



Turkeystuffer

a novel
by Mark Crockett

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Chapter 1

“Wake up, bitch, your tests are back.”

The force of the slap across her face rocked the old high-backed chair to which Mimi Driver was securely bound with duct tape. The high back of the chair (and her head) hit the nearby wall, narrowly missing a half-filled bag of IV solution that hung from a nail. The solution fed into her petite body through the brachial artery on her bare right arm. The chair seesawed for a moment before settling upright. The duct tape covering her mouth somewhat silenced her scream of pain and surprise.

“You’ve been busy, home girl. You test positive for gonorrhea and syphilis...now *that’s* something you don’t see everyday. You also have a nasty case of hepatitis ‘B.’ Kind of a hazard in your line of work, huh? Oh, and you’re pregnant. Congratulations.”

Her vision blurred and the general disorientation was coming back to her. The man’s voice, muffled by the facemask and clear plastic eye shield he wore, droned on as he read from his checklist while Mimi’s tears soaked her swollen face. She had been trapped in this room, bound to this chair, for almost two days. She now knew she was going to die here. He put down the paper he was reading from atop a large, closed styrofoam cooler behind him, then turned to face Mimi.

“So, what do you say? Ready for a little chat?” he said as he adjusted the drop of the IV cocktail that kept her nauseous and, when he didn’t wake her with beatings, semi-conscious.

Then, in one smooth motion, he ripped the sodden duct tape from her mouth and stepped back to the cooler. Mimi vomited almost immediately. He opened the cooler while she retched, removed a large plastic cup filled with blood-tinged ice water, and threw it on her face. The shock of the cold water hitting her face caused her to inhale some of the liquid and left her coughing and gasping for air. He threw the cup and wad of tape onto the puddle of fluid on her lap.

“Well, you done?” he asked.

She coughed again, then spoke in a thick, slurred voice.

“I’m sorry...don’t do this. Please. I don’t know nuthin’. I never saw you...I’ll leave town...just let me go...” She hiccupped, then began to whimper.

“That’s it?” he asked.

She tried to focus the blur that was her vision. She could hear a faint echo when he spoke as she looked in the direction of his voice. All she could make out in the low light was his outline. He was tall. And green. The clothes he wore were green.

“Don’t...kill me.”

The slap this time was far more vicious, bouncing her into the wall again and toppling her and the chair to the floor. The force of her fall ripped the IV from her arm, leaving a jagged, bleeding tear. The left side of her face hit the floor with enough force to break her jaw in two places. The pain cleared the muddiness enough that she could see him clearly as he stood over her. He was wearing green hospital scrubs with blue booties covering his feet. He was rubbing his gloved hands. She saw that the gloves were taped to his sleeves.

“Shit, that hurt,” he said as he massaged the hand he struck her with. He flexed his hand, then looked down at her.

“Frankly, baby girl, I expected a bit more out of you. I’m disappointed.”

He walked behind her, grabbed the back of her chair, and sat it upright. The motion of righting her chair caused a loud, high-pitched wheeze to escape from her bloodied, swollen lips. Crossing to the front of her, he noticed by the lop-sided angle that her jaw was broken.

“No...you’ve been a party I shouldn’t have gone to,” he said as he reached into a black backpack behind the cooler, taking out a roll of duct tape and a sharpened Philips head screwdriver with a five-inch shaft. Using the tip of the screwdriver, he caught the beginning of the tape and pulled it out to a two-foot strip. He did this three times. When Mimi heard the tape tearing, she started to moan and began rocking side to side in her seat. He stuck the tips of the tape to the front of his shirt, then tore off a much smaller strip and circled behind Mimi. The sound of the roll of tape hitting the floor behind her stopped her rocking. He held the screwdriver in the same hand from which the tape had fallen.

“I’ve got to be back at work day after tomorrow, so girl, it’s time for us to hit the road.”

When Mimi turned her head toward the sound of his voice, he looped the first strip of tape under her chin and fractured jaw, pulling it up and back quickly, stopping her scream before it could start. As she kicked against the tape holding her legs, he secured her head to the back cross board of the chair. Avoiding her struggling and bound hands, he moved to her left side and knelt down. When he put his hand on the remains of her wet, soiled top, her kicking became more frantic. He giggled beneath his mask when he tore a gapping hole in the side of her blouse. As her bruised face started to darken from her efforts, he slid his hand up her side to the space between the fifth and sixth rib. He placed the tip of the screwdriver there.

“This is gonna hurt.”

With a loud grunt, he pushed the screwdriver up to its base through her flesh, the intercostal muscle layer, the parietal pleura, and directly into her left lung. Her chair left the

floor for a moment with the force of her struggle, but her bounds held. He quickly removed the screwdriver and placed the smaller strip of duct tape tightly over the hole he'd made. Breathing hard, he jumped up and used the tip of the blood-slick tool to cut her head and neck free. She gasped so hard that he, now backed to the cooler, could hear her fractured jaw crack make little pops. Her kicking had almost freed her left leg, and he now sat on the floor near the cooler to watch her. Within three minutes, the veins in her thin neck were bulging above her flesh like thick piano wire from the tension pneumothorax he had caused. It took another two minutes for the increasing pressure in her chest cavity to collapse her injured lung to the size of a baseball. Another two minutes collapsed the lung further, pressing it against the heart and great vessels. After two more minutes, the compressed lung squeezed the last beat out of her heart. She died with the left side of her chest slightly bloated from the internal air pressure.

He watched her for another minute before he got off the floor and, using the tip of the screwdriver, cut both of her arms and legs free. With a push, her body fell to the floor face down. He turned her onto her back, stripped off what was left of her clothes, then pushed the chair to the side. He pulled the backpack and then the cooler between her opened legs. Looking at a cheap watch he had taped to the top of the cooler, he started to whistle a tuneless melody. He opened the backpack and neatly started to line up his tools next to the body. Looking again at the clock, he began to move faster. He had a lot of work to do and wanted to be finished before morning...

* * * * *

It was the cold night rain in the Little Beirut section near downtown Phoenix, Arizona, that kept most of the homeless in the vacant buildings that filled this area of town. Centered between the 7th Avenue Police Precinct and the State Capitol complex, Little Beirut was the no-

man's land that even the police didn't venture into after sunset. Dotted with more abandoned buildings and crumbling long vacant schools than the light industry it was zoned for, this was a place that, save for the transients gathered there, you did *not* go. In the shadow of the largest police headquarters in Arizona, every type of illicit activity known was produced, packaged, and served to an eager clientele. Rape, homicide, and drug peddling were nightly rituals whose remnants were addressed only in the brightness of day (with several squad cars present).

The Montovie Men's Hotel (on the corner of 11th Avenue and Madison Street) and the Drawbridge Christian House (a men's shelter and halfway house on 13th Street and Jefferson Road) held the few men trying to escape the insanity of the streets and stay clean (physically and drug-wise). The only women in the area were the hardcore crack and met amphetamine whores or the very few who followed their men into the nightly shelter of vacant buildings.

One of these coupled men, known on the streets as Chickenhead, was walking in the night drizzle looking for his girlfriend, Mimi Driver. It had been four days since he had last seen her. He was beginning to wonder if she had finally made good on her constant threat to go back to someplace in Texas (he didn't remember where). It wasn't too unusual for her to disappear for a day or two, but in the last seven months, they had gotten closer, and she would let him know if she would "be leavin'" (that's what she would call her tricks) and where he could meet her afterwards. Ten years older than her twenty-eight years of age, he really felt that he needed to look out for her.

Chickenhead had haunted these streets for almost seven years and had no fear of them. Six foot tall and rail thin, his long, dirty red hair stuck out of a taped-up bill-less black baseball cap. He knew intimately the mindless chaos that lived here and tried to pass on this knowledge to Mimi. She rarely listened. He loved her anyway.

After leaving the Home of the Savior soup kitchen earlier that evening, he walked the street, leaving word with people that he was looking for her. It was almost 3:00 a.m. when he started back to their flop on the second floor of the abandoned Grace Court School on 13th Street. The rain had stopped around 12:30 a.m., and the water and cold had soaked through the three layers of shirts and cheap pants he was wearing. A car passed him. He saw its brake lights brighten twice about a half block ahead and stop just down from a streetlight. Chickenhead stepped into a nearby door and watched.

“Fool,” he said aloud. *The only people on the streets this time of night you don ‘t want to meet*, he thought.

Wearing a long, dark coat, someone got out of the driver’s side, opened the back door, and quickly dumped a large bundle onto the sidewalk. The driver whipped the coat away from his legs, jumped back into the car, and sped off.

Chickenhead knew instantly that it was a body. After the car drove off, he hurried down the block toward the body, staying close to the shadows. A slight drizzle started by the time he reached the body. As he left the shadows for a closer look, he saw that it was wrapped in black plastic garbage bags. The bags were torn where they had scraped the sidewalk, and an acrid, chemical smell stopped him a foot or so from the body. And the sight of shoes sticking out of the bottom of the bags. Mimi’s shoes. He was on his knees tearing at the plastic and screaming when he cleared the wrapping from her head.

He stared at her for only a moment before he tried to stand, stumbled, then fell onto the ground next to her, whining. Unable to stop himself, he looked at her face again. Above the dull shine of her bloated face, stapled to her forehead, was a twenty-dollar bill...

Chapter 2

“Another morning, baby,” he said.

Stephen Proctor looked at the frame photo of his wife on the nightstand beside their bed. As usual, he had awakened twenty minutes before the digital alarm clock buzzed. It had been slightly more than a year since the death of his wife Carol.

He swung his feet to the cold wood floor, then walked through the dark apartment to the kitchen. He turned on the radio on the cabinet near the stove and then pushed the “start” button on the coffee maker. A minute later, just as the coffee started to pour out of the opening, Stephen placed a large mug from the sink under it. The smile on his face didn’t reach his sleepy, deep-set eyes. This used to drive Carol up the wall. “Why can’t you just wait for the pot to finish?” was her almost daily question. “Cause that first cup is the best,” he’d say, “strong, just like my woman.”

After she died, he remembered that morning, days later, when force of habit brought him to his morning ritual. As the coffee poured out, no cup caught it. As the steaming fluid ran onto the hot plate, then onto the countertop and then the floor, Stephen leaned against the refrigerator and bawled.

Absentmindedly, he pulled out his now full mug and replaced it with the pot. He sipped his coffee as he reminisced. He remembered yanking the unit off the counter, not feeling the boiling liquid splashing him, and hurling it into the wall. The plastic and metal exploded from the force of his throw when it hit the wall. It was months before he replaced the unit, months before he drank coffee in the morning again. When Stephen finally broke down, he replaced the coffee maker with the exact same model that he had destroyed. The morning cup of coffee was now a reminder of something they shared.

At the time of her death, he had been studying for the detective's exam after being a sergeant in the Homicide Division of the Phoenix Police Department. Working and studying kept him going. He could barely remember passing the exam when he took it two months later. His Mom and Dad were there when he received his detective's shield at the Department ceremony. Whitney, Carol's mother, was there also. Carol's father Patrick—wasn't. He blamed Stephen for Carol's death; still does. She was his only daughter, his only child. Hell, *Stephen* still blamed *himself*.

The alarm buzzed in the bedroom. Carrying the cup into the bedroom, he set it next to the alarm and pressed the "reset" button on the clock. Turning on the bedside light, then the bathroom light, he removed his boxer shorts and stepped into the shower before turning it on.

Carol had been pregnant. After six years of marriage, he had talked her into having a child. She didn't really want one—he did. She did it for him. The early months of the pregnancy

were tough for her, but manageable with the medications and lots of bed rest. Carol was an only child because eclampsia had almost killed her mother while she was carrying her. Whitney's condition scared Patrick so bad that while Whitney and baby were recovering in the hospital after a two-day touch-and-go labor, he got a vasectomy. Whitney and Carol came home three weeks later.

The water in the shower started to run cool. Stephen turned the water off and stepped out. He wiped the mist from the mirror with a dripping hand. Another pet peeve of Carol's—the shower. She'd made him late to work many times with her preference for lovemaking in their cramped bathroom after he'd step out of the shower, dripping wet. She'd take all the towels while he showered and wait. When he stepped out, she'd say, "You have to go through me to get dry, Papa." Tall with skin the color of mahogany and slender with huge, peaceful eyes and dreadlocks. He never stood a chance.

He ran water into the sink, lathered, and began to shave. When he finished, his heavy sigh warned him that today would be rough. Mornings like this were still tough—after more than a year, the worst time of the day for him. The bad days had finally started to dissipate in the last couple of months. He knew this one wouldn't. He made a mental note to call his shrink after he got to work. Toweling dry as he got to the bedroom, he sipped his coffee as he dressed.

She had refused to stop working up to the day the doctor checked her into the hospital because her hypertension was so severe. Her romantic greeting card company, Gentle Persuasion Cards, was run out of the second bedroom. Even in the later months when she was in so much pain, when her frightening weight gain from fluid retention and her condition kept her bedridden she still worked. He put a fax and phone line in their bedroom just to keep her off her feet. In the beginning of her sixth month, he got scared and asked her to abort their child; he didn't want to

lose her. She cried while laughing, saying after all the shit they had been through, she was going to have this baby just so that she could whip its ass for making her so sick. She died in the hospital while he was testifying in court in Phoenix. It happened at the end of her seventh month. He left as soon as he got the page from the hospital, calling over and over on his cell phone as he drove the twenty-seven minute ride from the State Capitol to Saint Mary's/Mother of Christ Medical Center in Mesa, Arizona. Despite the bed rest and all the meds, her body had spontaneously aborted their son while she was in her hospital bed. The placenta had ripped away from the uterus, and she and his son bled to death on the operating table nine minutes before he got there and forty-five minutes before her parents arrived, driving up from Tucson for their weekly visit to the hospital.

He pulled his cell phone from the charger on the bedroom dresser and clipped it to his belt. Next he opened the bottom drawer of the nightstand on his side of the bed and pulled out his firearm and shoulder holster. Carrying both in one hand, he finished his now cold coffee as he reached the kitchen and put the cup in the sink. As he adjusted his holster over his shoulder, he stared at the coffee maker and the half-filled pot it held. He reached over, turned the switch off, but didn't move from the kitchen. Shaking his head, he walked to the front door, grabbing a brown sports jacket off the living room sofa. He locked the door behind him as he again reminded himself to call Amber Bennet, his psychologist, as soon as he got to work.

Today won't be too bad, he thought as he opened his car. *Yeah, I'll be cool today*. He adjusted the car radio to the Tom Joyner Morning Show, then backed out of the carport.

"I'll do okay," he said out loud this time. And he was doing better...he only had to wipe away the tears once during his forty-minute drive to work...

Chapter 3

The sun was just clearing the skyline when the unit arrived.

“Roger that, dispatch. Car 486 on scene,” Training Officer Sergeant Jerome Keller said into the car radio. Switching it off, he turned to his trainee, Matt Woods, a rookie who was experiencing his first day on the job.

“Okay, take a breath, Matt. We’re here to keep anybody from fucking up the scene any more than it already is,” he said and then added, “We’ll leave that to the professionals in the crime lab.” He laughed as he exited the car.

Keller’s joke fell on deaf ears. Matt looked out the unit at the body on the sidewalk and swallowed hard. He was terrified and failed miserably in trying not to show it. For what seemed like the thousandth time, he wondered what he was thinking when he entered the Academy. He took a breath, opened the car door, and walked to the back of the car. Keller had the trunk open and was rummaging through it.

“Okay, Rookie, what’s first?”

“Uh, we physically secure the perimeter until the crime lab personnel arrive. Upon securing said area, we do pre-interviews of any individuals that may have useful information to the perceived wrongdoing or action, then triage gather data in order of importance in a written report to be turned over in my shift report...right?”

Keller closed his eyes and rubbed them with one hand.

“Matt, *Jesus*, don’t quote the textbook verbatim. Try to sneak an original thought in every now and then.”

“Uh, right. Okay.”

Keller reached in the car trunk and pulled out bright yellow perimeter tape and packing tape.

“Here,” he handed both to Matt, “rope off a space of about twenty feet on all sides of the body, and make it about four feet above the ground. And for Christ’s sake, RELAX! You’re turning fuckin’ green.”

Keller watched Matt’s slumped shoulders as he walked away.

“Fuckin’ college-educated idiot! They get dumber every year,” he mumbled.

By the time Matt began circling for the second time, another squad car pulled up opposite their car. Matt continued taping everything in sight, oblivious to the two cops leaning against their car, smiling. Keller tried not to notice them. The older of the two approached Keller as they all watched Matt perimeter tape, for the third time, a garbage can.

“So, Pop, how’s the kid?” he asked as he slapped Keller on the back. He turned and walked back to his unit, laughing out loud. Keller counted from one to twenty, backwards, before he called Matt over. The sound of his name caused Matt to flinch and turn, quickly covering the

distance to his training officer. In his haste, he kicked the body as he passed it and almost tripped. He *was* green as he stood before Keller. His color accentuated the deep red shade of his training officer's face.

“Go—to—the—car—and—wait—for—me.”

Matt feebly shook his head and opened his mouth to ask what to do with the tape just as the wind shifted, and he caught the corpse's full aroma. Before he could stop himself, he retched onto the front of Keller's pants. Both officers fell against their unit laughing hysterically as Keller half pulled, half carried his trainee to the car.

* * * * *

Across the street a small crowd watched as more police units drove up. Chickenhead was in the back of the growing crowd. He was the one who called 911 from a payphone to tell them about Mimi's body. When the operator asked who he was, he gave her the address nearest the body, then hung up. He wiped the phone and the keypad with his shirttail before walking half a block down from the scene. Standing in a doorway, he watched as the first units arrived. As the crowd gathered, he joined them across the street. An unmarked blue Ford pulled up, and Detectives Stephen Proctor and David Murphy got out. He saw both go under the tape just as someone tapped his arm. He looked down and saw an ashy, dark hand holding a large, steaming cup of coffee.

“Thanks, Jamaica,” he said as he took the cup.

The small, bent black man nodded at his friend and took a sip out of an equally sized cup of his own.

“I'm sorry about your woman, Robert. I just heard.”

“Not as sorry as the bastard that butchered her is gonna be.”

Jamaica nodded his head in agreement. A head shorter and seventeen years older than his friend, Jamaica was one of very few people who knew Chickenhead's real name—and could call him by it. They nursed their cups of coffee as the cold morning breeze blew up the street.

Jamaica moved closer to him and lowered his high voice before speaking.

“Word is that they found another body in one of the canals in Mesa. Same way...wrapped in black garbage bags. He was black,” he sipped his drink. “Found him yesterday.”

Chickenhead turned to his friend.

“When did they find him? What time of day?”

“They pulled him out of one of the garbage traps about one o'clock in the afternoon. Some kids saw all the trash piling up and went to look closer. Saw a foot sticking up and called the cops.”

“Mimi was dumped about three this morning. It was a big car,” Chickenhead took a sip from his cup of coffee, “big enough to hold a couple of bodies.”

They watched as a white van pulled up and backed behind the detective's car. The back doors opened from the inside, and two men in navy blue coveralls climbed out. One reached back inside and pulled out a gurney. The words “Medical Examiner” were embroidered in yellow on the back of his uniform.

“Excuse me, sir, I'm Detective Stephen Proctor of the Phoenix Police Department. Did you happen to see anything that might help us?”

Chickenhead turned and looked directly at the detectives. *Jeez, this guy is big*, he thought.

“Um, no...I just got here. I was walking to the store and saw the crowd.”

“Thanks.”

Stephen gave him the briefest of glances, nodded, then moved on to the next person in the rapidly thinning crowd. Murphy looked in Proctor's direction, waved to get his attention, then shook his head. Stephen handed a card to the woman he was talking to.

"Call me if you hear anything."

As Proctor and Murphy crossed the street, Chickenhead and Jamaica moved as one toward the woman Stephen had talked to. Just before they reached her, Jamaica grabbed Chickenhead's arm and stopped him.

"Let me talk to her alone."

Chickenhead looked at his friend, then nodded.

Jamaica talked to the woman for several minutes before Chickenhead watched her dig into her pants pocket and hand the card to Jamaica. He talked to her a moment longer before walking back to Chickenhead and handing him the card. Before Chickenhead could speak, Jamaica answered his question.

"I convinced her someone needed the card more than she did."

Chickenhead stared at the card, then shoved it into his pants pocket. He looked across the street in time to see the white Medical Examiners van leave. The last police unit and the detectives' car followed. He watched them all the way to the end of the block.

"Jamaica...I'll talk to you in a couple of days. I'll...uh, thanks. I'll meet you at the Post Office."

"I'll see what I can find out on this end." He squeezed Chickenhead's arm.

"I'm here for you, bro."

As Jamaica walked toward the State Capitol complex, Chickenhead crossed the street to the now deserted sidewalk. Next to the gutter were a couple of latex gloves and some loose strips

of perimeter tape. He stood on the spot where he had found Mimi's body and stared at the spot on the pavement where her head had rested. The tears welled in his eyes but never fell. About ten minutes passed before a small, thin Hispanic man with a slight limp walked behind him. He stopped a few steps away from Chickenhead and leaned against the still yellow taped garbage can.

"Yo, man. You okay? You need some shit? I got it all. I can tighten you up," he said softly.

Chickenhead didn't move from his spot, didn't turn his head when he answered. "Yeah," his voice cracked, "I need something."

"No problem. Meet me down the street. I'll fix you right up."

The man pushed off his perch, slowly making his way up the street. Chickenhead bent down, touched the cold, wet sidewalk with the palms of his hands, then stood up. He turned and followed the man down the street.

* * * * *

The caravan of police vehicles made it to the downtown Phoenix City Morgue in record time. As Proctor parked his car, he watched the white van carrying the body back up to the loading dock and stop. When he and his partner exited the car, Proctor saw his boss, Lieutenant Bryan LaPlante, pulling into the back parking lot. Proctor waved at him to get his attention as the commander got out of the vehicle. He nodded to both of the detectives as he walked over.

"Murphy, Proctor," he began, "find out anything at the scene? Anybody talking?" The three men walked over to the loading dock.

"The usual," Murphy commented. "Lot of people looking but no one saw shit."

As the men entered the double doors that lead into the chilled facility, Proctor tried to ignore the slow roll of his stomach and the tightening of his throat. This place reminded him of the last time he'd seen Carol's body. Patting first one pocket of his jacket and then the other, he cursed under his breath. He was out of Tums. Again.

Murphy tapped his friend on the shoulder. Proctor turned to his partner and saw a foil-wrapped stick of gum in Murphy's hand. Thankful, he nodded and took the offering. It was better than nothing.

The men watched in silence as the morgue attendant, dressed in black scrubs and wearing a paper facemask, removed the body from the dark plastic body bag. The attendant weighed the body and put a cardboard toe tag on the big toe of the right foot. He scribbled something on the tag before he wheeled the gurney into the autopsy room. Proctor followed the man through the large shiny metal door that led into the room and saw that a police photographer and a fully gowned medical examiner were already inside.

The attendant pushed the gurney next to a large metal table and locked the wheels of the stretcher by kicking a lever on each wheel with his foot. He and the examiner then, together, pulled the body onto the fixed table. Proctor rubbed his stomach with one hand while he suppressed a burp. His guts felt like they were on fire.

"This is the first time anyone's found a fresh body that this mutt's left," LaPlante explained. "Let's hope we can get something out of it."

Proctor nodded as he stared at the puffed broken face of the dead girl, her half-open eyes sunken in, looking upward toward a ceiling she couldn't see. The medical examiner started to cut away the sheets of black garbage bags that were taped around the body as he talked loud enough for the microphone mounted over the table to pick up his words. The other man reached up to a

large, circular halogen light positioned high above the table and turned it on. The man cutting away the plastic halted about two-thirds of the way up the body and stepped back from the table. With a gloved hand, he waved the police photographer over and then pointed to the end of his cut. They all moved closer to the table as the man began cutting again.

“I got something here,” he said as the photographer snapped pictures. The examiner gently peeled back the layers of garbage bags. Everyone stared at the large clear plastic baggie lying on the woman’s abdomen. After the photographer took several more photos from different angles, the examiner, using a pair of six-inch forceps, carefully lifted the baggie from the body. A crudely drawn picture—it looked like a tracing of a person’s hand with a beak and two small eyes on the thumb with two stick feet extending from the bottom of the palm—was sealed inside. The paper was lined notebook filler and wet on the bottom, stained a dull red from a tear in the corner of the plastic. LaPlante took a step closer to get a better look.

“Shit,” he muttered, “that’s a first.”

Holding the foot square baggie over a large police evidence bag, the examiner placed the baggie into the evidence container as his assistant held it open. The examiner sealed it closed, setting it aside on a tray under the table as he returned to his narration and examination of the body.

“Caucasian female, brunette...” He stopped again. “The ‘Y’ incision already present—.” The examiner looked up at LaPlante. “She’s already been cut open and sewed up, Commander.”

Waiting for his assistant to get scrapings from under her nails and do finger and palm prints, the examiner gestured for his assistant to help him. Working together, they rolled Mimi onto her side. The assistant held her in that position as the other man scanned the backside of her battered body.

“Very little lividity on the back, buttocks, thighs.” They laid her on her back again and, lifting her left arm away from her side, the examiner pointed to the small patch of duct tape he found there. The photographer took pictures of the area before and after the tape was removed. The examiner put her arm back on the table and continued.

“I’m going to try to obtain a blood sample from the sub clavicle artery.”

Taking a large syringe from the work tray next to the body, he made several attempts to draw blood from the area across the top of her chest. All failed to produce the desired fluid.

“Unsuccessful with sub clavicle extraction. Will attempt blood sample from the iliac artery.” Putting the needle down, the examiner massaged Mimi’s left leg upward from mid-thigh to the top of her slender leg, hoping to push blood up to the artery in her pelvis. After a minute, he sank the needle into her flesh. On the second attempt he withdrew a small sample. Setting the capped and labeled syringe aside, he moved back to the top of the body. He picked up a large pair of scissors from the work tray.

“I’m now cutting away the thread in the ‘Y’ incision.” He cut through the thread with the scissors and removed the remnants with forceps. “I’m now folding back the opening of the chest cavity.”

The two detectives and the commander moved closer to the body as Eric Downly turned his head and opened Mimi’s chest like a hinged door. And everyone save for Downly stepped back quickly as the thick formaldehyde fumes caused them all to tear up and gasp for air.

Downly’s attendant misted the air above the body with a plastic spray bottle filled with an ammonia solution to help neutralize the fumes and then clicked a switch on the nearby wall. Large air movers hanging over the autopsy area cleared what was left of the fumes.

“Goddamn,” Murphy growled, his eyes still tearing, “what the fuck’s in there, acid?”

The lieutenant, like his men, coughed, and after the vapors dissipated, edged closer to the table. Downly's talk continued.

“Internal organs, at least for a time, have been preserved in a formaldehyde-type solution.” He gingerly probed the flesh and bone mantel within the chest area with the forceps. “Edges of the bones of the breast plate are smooth. They appear to have been cut by a bone saw or like instrument.”

Not missing a beat, Downly continued. “I'm now removing the breast plate.”

Remembering the noxious fumes from earlier, the detectives and the commander took a quick step backward as the police photographer stayed near the table, snapping pictures. The photographer stopped abruptly and moved the camera away from his face. Proctor watched as both the photographer and Downly stared into the blossomed body cavity. The photographer lowered the camera as he stepped back, pulling at his paper mask with his free hand. He had just gotten the mask off when he vomited into a large stainless steel sink directly behind him. Downly, looking mildly annoyed at the man, placed the plate of flesh on a large tray that his assistant had handed him. With a fluid-drenched gloved hand, he gestured for the three men to step closer.

“Bryan, I think you need to see this. And you probably need to look for another body.”

All stepped to within inches of the table's side and looked into the body opening. Murphy covered his mouth before burping loudly and sprinting to the nearest sink, where he too lost his breakfast. Proctor was saved from the humiliation of upchucking only because he hadn't eaten anything that morning. LaPlante, though pale as milk, kept his composure as he stared at the mess of organs—both lungs, heart, and what looked to be the stomach—all having been tossed

carelessly into Mimi's chest. And sitting on top of the glistening jumble of insides was a man's severed penis—with the scrotum attached—in a clear, sealed plastic bag...

Chapter 4

It was just before 10 a.m., and he was crashing after four sleepless days and nights of walking, riding buses, and questioning every homeless person he met. He'd been to all parts of Metro Phoenix and back again. Fueled by crack cocaine, the drug Ecstasy, coffee, and anger, Chickenhead was obsessed with finding out everything about the murders that had happened five days ago. This was the second time in the last few days he showed up at the Postal Station for the homeless on Eighth Avenue in Phoenix. With today being December first, most of the nine hundred plus homeless in the area would be stopping here for their disability or welfare checks or the bi-monthly mailing of food stamps. That flow of people he would not miss.

Standing just outside the door, held open with a cracked 2 x 4, he leaned against the graffiti-covered wall. He shielded his face from the bright morning sun with the small notebook he held.

Chickenhead watched for people coming down the street. The two shirts he wore didn't keep him warm, and he looked terrible. The dark blue of his eyes appeared to float on twin pools of blood, making his dirty, unshaven face look on the verge of screaming. In the last three hours, several people had walked up to the building where he had camped, and most had answered his questions. No one knew anything. He moved off the wall as a large man and a bigger woman approached the station. He was a few feet away from them before he spoke.

“Excuse me, can I talk to you for a minute?”

The man Chickenhead spoke to stopped talking to his companion and looked at him.

“What the fuck do you want, tramp?”

The short fat woman with him covered her slack, toothless mouth and chuckled.

Chickenhead stopped about two feet from the couple and held up his empty hand, palm facing down.

“Sir, I don't want money or stuff, okay? I just want to talk to you for a minute, then I'll leave, okay?”

The ugly look of contempt that covered the man's face grew into an evil grin that revealed three missing bottom teeth. He was several inches shorter than Chickenhead but outweighed him by at least sixty pounds—most of it in his huge beer belly.

“Oh, you wanna ask some questions? You must be from the Bum Academy,” he laughed.
“You must be undercover, huh, boy?”

Chickenhead took one step back.

“I'm sorry I wasted your time, bro.”

“Fuck you and get out of my way, shithead.”

Chickenhead moved to one side and let him and his smiling partner pass. As they disappeared into the station, he was already talking to another man who had just walked up to the station.

Chickenhead had forgotten about the fat man and was talking to two men near the door when the fat man and his partner exited the station ten minutes later.

“Well, if it ain’t mister reporter,” he shouted. “Don’t tell him a damn thing, boys. He’s working with the cops on Bum Patrol.”

The two men Chickenhead was talking to started to back away from him. Chickenhead turned to face him.

“That’s right, boys, his cover’s blown. You’ve been talking to an undercover asshole.”

Both he and his woman laughed.

“Bro, I don’t want any trouble.”

“Didn’t I tell you to get the fuck out of my way?”

The big man covered the short space between them in one step, swinging at Chickenhead but hitting only air. He turned to his right looking for the bum when he was hit from below by a kneeling Chickenhead. The force of the bum’s open-handed blow to the fat man’s ample stomach lifted him a good seven inches off the pavement and slammed him into the building. With one hand on his stomach and the other trying to steady himself against the building, the fat man moaned loudly as his bladder released down his leg. He made a feeble grab at Chickenhead as the bum sprinted past him. He had just pushed himself off the wall in time to see Chickenhead running back, clutching a length of wood that had held the door open. The fat man turned, trying to hobble away, just as Chickenhead’s swing connected with his elbow. The crack of breaking bone could be heard ten feet away. The fat man’s scream was cut short by another blow across

his head. As he fell unconscious to the pavement, the woman screamed. One quick look from Chickenhead, bloody board in hand, silenced her. Dropping the wood, he crossed to the front of the man, backed away a step, then kicked him in the face hard enough to splatter blood and mucous on the bottom of Chickenhead's filthy jeans. Breathing hard and sweating in the morning cold, Chickenhead walked to the woman. She was shaking and a dark, wet stain was spreading down the front of her soiled dress. He shook his finger in her face, and she flinched as if struck.

“If I hear from *anybody*—cop—*anybody*,” he pointed at the prone man, “you get the same, understand?”

The stain on her dress, steaming in the morning cold, got bigger.

Before Chickenhead picked up his pen and notebook, he went through the man's pockets. He took the three tiny vials of crack cocaine and about eighty dollars and some change. The two men who had left earlier were now walking toward him. When they spotted the scene behind Chickenhead, they bolted back up the street. It took Chickenhead almost twenty minutes, using back streets and alleys, to get to his flop on the second floor of the abandoned Grace Court School. Moving aside the canvas covering a second floor window, he had a clear view of the scene he had just left. In the time it took Chickenhead to get home, a police unit had pulled up. He watched the officer get out of the car and walk to the fat man, who was now sitting up. While he watched, a second unit pulled up and blocked his view of the man he'd beaten. Chickenhead scanned the street. Other than the cops and the fat man, the street was deserted.

Backing away from the window, he removed his blood-spotted pants and shoes. He opened a cabinet, pulled out an equally dirty pair of shiny gray dress pants, and put them on. He replaced the shoes with a torn pair of faded black high-top sneakers. Grabbing his bedroll, some

shirts, and a gallon of bottled water, he put everything at the top of the stairwell outside the classroom. He re-entered the room he and Mimi had called home and took a yellowed-with-age plastic bucket from one of the lower cabinets. They had used this as their nighttime toilet.

Dumping the contents in the hall, he opened a half-full bottle of bleach from the same cupboard and poured the entire contents into the bucket. He rolled the jeans into a tight tube and placed them in the bleach bucket. Then the shoes. He swirled the bucket for a minute, then put it back in the cupboard. He threw the empty bleach bottle down the hall as he headed down the stairs.

Chickenhead exited from the backside of the building and quickly walked across to the bus stop at 13th Street and Van Buren. He was counting out the fare when the bus arrived twenty minutes later. Boarding the almost full bus, he made his way to the last few vacant seats in the rear of the bus. His crazed look and his smell (he had walked through the contents of his toilet) helped to clear several rows near him. Sitting near an open window, he read from his notebook during the twenty-minute ride. Two streets down from his stop, he buzzed the driver and got off the bus.

Crossing Van Buren, Chickenhead stopped outside All Star Military Surplus, took off his shoes, and leaned them against the wall of the building before entering. It took him ten minutes to find and pay for his goods. He grabbed his sneakers and put them inside two plastic bags, then put on the two-dollar flip-flops he bought in the store and walked the two blocks to the Sunny Day Motel. After checking into the motel and paying forty dollars for a room with a kitchenette for the next two days, he threw his stuff in the room and walked to the corner store. Ten minutes later he was locking his door as he balanced two bags of groceries in his arms. By the time he put everything away, he was swaying as he walked through the small room. The fight and the four-day drug binge had caught up with him. Holding on to furniture, he made it to the bathroom with the bag that held his soiled shoes. He put a small bar of hotel soap in the sink, ran hot water in it,

and dropped in both sneakers. After undressing in the bathroom, he returned to the kitchen to open a beer. He gulped it down before he stepped into the shower, where he turned the water on full blast and stayed in until it ran cold. Drying off with a small hotel towel, he took the only chair in the room and angled it under the doorknob. He lay on the bed with notebook in hand and quickly fell into a hard, dreamless sleep for the next twelve hours...

* * * * *

Reading his notes while sipping a beer, he figured there had been, counting Mimi, at least five murders of homeless people in the past nineteen months. He tried to ignore the all-over ache of his body and frowned at the notes he'd taken over the last week. From the hordes of people he had talked to, he pieced together that all of them—four women and one man—had been prostitutes. All except the floater in Mesa were white and had been found by street people. No one, save for him, had seen any of the bodies being dumped. All of the bodies had a twenty-dollar bill stapled to the forehead. One old man with whom he had spent the better part of a day in Mesa (along with a twelve pack of beer and four 99 cent Big Macs) gave him the most useful information of all. The old man (“just call me Buddy,” which he kept saying to Chickenhead about every thirty minutes) had found one of the bodies after midnight a year ago by the I-17 underpass at 7th Avenue. He thought he had found a bundle of clothing until he shined a small flashlight on it. That’s when he saw the money sticking out of the top of the black plastic.

Buddy had dragged the body into the bushes near the highway and had cut the remaining plastic to see if there might be any more money. That’s how he found the picture he had given to Chickenhead. It was still enclosed in the large plastic baggie Buddy had found it in and was stained with what looked like blood.

Chickenhead got up and crossed the room to the wall-mounted phone. He dialed Jamaica's voice mail number but got only a buzz on the line. Puzzled, he looked at the phone.

That's when he saw the small placard on the wall. It read:

All phone calls MUST go through the operator. No long distance outgoing calls are allowed. Dial #923 to reach the operator. A one-dollar per call charge will be added to your credit card. If you are paying in cash, please see the front desk for instructions. Have a great stay!

Sunny Day Motel Group

"Fuck."

He put on his pants, a shirt, and his flip-flops, grabbed his room key, and ran to the office. He had to hit the little bell twice before a chubby, balding man appeared from a back room. The man was holding a plastic fork and chewed as he spoke.

"You need to check in, buddy?"

"No, I'm in Room 105. I need to make some phone calls."

"Got a credit card?"

"Ten dollar deposit. Cash."

Chickenhead handed him his last twenty-dollar bill and waited for his change. Seeing the morning paper on a chair in the small lobby, he took it on his way out.

Back in his room, he dialed the operator, got an outside line, then dialed Jamaica's voice mail. He left a message with his address, room number, and directions how to get there. Hanging up the phone, he sat back at the table and picked up the baggie, staring at the stained picture inside. He was reading his notes when the phone rang.

"Jamaica?"

"Yeah, man. Where the hell you been?"

"I stayed in Mesa for a couple of days. What did you find out?"

“You need to stay away from here for a few days. Someone got the shit kicked out of ‘em, and a couple of his buddies lookin’ for some payback.”

Chickenhead snorted. “Thanks for the tip. What did you find out?”

“Three or four people got killed here over the last year, then that guy in Mesa. All ho’s. All cut open, then sewed back up.”

Chickenhead frowned. The cut and sewed part was news to him.

“Cut up like a knife fight or stabbed?”

“Nah, man, cut open from neck to pussy, then sewed back up.”

Chickenhead leaned against the wall, dizzy. He had never checked Mimi’s body. He couldn’t. He just screamed and stared at her face. Then he had called the police.

“You still there, Robert?”

“Can you make it here tonight, Jamaica?”

“Yeah, I think so. Wait a minute, let me check.” He heard him talking to someone about a ride, then he came back on the line.

“It’s gonna be a couple of hours, but I’ll make it.”

“I’ll be up. Later.” He hung up the phone.

Chickenhead stood against the wall, still weak from the news Jamaica had given him. Something else...something Buddy had said to him tried to surface. He opened the tiny refrigerator and reached for a beer, then stopped and closed the door. Going to the cupboard above the sink, he pulled out one of the two paper-wrapped cups and tore off the covering. He filled it with water from the sink and drank down three glasses before he felt a bit steadier. Chickenhead sat down at the table and looked through his notebook until he found the page he was looking for. Buddy said he had spent a week locked up at Madison Street Jail right after he

found the body. He had overheard a couple of the cops talking to a guard about a body that had been found. They didn't know or didn't care that Buddy was listening. The body was the second that the cops had found near the highway in the last month. One cop laughed and said that whoever was doing in bums was doing everyone else a favor by scaring the rest of 'em to Tucson. He said the way they had been found all cut up made him think of a Thanksgiving turkey. Buddy told him that after the cops left, he had written down the line the cop had told the others.

“Maybe we should just call this nut ‘Turkeystuffer’.”

Chapter 5

Barely able to contain his anger, Chickenhead sat in the cold interrogation room and looked at the wall-mounted camera for what seemed like the millionth time. After waiting there for the last hour and a half, his patience was gone, and his ass was hurting from sitting on the unpadded metal chair. This wasn't the first time he had been in one of these rooms, but it was the first time he had come of his own free will. He had cleaned up as much as he could before coming here. His long red hair was washed and pulled back, the ponytail held in place with two rubber bands. His shirt and pants were a two-part tan work uniform he had lifted out of an unattended clothes dryer two days ago at the Quarter Plus Laundromat on 15th Avenue. His socks and underwear came from the same dryer. The brand new hiking boots he had on were the reward of the last three days of day labor he had just finished yesterday.

He badly wanted a cigarette or gum or anything to calm him down a bit. Chickenhead got up and started to pace under the eye of the wall-mounted camera. He stopped and leaned against

the back wall, closing his eyes. He could still see Mimi's dead, bloated face colored a sick black and yellow under the streetlight where he had found her. Saw the twenty-dollar bill—the same twenty-dollar bill he had in his pocket—stapled to her forehead.

He opened his eyes and stood away from the wall. *This isn't helping Mimi*, he thought.

As he was walking to the door it opened, and a stocky, uniformed officer walked in. He was holding several folders under his arm and a cardboard cup of coffee in his free hand. The faraway look on the cop's face as he entered the room let Chickenhead know this wasn't the person he needed to talk to. The cop looked around for somewhere to set down his stuff when Chickenhead spoke to him.

“Uh, officer, is Mr. Proctor here?”

The cop sipped his coffee before answering. “Hello, sir. I'm Sergeant Makes. Sorry to keep you waiting, but it's been a zoo. What can I help you with?”

The officer stood just inside the open door, leaning on a padlocked, battered gray file cabinet. He set the cup of coffee on top of it and opened one of the folders.

“You said to the officer who interviewed you that you had some information. What is it?” The cop glanced at Chickenhead, then back at his papers. He pointed to the chair. “Why don't you have a seat, if you have something to say.”

Chickenhead stared at the chair, then pulled it out and sat.

“Good boy,” the cop said, “Now what ya got for me?”

“Sir, I asked to speak to Sergeant Proctor. I was told he was here tonight. I would like to speak to him, if that's possible.”

“Detective Proctor is out on a call,” he lied, “so you’ll just have to trust me with this information. I’ll make sure he gets a full report, though.” Sergeant Makes pulled a pen out of his breast pocket and started writing on one of the folders.

“Like I said, buddy, we’re busy tonight, so if ya got something ta say, let’s hear it, okay?”

Chickenhead could feel the rage flowing through his body in waves. *If I go off on this fat fuck, I’ll never help Mimi*, he thought. *That piece of shit has to pay*. Thinking of her helped him stay focused. He coughed to try to loosen the tightness that threatened to close his throat.

“I’ve seen him,” Chickenhead said simply.

“Seen who?” Makes asked disinterested. He continued to scribble on his report.

“The guy who’s killin’ all those people. The whores and street people. Turkeystuffer.”

Sergeant Makes stopped writing in his report and looked up at Chickenhead. He quickly closed his folder and pushed it next to his coffee.

“How do you know that name? Who told you?”

Got your attention on that one, you fat bastard, he thought. A slight grin crossed his face and was gone. He ignored the cop’s question.

“I saw him dump a body and know of a couple more. You motherfuckers ain’t been lookin’ for him ‘cause he’s just been killin’ us bums. Not ‘til now. Now y’all want him. I’ve seen him.”

Makes’ face reddened, but his voice stayed even.

“I asked you a question. How do you know that name?”

“You don’t believe me? I’ll show you. Give me a piece of paper and a pencil...and a cigarette.”

Makes looked at him for a moment, then pulled a small key ring off of his belt. He unlocked and then opened the file cabinet, pulled out a legal pad from the drawer, then closed and relocked it. Taking another pen out of his shirt pocket, he crossed the room and threw both on the table. He pointed to the “No Smoking” sign on the wall beside the table at which Chickenhead sat.

“Stop wasting my time. If you got something, show me or get to steppin’.”

Chickenhead reached for the pen and pad, pulling both closer to him. He turned the pad sideways, placed his hand on the middle of the paper, and carefully started to trace the outline of his fingers. He heard Makes inhale sharply, but he didn’t look up until he’d finished the drawing. Chickenhead was frowning while he added a beak and one eye to the thumb, then completed the picture by closing the bottom portion and adding two stick feet. When he looked up from his work, his frown was replaced by a smirk. The cop’s face was the color of paste under the overhead fluorescent lights, and his mouth was hanging open. Chickenhead pushed the drawing across the table to Makes, suppressing a giggle when Makes flinched backward.

“When you find the bodies, you find a drawing like this one, only it’s in a large plastic baggie, and the baggie is stapled to the body.”

Makes grabbed the tablet off the table. He looked at Chickenhead, then the drawing, then back at Chickenhead as he backed out the door.

“Stay here. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” Makes grabbed his folders and closed the door behind him. Chickenhead heard the door latch and grunted out loud.

Yeah, y’all real interested now, he thought.

He had just finished the last of Makes’ coffee when Makes, followed by Detective Proctor, entered the room. Makes was carrying a folding chair that he slid under the table

opposite Chickenhead. Proctor was carrying a small tape recorder that he placed on the table between himself and Chickenhead. Proctor pushed the “Record” button after he settled into his seat. Behind him, Makes had stationed himself by the now-closed door.

“Sergeant Makes said you were asking for me, Mister...I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Everybody call me Chickenhead.”

“Mister...Chickenhead, how did you come upon the information you relayed to Sergeant Makes?”

He looked at Proctor, then Makes, and the anger came back. *Fuck this*, he thought, *if y’all want something, it’s time I got something.*

“I...I would like a cup of coffee, if you have any made, please.”

The look of bewilderment on Proctor’s face was immediate and followed just as quickly with another...disdain. His next words came through tightly pursed lips.

“Sir, this is not a convenience store, if...”

“No, it’s *not*,” Chickenhead interrupted. “It’s ‘pose ta be a police station, and I came here ta help. Know what I got? I got ta sit here in this cold ass room on this hard ass chair for two goddamn hours while y’all ignored the fuck out of me. Then you send in this asshole,” he pointed at Makes, “who won’t even look at me but expects me ta spill my guts when he won’t even ask me my name.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but...”

Chickenhead pushed his chair away from the table but stayed seated. Both cops’ eyes followed him.

“Y’all wanna know how I know this stuff? One of the people butchered was my girlfriend Mimi. I saw her dumped out of the back of a fuckin’ car like a sack of shit. You want some information from me? Treat me like a goddamn man.”

Chickenhead was holding onto the edge of the table, glaring at Makes and shaking. He looked at Proctor, then looked away. *Mimi*, he thought, *help me...*

Proctor cleared his throat before he spoke.

“I’m...sorry.” Suddenly, Proctor smelled the perfume Carol had always worn. Just as quickly, the scent was gone.

“I’m truly sorry.” The emotion in Proctor’s voice erased most of the anger Chickenhead felt and brought his full attention to Proctor. Proctor reached across the table to the recorder and switched it off.

“Man, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Chickenhead looked at Proctor for a moment, then nodded. The Detective turned to Sergeant Makes.

“Jim, could you get us both a cup of coffee, please? And give us a couple of minutes alone.”

After Makes left the room, the silence was awkward for both men. After a minute Chickenhead spoke.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I...I want to help catch this bastard. She didn’t...no one deserves to die like that.”

“And we want your help. Do you smoke?”

“I’m dying for one.”

Proctor pulled a half gone pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, took one out, then handed the pack to Chickenhead. He fished a plastic lighter out of his pants pocket and lit both cigarettes. They smoked in silence until Sergeant Makes returned.

Makes set both styrofoam cups of coffee on the table with several small packs of sugar, then returned to the file cabinet and closed the door. Chickenhead added several bags of sugar, stirring the coffee with the pen Makes had given him. He sipped his coffee as Proctor spoke to him.

“Chickenhead...do you mind if I ask you your real name?” Chickenhead sipped his coffee again before he answered Proctor’s question.

“My name is Robert.”

“Thanks,” Proctor said as he extended his hand across the table. “Mine is Stephen. I’m glad you’re here.”

Visibly surprised, Robert wiped his hand on his pant leg before shaking Proctor’s outstretched hand.

“Okay,” Proctor said, “do you mind?” He pointed at the recorder. “What you have to say may help us in this investigation. We...I want to make sure we get it all.”

Robert nodded.

Proctor leaned closer, then switched on the recorder.

Chapter 6

It was the last of six operations of the day, all hip and knee replacements, with an unscheduled bi-polar hip replacement. His double-gloved, tightly bandaged right hand was singing in pain. His patient was a big woman, well over two hundred pounds and long limbed. Her heavy weight added density to her already thick bones. With his sprained hand throbbing, his agony was apparent by the profuse sweat his surgical nurse kept blotting from his brow.

“Doctor Howard, are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

Finally clearing the femoral shaft of cancerous bone, he inserted various size trials to measure the size of the opening. He settled on a number three femoral stem to insert into the cavity and prepared bone cement to seal the stem in place. After adding the adhesive to the bone, he picked up the two-pound stainless steel mallet to pound the stem into place. Two blows later,

he stopped and stepped away from the operating table. He wiped his brow before speaking to the observing resident.

“Doctor Thompson, I want you to finish this and close up.”

“I’d be glad to, Doctor.”

Talking the resident through the rest of the procedure and closing routine, the doctor watched as the patient was wheeled into post-op recovery thirty minutes later. After thanking the resident and his crew, Dr. Braxton Howard quickly left the operating room and bee-lined to the doctors’ locker room. He removed his drenched cap and mask with his uninjured left hand and dropped both garments to the floor. Slowly, he removed the gloves from his slightly swollen right hand. He winced as he unwrapped the Ace bandage from his hand, and the released pressure brought fresh pain. It had been a week since he had killed and gutted Mimi and the bum in Mesa, and the swelling was just going down. He looked up when he heard the door to the locker room squeak open. He slowly flexed the hand.

“Hey, Howie, you in here?”

“In the back, near the water fountain.”

Tony Norwood, his regular anesthesiologist, came around the corner dressed in faded blue jeans and a black polo shirt. He was still combing his damp hair.

“Hey, buddy, you looked a little rough in there today. How’s the hand?”

“I’ll survive. That last bi-polar kicked my ass.”

“You taking anything for that?” he asked as he pointed to the hand.

“Nothing that you’d want to know about.”

Dr. Norwood smiled, then chuckled.

“Oookay...you better get your crippled ass in the shower pronto if we’re gonna make the Sun’s game. These tickets are burning a hole in my pocket, and I will leave your busted hand self here if you don’t get a move on.”

A smile broke the frown on Howard’s face as he looked at his friend.

“Shit, you’d do that anyway if you thought I’d let you get away with it.”

“How true, how true.” He looked at Braxton’s slightly swollen hand.

“I take my hat off to you. No way I’d be banging bones all day in your condition.”

“No pain, no gain,” he laughed, “and definitely no plane.”

“When do you pick it up?”

“December 19th, an early Christmas present to me.”

“You da man.” Tony turned and started walking to the front of the locker room. He stopped at the corner and turned to Howard.

“You got thirty minutes to get your shit together or get left. You’re buying dinner. I’ll be in the cafeteria.”

Tony disappeared around the corner. Howard heard the locker room door squeak open, then close. Turning to his locker, he opened it and took out a small bottle of 50 mg Demerol tablets. He popped two of the industrial strength narcotics into his mouth and dry swallowed them, then quickly undressed and stepped into the shower room. Fifteen minutes later, he was combing his still wet blonde hair as he walked through the hallway to a bank of elevators. He boarded one, pushing the button for the second floor. He had just walked into the cafeteria as Tony was walking out.

“Hey, glad I didn’t have to come back to the dungeon to drag you out.”

“Would have been a short struggle.”

Tony pressed the button for the elevator.

“Struggle? Boy, I could take your tall, skinny, surfer-lookin’ ass out and still have time for lunch.”

The laugh from Howard was loud and genuine. By the time they reached the underground parking lot, the narcotics had kicked in, and Howard was feeling no pain. Tony pointed to his car, a sparkling ebony Porsche 911.

“I’ll drive. Your high ass is liable to get somebody killed.”

Pulling out of the hospital parking garage into the light early evening traffic, Tony floored it to the downtown arena. Two blocks from America West Arena, they hit a wall of traffic that slowed them to a crawl. After sitting in traffic for ten minutes, Tony saw an opening in the traffic and gunned the car into it. He drove back two blocks and parked the car on a side street almost four blocks from the arena. Jogging past the walking crowd, Tony was out of breath by the time he handed their tickets to the attendant. When he looked over to Braxton, he realized the doctor wasn’t even winded. Tony snorted.

“Great! An in-shape dope fiend.”

Braxton smiled and shrugged as they entered the building. They made it to their third row center court seats just as the announcer began introducing the Sun’s starting line-up.

* * * * *

The game was a wash, with the Sun’s losing to the Lakers 85-102. All through dinner afterwards, Braxton smiled at his friend’s idle threats of canceling his season tickets.

“You want to hit Majerle’s for a minute?” Tony asked as they drove into downtown Phoenix.

“Not tonight. I’m gonna call it a night and soak my hand before it falls off.”

“Suit yourself, wussy-boy. You gonna be cool for work on Thursday?”

“Yeah. I scheduled two knees. One is a total, but that’s the only banger. The rest of the day is paperwork.”

They talked shop until Tony pulled into the almost empty doctors’ lot and stopped next to Braxton’s Mercedes SLK Roadster. Braxton was opening his car when Tony honked his horn to get his attention. He leaned across the passenger seat and talked through the open window.

“You need to heal up quick. I’m missing the spending money I get from kickin’ your ass on the golf course.”

Braxton smiled and gave him the finger with his good hand as Tony sped out of the lot. Laughing out loud at his friend, he started his forty-minute ride to his Scottsdale condominium. As he turned onto the interstate highway, he popped two more Demerol tablets. Opening the windows on both sides of the car from his door control, he enjoyed the crisp night air as he drove home.

* * * * *

Standing bare-chested and in his stocking feet next to a large stainless steel bowl filled with crushed ice and water, Braxton slowly turned the pages of a catalog for his new plane. He was taking delivery of a Cessna 3401 Series One in about two weeks. He alternated between turning pages and sipping from a can of beer with his good hand as he slowly turned the glossy pages he had almost memorized. With a range of 1307 nautical miles without refueling and a cruising speed of 270 miles per hour with a 3/4 ton payload, he could be almost anywhere in the country in hours. He was eager to try out his new toy and excited about the new horizons the mobility would open up to him. He had only killed once out of state, in Dallas, while on vacation there almost three years ago.

That entire episode had been a nightmare. He was unfamiliar with the area and got lost looking for a place to dump the body. Not fifteen minutes after getting rid of it, he made a wrong turn down a one-way street and was pulled over. The cop had been parked in an alley just before the one way sign Braxton hadn't seen. With his bloodied clothes and tools wrapped in plastic and stuffed in the spare tire well of the rental's trunk, he explained to the officer that he was a doctor from out of town visiting friends. After running his plates and checking his ID, the cop talked for another ten minutes about his daughter's nursing career. He didn't give him a ticket. Apologizing for keeping him so long, the officer gave him directions out of the area and wished him a good night.

As soon as the cop drove off, Braxton started trembling uncontrollably. In the thirty minutes it took him to drive to his hotel, hives the size, of quarters covered his arms and back. Too shaken to risk discarding his bloodied clothes and tools, he kept them in his room. It was a long, sleepless night. All of this could have been avoided if he had had more time to examine the area. The plane would solve that problem. A pilot since his teens and certified on fanjets for more than a year, Braxton knew this plane would free him to travel the country on a whim. To scout out areas. To kill more.

He pulled his soaked hand out of the basin and flexed it slowly several times. Between the drugs and the cold water, there was no longer any pain. Deciding to play it safe, he would let his resident do any procedures he had scheduled for Thursday. This was the first time in, all of his killings, nineteen in the last five years, that he had beat anyone to the point of hurting himself. Mimi was a total waste of energy with all her sobbing and begging. He had expected a bit more guts from her.

He dumped the water-filled bowl into one of the twin stainless steel sinks in the professionally equipped kitchen he rarely used. He set the bowl on a drying rack near the sinks and got another beer out of the SubZero refrigerator. He turned off the kitchen lights on his way into the living room. Using two remote controls, he switched on the overhead track lighting and the television, tuning the wall-sized TV to CNN. He lowered the sound to slightly more than a murmur. Pulling a plastic exercise mat from behind a huge chocolate-colored leather sofa, he set the mat down near the TV. He striped down to his boxer shorts and placed his beer on the floor next to the mat. Settling onto the mat, he took a long swallow of beer, then started the first of five sets of one hundred sit-ups...

Chapter 7

The three men sat at a table in the center of Lt. Bryan LaPlante's office combing through copies of Chickenhead's notebook.

"Christ, this guy is thorough. I wouldn't want him on *my* ass," Murphy mumbled as he leafed through the Xeroxed copies of notes. Proctor nodded while reading along with his set.

"Look here," Murphy pointed. "He says he talked to the buddy of the floater they found in Mesa last week. Shit, I was on the horn with Mesa PD this morning, and they *still* didn't know who the hell the guy was. And here he's got both of their names.

"Make sure you get a copy of these notes to Mesa PD this afternoon," Bryan ordered and turned to Proctor. "What do you think of this guy? Is he legit? A flake?"

Proctor put his notes down and thought for a moment before he answered his boss.

"I think he's pissed and wants revenge. This was his woman who was filleted, and he's taking it personal."

“You think he did it?”

“Nah, no way. My gut says no. He’s working way too hard to find this fucker. We’re checking his alibi; I don’t think we’ll find anything. He gave us his place in Phoenix so we’d know where to reach him. And he hates cops and ain’t afraid to show it. Lit into both of us in the room.”

“I heard.” Bryan looked at Proctor for a moment, then turned to Murphy. “Dave, why don’t you fax these to Mesa PD. I need to talk to Stephen for a minute.”

“On my way.” Murphy closed the door on his way out.

“I saw the surveillance tape of the interview with this guy.” He pointed at Chickenhead’s notes on the table. “Everything okay with you? On this case, I mean? Anything you want to talk about?”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Bryan. He kind of caught me off guard with his reaction. He really loves her, and it showed. Reminded me of Carol for a minute.”

“All the more reason for me to ask if you’re okay.”

“Bryan, I’m fine. Really.”

Bryan looked at Stephen, then to the notes spread out on the table in front of him.

“Have you been able to get in touch with the next of kin yet?”

“Not yet. We got a phone number from an old booking file of hers for someplace in Houston, Texas. Called a couple of times and kept getting an answering machine. I faxed a copy of what we had to Houston PD this morning. We didn’t have the notebook copied then. I’ll call them again this afternoon.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the office door.

“Come in.”

Murphy came into the room carrying several file folders. He handed one to Bryan and another to Stephen.

“Well, our boy is who he says he is.” He looked at a sheet of paper clipped to the top folder in his hand.

“Robert Stanley Gibbs, a/k/a Chickenhead. Our file goes back about—,” he shuffled a couple of pages, “—five or six years. History of petty shit, vagrancy, trespassing. Did thirty days at Madison in ‘97 for simple assault. Beat up ah couple of guys he said were stealing from his flop. Listed his address as a general delivery box.”

Murphy picked up Chickenhead’s notes that were lying on the table and turned several pages before he found what he wanted.

“Same as the one he gave us. Last arrest was the Madison incident. No outstanding warrants. Listed day laborer as his occupation.”

Bryan held up his hand to stop Murphy’s report. He scanned several pages in his folder before he spoke.

“Has the coroner come up with anything else on either of the bodies?”

Murphy opened the last folder in his pile.

“There’s not much back yet. The tissue samples aren’t back yet, but it’s pretty obvious the organs were switched between bodies. Ya don’t find two-month-old fetuses in most guys. No liftable prints on the floater. There’s tons of shit to go through from the garbage he was floating in. Found a picture like Robert drew dry as a bone in a plastic baggie. The lab is still checking to see if anything useful comes out of it. Found a couple of prints on Mimi around her head where Chickenhead tore away the plastic. The rain lasted most of the night and washed away just about anything on the surface. The lab is still checking the plastic she was wrapped in for whatever

might have survived. The last thing is that the coroner is pretty sure they both died within a day or two of each other. And the floater had a twenty-dollar bill stapled to his forehead.”

Bryan looked at Stephen.

“Did Chickenhead mention anything to you about money on Mimi? Maybe after the interview?”

“Not a word.”

Bryan looked through the now huge stack of papers in front of him.

“It says that the hole for the staple was there, but no money. The lab found pieces of plastic in the gutter along the street. It’s probably a waste of time, but check out any storm drains near where Mimi was found. Talk to Chickenhead again. Gently. See if he remembers anything else.”

Bryan grabbed a pen from under the sea of papers in front of him.

“I’m going to be out of town tomorrow, but if anything, and I mean *anything* comes up,” he wrote down a number, “call me at this number. The operator will patch you through.”

“I’ll take care of it, Bryan.”

There were a stack of telephone memos and several file folders on Stephen’s desk when he got back from his boss’ office. He tried to clear a spot for the papers he carried and made the mess bigger. He picked up the memos as his partner peeked into his cubicle.

“I’m hittin’ the deli. You want somethin’?”

“A sandwich. Anything with pickles.”

Stephen slumped down into his chair. He knew that the odds were in his favor that Chickenhead had removed the money from Mimi’s head. Knew it without being told.

“I’m outta here.”

“Get me a soda, too.”

He picked up the phone and dialed the hotel where Chickenhead was staying. The operator connected him to the room. After the twentieth ring he hung up, then re-dialed the hotel. He left a message with the desk for Chickenhead to call him when he got in. He was sorting through phone memos when his desk phone rang.

“Detective Proctor, how can I help you?”

The connection was so bad he could barely hear the caller.

“Is this Detective Stephen Proctor of the Phoenix Police Department?”

“Yes, it is. To whom am I speaking?”

“Hold one moment, sir.”

Hold? Stephen shifted the phone to the other ear after the line clicked over to taped music. He looked at one of his memos. It was marked urgent. Circled was an out of state number. He checked it against Mimi’s number from the file. It was the same area code but a different number. Someone came back on the line.

“Detective Proctor, are you still there?”

“Who *is* this?”

“I’m sorry about the delay, Officer. The Mayor can speak to you now.”

After a brief pause, the line was picked up.

“Mr. Proctor? Detective Proctor? Are you there?”

“Yes, I am. Who is this?”

“I’m Peter Driver. Mimi’s my daughter.”

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