin. While he was waiting for the settlement that never materialized, his mother died in her bed. Now he was paying her old medical bills along with the ones that began to arrive for the treatment of his crispy hand.

He started to sell things to keep up and soon he was in an empty rental, three months behind on the lease. With the clothes on his back, he left the apartment full of unpaid bills and bad memories and said goodbye to his old life. Peter was amused at how much stock he once put into the things he owned. In the end, they were all the same, just goods to be exchanged for other worthless things. From that point on, everything he had the privilege of owning, for however short a time, was both precious and worthless.

Ray took the burned shell of Crispy's hand and shook it hard, with no resignation, just as Crispy Morgan wanted it. Crispy went back to his task, knowing that everybody coming to him was looking for something. He had long ago rid himself of the pretense of small talk and would wait patiently until his visitors got around to flat out asking for an exchange, but Ray was one of his best customers.

"I've gotta go down to Lindberg tonight," Ray said, staring across the street.

"Shit, Ray, what you wanna go do that for?"

"Trying to figure out this thing with Ernie."

"That there was a buncha crazy bullshit, Ray. I could use a brand new hand my own self, but I ain't gonna go 'round takin' somebody's hand that's already usin' it, let alone both of 'em. I ain't greedy."

"Maybe if I find one of them, I'll let you have it on loan."

"You think *She* has somethin' to do with it?"

"No. But I think Benny does."

"Dick Scrape ain't smart enough. You know where he rests his head, why you gotta go down to Lindberg?"

"Already been to see him. Benny's been depositing updates of the manifesto down at Lindberg."

"I hear tell *She* strains all garbage comin' and goin'," Crispy said, affirming what little information Ray had about the goings-on of Lindberg Park.

"I need the latest copy for some answers."

"You don't got one?"

"Thought I did, but there was no copy on his cart, no copy in his camp."

"Sounds like Ernie was ready for this," Crispy said.

"I would've said it was just a symptom of his paranoia, but anyone who wanted him out of the way would have had instant access to the manifesto had he not taken precautions."

“Had me a draft ‘bout eight months ago, but I traded it to Kenny Flak Jacket for a vinyl copy of the Buggy Malone soundtrack. I can find out where Flak Jacket’s at for you if you want.”

“I might have to see him anyway before this is through, but an eight month old copy isn’t going to do me any good. I need the draft from the day before he was put away.”

Crispy was struggling to twist his cigarette closed, but Ray didn’t dare ask if he needed any help. He knew better. He just waited patiently until Crispy got the makeshift blunt situated in just the right way, then offered a hand to cup the flame as he struck a wooden match on the pavement. Crispy took a deep breath in, let out a cough from the burning napkin paper, and let the long floppy cigarette hang from the corner of his mouth. He got up and went to an abandoned phone box, pulling out the coffee cups and bottles one at a time. His left hand reached in and felt around for his hidden treasure, finally pulling out something wrapped in a dirty white piece of linen.

“You lucky I like you, Ray. I was gonna mount this particular item right here on top of the phone, make it sorta regal like, at least for a while ‘til someone come along and snatch it up. Don’t get too many things passin’ as a Lindberg offerin’.”

“Somehow I knew you’d have something for me.”

“Funny story,” Crispy said, returning to the curb, “So you know Frankie Pink Slip, right?”

Ray nodded. Frankie Pink Slip was the founder of the ice machine catnap.

“Frankie Pink Slip was sleepin’ in that tube slide in the park behind the Glendale Library when mu’fucka feels this sharp pain on the bottom of his foot. He wakes up straight hard, son, bumpin’ his head on that orange plastic shit, slidin’ down to the wood chips on the ground. This group of

upscale asshole high school kids was pokin' at him with this sword, like this fuckin' skinny stickpin lookin' thing they picked up at this weapon store in that mall, the what's it? Glendale Galleria. Goddamn thing went through the bottom of his shoe and stabbed the sole of his foot, wakin' him up with one hell of a pain. So, dude does what anybody woulda, he takes a swing at one of the kids, managin' to clomp him on the back of the head. The little shit wit' the sword decides to defend his friend's honor or some shit, and charges at Frankie, sword straight out, ready to gut his ass.

“Lucky for Frankie, as Frankie tells it, the dumb mu'fuckin' kid trips over his own two feet and goes down hard, eatin' gravel. Damn kid was lucky he didn't run himself through. As a show of strength, as Frankie tells it, Frankie grabs the hilt of the sword, stickin' up out of the dirt like a cross marking a grave, and steps down hard on the blade. Cheap piece of shit was enough to go through his shoe once, but not twice. He snaps the thing easy, the hilt left in his hands, the punk kids runnin' scared, 'fraid this crazy homeless guy is gonna kill 'em. So Frankie Pink Slip has to make his broke-ass way to the free clinic, get a real painful tetanus shot from some pissin'-in-her-pants-scared volunteer, the whole time holdin' tight this glitterin' sword hilt. He tries to return it, sayin' it's all defective an' shit, you know, try to get some cash for his trouble, but the guy at the store wasn't hearin' none of it. So he comes limpin' to me, gives me that hilt and in exchange I give him a pair of them, whatchacall'em, Halloween vampire teeth. He thinks it'll help scare off any other mu'fucka who wants to mess with him while he's sleepin'. I think he'd have been better off with a broken sword hilt, but I ain't no one to judge.”

Ray reached out for the package when it seemed that Crispy was done telling his tale, but Crispy pulled it back from him.

“Ray, you know you don’t gotta do this,” he pleaded, trying to protect his friend.

“Yeah, Crisp. Yeah, I do.”

“You do this, Ray, you gotta do it right, son. Folks come back from Lindberg sayin’ they can’t imagine hell bein’ much worse.”

“And yet they came back, Crispy. I’ve heard the stories. I know what I’m up against. What’ve I got to lose?”

“My sword,” Crispy tried to joke, “and your life.”

“Not much of a life to lose. If I remember correctly, I trade you straight up, the sword will be mine to lose anyway, not yours,” the corner of Ray’s mouth went up in a mocking smirk.

Crispy placed the package into Ray’s hands. The metal of the blade was indeed cheap, but the hilt was in the shape of two golden dragons with a blue bead for each of their eyes. The gold of the handle was woven in Celtic style and it definitely had some weight to it.

“And now, what you got for me?”

Lost in the glitter of the hilt, Ray almost forgot that he couldn’t have one thing without giving up another and reached into his pants pocket. Shaking out the clump of hair into Crispy’s palm, Ray just smiled. Crispy looked down at the hair and then back up at Ray. From the look on his face, Ray could see he wasn’t having it.

“Funny joke,” Crispy said, his eyes telling Ray he didn’t get the punch line, “You wanna trade me some nappy-ass pubes for that beautiful piece? What the fuck?”

Ray shrugged with his eyebrows.

“Pubic hair this is not, my friend. That’s a chunk of the rat stain currently renting space in the area between Benny 7-11’s nose and his upper lip.”

“Wait. Hold up. This here’s Benny’s mustache?”

“Part of it. Harvested it myself.”

Crispy Morgan let out one long hard laugh. He looked down at the clump of hair in his hand, pushed it around a little, and then brought his eyes back up to Ray.

“I’m gonna have to braid it together or some shit, but this’ll make a fine trophy for someone out there. I know plenty’a folks that hate that prick, myself included, even more now that Ernie ain’t ‘round no more. One of the best exchanges I ever had. Thanks, my friend.”

“Thank you.”

Crispy transferred the contents of his right hand into his left and held it out to Ray, who took it and shook it hard.

“Be careful down there. *She’s* supposed to be mad dog unpredictable.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Make your way up to Robertson Boulevard, be sure and catch the 9:28 bus. Mention me to the driver and you’ll get on free. Beats walkin’ down to Culver City.”

“Word is *She* doesn’t hold court until after 2 a.m.”

“*She* don’t. But when you get down to The Dark Territory and have trouble gettin’ in to see *Her*, you gonna need all your strength.”

Ray nodded to him and started west, wondering what he had gotten himself into.

Nick had been staring at the files for three days straight.

8/4/89 - Hannah Theobaud, kidnapped from her family home, no leads, no witnesses, body found eight days later, strangled, no sign of sexual assault.

7/18/76 - Adam Bevan, murdered in his recently remodeled family room basement, case pending due to evidence tampering.

1/3/00 - Uki Huraka, raped in an alley in Little Tokyo, bled to death internally, no DNA evidence.

The list went on and on. He was flooded with a sea of unsolved crimes in no particular order and still wasn't sure if he was supposed to be organizing them chronologically, alphabetically, or by offense.

Nick started making a series of piles around his desk, trying not to become completely exasperated by the process, knowing each one of the folders he put on its respective pile was another life destroyed, with no prospect of resolution.

There was a family out there somewhere for each victim, awaiting new evidence or a witness that would probably never appear. He hated himself for hoping a new, interesting crime would be committed to pull him off paperwork duty, but at least a new case with fresh evidence had the potential of getting solved. The black tags on the cold case files represented the death of hope.

“Archer!”

Nick blinked himself out of a partial fingerprint photo from a carjacking gone wrong in 1984.

“You think you can pull yourself away from that long enough to question a suspect?” Jim Jenkins barked at him.

“I don’t know, I think I may be making progress with this case from 1991. Woman was choked to death with a dog leash. I think the dog might’ve done it,” Nick said without smiling.

“Listen, smart ass, I’m just trying to give you a break so you don’t lose what’s left of that tiny brain of yours, but if you prefer, I’m sure I could find someone else willing to get involved in a case that happened in this decade.”

“Where?”

“Interview two,” Jenkins coughed into his palm, throwing the case file in his direction. Nick had to grab for it and in the process kicked out his foot, knocking over the “Blunt Trauma/1975-1981/A-C” pile of papers. He just let them slide down onto the tile floor without picking them up. It wasn’t like they were going to get any more disorganized.

Flipping through the new file in his hands, he took his time walking down the hallway to the interview rooms. He had to stop himself for a minute and go back to read the details of the case. His brain had become so accustomed to skimming over paperwork with random, seemingly useless details, he had to re-acclimate to doing some real police work.

These were the days he wished he were better at minding his own business. Little over year ago he was just a uniform,

crowd controlling a crime scene. He happened to spot someone in the crowd taking pictures with a wide-angle lens, someone without a press pass. For a few days, he was given shit from his crew, increasingly tall tales of his action sequence, chasing down this dude with a camera, leaving his post on a hunch and never catching him. He might have been suspended—if the same guy hadn't turned up with the same photo equipment a few days later at a similar scene. This time the detectives took notice. They managed to nab Kyle Vargas, The Barbed Wire Strangler. Son of a bitch would go home and jerk off to the crime scene photos in his darkroom before they were done processing. The semen scan of the room matched that taken from each victim.

Nick's buddies shut up real quick and it got him a preliminary meeting with the Robbery-Homicide Division. The police commissioner was doing his best to look good in front of the mayor and decided to make Nick his poster boy. He did a short six months as an officer in RHD before his new friend the PC pushed him to upgrade his shield. A barrage of tests and a psych evaluation landed him a promotion, a desk, and a plainclothes allowance. Officers who had been riding desks for years without an offer to take the exams hated Nick for the preferential treatment and the bosses thought he was a snot-nosed punk, even though he had the years on the force to back up his progress.

Soon after getting his detective shield, the PC found a new pet on a bigger case and left Nick alone to fend off the wolves. It didn't help that he was never the suit wearing type and did his best to avoid doing so, which immediately put him on Jenkins' shit list. Narco cops got away with dressing down, Homicide didn't. He was an outsider on both ends, resented by the uniforms on patrol and thought of as a fluke by the detectives. Most days he wished he had just done his job and kept his mouth shut, but that was never really Nick's style.

Lucky for him, Hank Drees was the uniform stationed outside the interview room. Hank was the only guy who sincerely congratulated him when he got the call up to the majors. He and Nick shared a slight head nod when they caught sight of each other.

“What’s up, Hank?”

“Detective,” Hank said.

“If I had known a promotion involved me being a file clerk, I would have stayed on the beat, waiting patiently to get shot at.”

“I could shoot you, if that would help?”

“Two more days of cold cases and I might take you up on that offer. How’s Kelly?”

“She’s doing good, been playing softball and is gonna to try to get on the JV field hockey team in the fall.”

“Your ex-wife trying to turn her gay on you?”

“Whatever, man. At this point, I’m just glad she talks to me. I don’t know what happens on the other side of town in that house during the week. If I don’t have to worry about some 15 year old horny shit-head skateboard punk trying to get in her panties, then she can rename herself Sappho for all I care.”

Nick laughed with his friend. Since being moved into RHD, he hadn’t seen much of his old crew in the department. His busy life was likely interpreted as conceited snubbing.

“How’s your mom? She still smoking?”

“Still smoking? I think she’s actually upped her dosage. The oxygen tank has increased her lung capacity. I’m surprised she hasn’t started taking ‘em two at a time.”

“At least I don’t have your second-hand stink reeking up my squad anymore.”

“Still no partner?”

“I asked Renner not to give me any punk-ass rookie, I’ve been doing this too long to put up with another Nick

Archer,” he said, smiling, “He’s doing me a favor giving me these daytime shifts, lets me see my girl more. Least he could do, considering my partner up and disappeared like a fart in the wind.”

“I know... I’m bad about keeping in touch. The job, Mom, the whole unicorn figurine addiction.”

Hank snorted at the bad joke.

“Anyway, good to see you, man. We need to catch a beer pretty soon.”

“Venue never changes, big shot. Thursdays at the Rusty Kilt.”

“You sure the boys are willing to have me? I have this image in my mind of me stepping through the doors, the needle scratching off the jukebox and everyone beating the shit out of me.”

“You’re always welcome, as long as you buy the first round. That’ll stave off the wild dogs for as long as it takes to chug a cheap beer.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Nick gave Hank a friendly swat with the file folder.

“Oh, one more thing. Watch it in there.”

“Why? We got a violent one?” Nick paused with his hand on the door.

Hank busted out laughing and clapped Nick on the shoulder.

“Violent? Lady won’t stop crying. Good luck getting her to answer questions.”

“That slippery fuck,” Nick said half to himself, wishing he’d asked why Jenkins was so willing to pass this particular interview onto him.

“Thanks for the heads up, Hank.”

“My pleasure.”

He could already hear the muffled sobs as he opened the door. The low light in the room revealed a tiny woman with

her face buried in a damp handkerchief. He rolled his eyes at what he was about to deal with and found himself pining for the comforting consistency of a stack of unsolved murders.

The water flowed from her eyes like a cracked fire hydrant on a hot New York street. She didn't acknowledge him as he entered the room, sat down across from her, and opened the file on the tabletop. Before he spoke to her he took one look up at the camera mounted in the corner, his eyes letting the guys huddled around the video feed know that they could fuck right off.

"Miss," he paused to look down at the folder, "Miss Searle?"

She was wailing like a banshee belting Wagner, but managed to nod a yes at him.

"Miss Searle, I just need to ask you a few questions."

She blew her nose and clutched the dripping rag to her face. The weeping hampered her lungs' ability to take in air, shortening her breath to staccato gasps. This wasn't how he imagined life as a detective.

"Listen, lady, could you stop with the—," he stopped himself, his hands going to his temples, trying to think of the best way to slip a laxative into Jenkins' coffee.

"Miss," his voice strained to get softer, "the sooner you answer me, the sooner I can get you out of here. You don't want to be cooped up in this dark little room anymore, right?"

Eyes peeked from underneath the wet veil, still held hard to her nose. Her waterlogged eyelashes clung to each other like they'd been lathered with 1920s mascara, framing her big blue eyes.

"Okay," she squeaked out at him in a soft voice, blowing her nose once more and lowering the handkerchief to reveal the rest of her face. She looked awful, but Nick noticed she was probably rather pretty on a good day. Her large eyes flanked a crooked nose that on another woman might be

unsightly, but somehow it fit the texture of her face. At the moment she was red and puffy, but something in him stirred as she softly moved a wisp of chestnut hair away from her face and over her ear.

“Thank you,” he said to her, forcing a sincere smile. She was trying her best to return the kind gesture, but he could see most of her strength was focused on holding back the constant well of tears.

“You’re an executive assistant at Keller & Hoff Real Estate, correct?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she nodded, her lip quivering.

“And your boss was Marjorie Wells?”

“Yessss.”

The dam broke once more and the waterworks flooded her cheeks, her face seeking the hankie to levy the deluge.

“Jesus Christ,” he growled under his breath, but loud enough for her to hear.

“Miss Searle. Miss Searle? Penelope?”

“Pennyeeee,” she corrected him through the sobs.

“Penny.”

Nick’s patience reserves were low. Mr. Sensitive didn’t come easy to him. Add on that he wasn’t exactly a Casanova when it came to talking to women and Nick Archer found himself in the middle of a shit tsunami.

“I know this must be tough for you,” he softened, trying to remember his Witness Advocacy course from the academy, “but we’re trying to get as much information as possible, so we can close the case on Miss Wells’ death.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Penny apologized. Fear and apprehension kept changing her face from deep red to pale and Nick knew it was touch and go with the weeping time bomb sitting in front of him.

“Let’s see if I can make this a little easier on both of us.”

Adjusting his position in the uncomfortable metal chair, he hoped that logic disguised as kindness might do the trick.

“I’m just going to go through the facts here and see if you want to give me any more helpful information, okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now, re-living some of this might be a bit upsetting, but this is for the good of everyone, all right? So, please try your hardest not to get too upset and I’ll do my best not to ask you too many upsetting questions. Okay?”

“Thanks. You’re much nicer than that other guy. Are you doing a good cop, bad cop on me?”

“He’s not a bad cop, he’s just a dick.”

Penny laughed through her tears, doing her best to wipe the snot running from her nose.

“Was that a laugh? I’m breaking through, let’s roll with it. According to this report, Marjorie Wells collapsed in a board meeting this past Tuesday, correct?”

He paused, waiting for the next wave of sobs. They didn’t come.

“Yes.”

“She had a seizure, lost consciousness, and stopped breathing. A co-worker of yours, Gabriel Byhn, tried to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until the paramedics arrived. Miss Wells was declared DOA when she arrived at the hospital.”

Penny took a deep breath and placed her palms flat on the table, like a drunk trying to keep the room from spinning.

“It just happened so fast. One minute she was getting upset about how the branding templates looked wrong and the next minute she was on the floor. We all thought she had a heart attack.”

“Was Miss Wells what you would consider an overweight woman?”

Penny tightened her lips together and shifted in her chair. Her eyes went to the ceiling, as though she was searching the white panels for the appropriate words. Nick sensed she was trying to hide her hatred for Marjorie Wells. He would have reacted similarly if asked to politely describe Lt. Jim Jenkins.

“She was bulky, but I wouldn’t really classify her as huge.”

“Bulky? I wouldn’t describe my boss as bulky. More of an overbearing fat pig.”

She laughed at him again. He could see the fragile fortress around her crumbling.

“She definitely had those qualities.”

“Were you aware that Miss Wells had hypoglycemia?”

“Not at all. Nobody did.”

Nick was surprised he’d made it through so many questions without an outburst. He thought he might jinx it by acknowledging it, but he wanted to keep her endeared to him as long as possible.

“You’re doing a good job keeping calm, Penny, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for taking it easy on me. All of my friends, or people I thought were my friends, think I am this horrible murderous person.”

“Speaking of that, would you mind if we get down to why you’re here?”

Nick could see the strain in her neck as she gathered the willpower to hold back her emotions. She nodded ever so slightly to him, indicating he could continue.

“On Wednesday, the day after Miss Wells’ passing, a package was delivered to her. The secretary sorting the mail, Nancy Uhl, forwarded that package to Miss Wells’ next of kin, who in turn contacted us. Were you aware of the contents of that package, Miss—Penny?”

The salt water already started to pool in the corner of her eyes, but she nodded, yes, she did know.

“Apparently the package contained some sort of threatening,” he checked the folder, “green M&M’s?”

Nick paused for a moment, making sure he had read the report right.

“M&M’s? The candy?”

She nodded, “Mmmm-hmm.”

“Threatening... M&M’s?”

“I didn’t know she was diabetic and besides she didn’t eat any of them before she died and I wouldn’t even know how to poison M&M’s anyway and plus they came right from the manufacturer so I wouldn’t have touched them and I did hate her, I’ll admit it, but I never would kill her oh my God I’m going to jail,” Penny’s words came in a long vomit of syllables.

Nick stared at her, his mouth hanging open, taking it all in. And then, he couldn’t help it. He burst into heavy laughter that made him sound like a braying madman.

Penny stopped sobbing once the wall of sound hit her. She was horrified that he would be making such light of her current situation, but soon it infected her and she found herself laughing just as hard as him.

“So you,” he chortled, gasping between snorts, “you sent her, um, you sent her a box of personalized green M&M’s that said ‘Fuck off and die’ and then she died. Of sugar shock.” Saying it out loud incited another burst of laughter until it petered out naturally.

“Well, Penny, I have to say, I’m so sorry you’ve been put through all of this cloak and dagger police questioning, which obviously upset you, but there’s no law against wishing ill will on someone, otherwise the whole world would be in prison.”

He got up and walked over to her side of the table.

“Now, of course, we’re still going to wait for the toxicology report to come back on this one, so don’t make any plans to

go out of town, but I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Her eyes went wide and she leapt up into his arms, hugging him tightly before he knew what was happening. He returned the hug awkwardly, remembering the conversation was being recorded for posterity. He pushed her away gently and gave her a smile.

"Thank you, oh God, thank you so much."

"Miss Searle, as far as we know you're guilty of nothing but having a very creative way of trying to quit your job and, let's be honest, terrible timing. You'll be contacted when we have our final reports on the case. And, if I were you, unless you count your intercepted package as your official notice, I'd take a few days off work, let things cool down a bit."

"Thank you, Detective... you know I never got your name."

"Archer. Nick Archer."

"Thank you, Detective Archer."

"You're welcome," he said to her, opening the door to let her out. She walked down the hallway and happened to catch him looking after her as she glanced over her shoulder. Penny gave him a fluttered wave that he returned, trying not to seem too eager.

"How the hell did you get her to talk?" Hank's deep voice whispered from behind him.

"Detective secret," Nick said back to him.

"Sorry I asked, dickhead."

"Catch you later, Hank."

Once Penny was out of sight, he took a deep breath and wandered back to his desk, returning to the mound of cases that couldn't be solved by a hilarious case of misunderstanding.

“I want him dead!”

“Have a little trouble with the razor this morning, Benny?”

Benny’s hand went instinctively to the patch where his mustache used to be. He let the blood dry without cleaning it, resulting in the beginnings of a dirty scab, the surrounding hair a mess of dry, encrusted red flecks.

“I ain’t here to play no games, Nestor. He made a fool outta me and now I wanna show him who’s boss.”

“I didn’t realize that mustache was so important to you.”

Benny could see the sides of Nestor’s cheeks go up, giving him crow’s feet at the edges of his dark eyes. The bastard was smiling at him from under that surgical mask.

“Will you come down here and talk? You’re givin’ me the creeps up there.”

Nestor Tyre resided in the park area surrounding the entrance to Bronson Canyon. He was never without a suit of full camouflage, accentuated by a surgical mask, making him look like a first response Ebola doctor. If Ernie Politics represented the new regime of political activists, Nestor would have been his defense secretary. He rarely walked among the masses in the daylight, but when he did, it was to

report information to Ernie. It was always a whisper or note passed with gloved hands, and then he would disappear back into the woods until he acquired the next piece of relevant intelligence.

Nestor made his way down to Benny 7-11's level, doing his best to keep to the shadows of the trees. He never acknowledged that his mask was bright blue and would give his position away to anyone who didn't happen to be colorblind.

"And what do you suggest I do?" Nestor asked him, cocking his head slightly in curiosity like a dog responding to a strange noise.

"I *suggest* you go to your little weapons stockpile in your mythical undisclosed location, find Ray Cobb and blow his fuckin' head off."

"But you see, Benny, I'm saving that particular stockpile for when the revolution begins, which I'm certain could be any day now. Those weapons aren't meant for me. The neoproletariat was meant to handle those elements of destruction, while I prefer the elegance of the sickle, held high at the head of a people's army, marching with a solidarity and singular purpose the Bolsheviks only dreamed of. Just because Ernie failed in his charge, doesn't mean we should be any less vigilant."

His intricately practiced speech affectation was pissing Benny off. Nestor had worked for years to perfect the linguistic eloquence of Karl Marx and Che Guevara, all part of his freakish cleanliness right down to his manner of speaking. Benny thought it made him sound like a pompous piece of shit.

"The fuckin' revolution? The revolution done already started, man! Look what they did to Ernie."

"There are so many 'theys' I have begun to lose track," Nestor mused, "We still haven't determined who was at fault for our fallen comrade's untimely demise."

“You think that’s a coincidence? You think that just happened outta nowhere?”

“If I’m not mistaken, Benny, you were supposed to recover a certain document from Ernie before his untimely passing and failed to do so. A document that is now infinitely more important and may help to flush our game from its den.”

“Cobb jumped me, Nestor! I had it in my hand and the son of a bitch sucker punched me and tore the hair outta my face.”

“You didn’t get a good look at it?”

“Some numbers and Spanish-Russian gibberish, man. I didn’t exactly have time to memorize it while my head was being bashed into a concrete wall.”

“And you didn’t send him to me, instead you sent him to *Her*.”

“I panicked, all right. And besides, you know Cobb. He’s smarter than that. No offense, but he thinks you’re one big package of Juniper Loony Bars.”

“Benny, you forget the words of the illustrious Sun-Tzu, *Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, then crush him.*”

“Baits? What the fuck’re you talkin’ about? I knew he wouldn’t come to you.”

“So instead you counted on *Her* discretion? We still don’t know where *Her* loyalties lie. Perhaps *She* was involved. Perhaps the lioness has positioned *Herself*, lying in wait for the coalition of males to devour each other so *She* can lead the pride.”

“Man, what the fuck? This is why I never know what the fuck you’re sayin’. You talk in fuckin’ circles and riddles and shit. What was I supposed to do? He broke my fucking finger,” Benny whined, holding up the crooked and loosely splinted appendage in front of Nestor’s face.

“Would you like me to reset that properly for you?”

He backed away from Nestor, knowing that his version of first aid would give Benny something to truly fear. Nestor stepped slowly out from behind the lengthening shadow of the tree he was using for cover and watched the sun descend quickly behind the mountains, leaving a trail of orange and pink in the small handful of clouds.

“We’ll wait and see what happens at Lindberg tonight. If *She* gives him the manuscript, then I’ll pay him a visit and we’ll get both documents. If he gets assimilated, then we... *you* will personally have to visit *Her* to recover the manuscript and the key. For your sake, Benny, I hope that Ray is as clever as you give him credit. I wouldn’t want to know what a slimy tripe like you would have to offer *Her* in exchange for such treasures. You may not walk right for a while.” He let his smug insult take hold, the indications of a smile emerging again.

Benny looked at Nestor’s back as he kept his gaze steady on the setting sun. His rage had subsided for the moment, but every throb of pain in his finger reignited it again. He left Nestor staring off into the distance and headed down the hill, hoping he could scrounge enough change together to pick up a sandwich at the supermarket by the Scientology Celebrity Centre, waiting the night out to see just how smart Ray Cobb really was.