



# Blackjack Willy

by **H.B. Koplowitz**



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A work of fiction by

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Dome Publications

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Any similarity to real people, living or dead, is mostly coincidental.

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*For Jaime and Gary,  
Euski and Nancy  
Don and Gerhard,  
and Whitt*



## Prolog

*A watcher in the shadows peers into a moonlit room, where a beastly man is bending a beautiful woman across a mahogany desk. The man's pants are at his ankles, the woman's skirt hiked above her hips. Her panties cling to one of her pumps. His ebony cock and her alabaster thighs shimmer in the moonlight, causing the voyeur to tremble, both revolted and aroused. The beast mounts the beauty from behind, and she surrenders unconditionally, splaying her arms across the desk as if being crucified. In a primal call and response, she echoes his grunting thrusts with escalating moans. The voyeur can't stop a tiny, anguished whimper from escaping, and feels a humiliating orgasm building irresistibly. Spasming in shame as well as pleasure, the watcher vows vengeance. A furtive fantasy has become a ghastly reckoning...*

Do you really need a prologue? Especially since you don't know how to spell prologue?

*Well, I've read a few mystery novels, and I noticed they all seem to have prologs. I mean prologues. So I thought I'd give it a try, especially since the goal of this exercise, when I started it some 40 50 years ago, was to cram as many mystery novel cliches as I could into a single story.*

No it wasn't.

*True that. Chapter One began in 1974 as my first essay for an English 101 class at Southern Illinois University in my hometown of Carbondale. I was asked to write a descriptive passage. Another section started out as my second English 101 essay, in which I was assigned to write in dialect, and I decided to try my hand at black lingo.*

Smooth move, X-Lax.

*As a mental exercise, I thought about turning the characters and places I'd conjured for the class assignments into a whodunit with*

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*interracial and psychosexual undercurrents. And rather than worry about an outline, I'd let my imagination guide the evolution of the characters and plot.*

*The impetus for the story came from a BBQ restaurant/lounge on the east side of Carbondale, where I worked for a minute in the early 1970s. The owner was a beguiling ex-cop and ex-bank robber, and I was a lowly, long-haired busboy who would watch from the sidelines as smooth-talking black dudes hooked up with platinum-haired white chicks for interracial flings. So that was the core — three days in the life of a strapping black lounge owner named Blackjack Willy, and a scruffy, white, covetous, busboy named Hal.*

A dubious foundation.

*It remained a mental exercise until the 1980s, when the chapters that comprise Day 1 were written during a burst of creativity while I was using a Kaypro computer in Decatur, Illinois, and snorting a lot of cocaine.*

But then the coke ran out, and you didn't look at the manuscript for another decade.

*In the 1990s, while using an iMac in Los Angeles, I revisited the manuscript, rewriting what I had and pushing the plot forward, halfway through Day 3, in fact. I added characters and began exploring back stories, plot twists, and playful tributaries, wherever my mind would wander, and I wasn't doing cocaine then, just cigarettes and pot. Actually, a lot of pot. But I put it away again, unable to get to the ending, and also unable to inject the story with a speck of a theme, or insight into interracial psychosexuality or anything else.*

And then your parents died.

*And after they passed away, in the spring of 2011 I left my journalism career in Los Angeles and moved into their condo in Boca Raton, Florida. Suddenly with lots of time on my hands, I decided to give Blackjack Willy one more try. I began to rewrite what I had yet*



*again, and realized I had unintentionally created a fairly diverse cast of characters. I then intentionally tried to make it still more diverse, in particular by adding a strong Hispanic female character.*

But it took so long to write the story that times had changed, and no matter how diverse the characters were, exaggerating stereotypes had become not just politically incorrect, but profoundly unfunny, especially coming from a straight white guy.

*Indeed. And that's what got me thinking about adding a "prolog" to trigger warn those who might find some of my stock characters, dialect and nonconsensual sex to be objectionable.*

And who might those people be?

*Oh, blacks, gays, women and the disabled, for starters.*

I see. So what did you come up with?

*Well, you've heard of woke fiction. I wanted to alert readers that this is unwoke fiction. If it were a movie it would be R-rated for explicit sex and other "adult content," including bad ethnic humor and off-color language, up to and including the n-word.*

More like incel fiction, if you ask me.

*I prefer to think of it as Freudian. It's the 1980s, when females were still chicks and males were still dudes. A time before smartphones, social media and cancel culture, when a certain amount of ethnic and sexual hazing was as much a bonding mechanism as it was actionable.*

*In addition to all the other potentially racist, sexist, homophobic, pornographic and otherwise objectionable material in Blackjack Willy, one of the plot devices is called the Monkey Demon, an homage to Richard Farina, who used the term in his first and only 1966 novel Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me. But the main reason I used the word "monkey" is because it has a "K" in it, like*

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*“Buick,” making it inherently funny. Unfortunately, now the word is also inherently racist.*

And so yet another decade passed.

*That it did. But at 10 p.m. Thursday, July 15, 2021, nearly a half-century after I began this tale about a dude named Blackjack Willy, I completed the rough draft. It was an auspicious occasion, as I was recovering from a breakthrough case of Covid-19. Perhaps being 70 years old with a potentially fatal disease focused my mind on the fact that the race to finish this story was coming to an end, one way or the other. Miraculously, the last 10,000 words poured out of me in a relative torrent over the course of a sickly week. Despite the passage of so much time, the climax was very much as I envisioned it when I got the original idea 47 years before.*

That’s nice. But getting back to the prologue, you really can’t use it.

*Why not?*

Because if you have to explain the joke, the joke’s not funny.

*True that, too.*

# Day 1: Monday

## October 21, 1985

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### Chapter 1

Gnarly rays of sunrise slither through a torn curtain, revealing the grunge of a dreary kitchen. Cockroaches laze in the sink. A scouting party of red ants reconcs crumbs on a chipped Formica counter. A big black ant stumbles off a rotting window sill and falls onto the greasy counter. Oblivious to the danger surrounding him, he indolently munches on a bread crumb. Obeying an instinct older than race, creed or national origin, the red ants are stirred into a frenzy as they attack the black intruder. The black ant shrugs off the first assault, but they cling to his legs and underbelly and swarm over his back, stinging him and each other. The pummeling wears the black ant down, and like a rummy past his prime, he sinks into a swoon.

There's a burst of Olympian thunder as a light flicks on and an abused human throat rumbles in an unsuccessful attempt to clear away the phlegm and mucous of a booze and smoke-filled night. "H-a-r-r-u-u-u-m." The cockroaches scramble for cover as the kitchen is invaded by a middle-aged black man. Hungover and crabby, he rummages through the cabinets, slamming the doors unshut. Paunchy, yet athletic and savagely handsome, he is black as Africa. His once hard gut strains the threads of his sleeveless undershirt and spills over the waistband of his chalk stripe pants. Red paisley suspenders dangle at his sodden sides.

Though groggy, he moves with catlike grace through the cluttered kitchen. Tugging his balls, he opens the refrigerator and winces at the light. Poking through the fruits and vegetables, he snags a leftover pork chop and a beer. He plops the beer can down on the counter, causing the red ants to scam. Dazed and clueless to the juxtaposition of universes that has spared him, the black ant staggers forward until he falls into a gap between the counter and refrigerator, to die just as stupidly another day.

Grabbing the pork chop, the man looks at it skeptically, then rips the meat away from the bone with his teeth, chews rapidly and swal-

lows. He draws the beer can to his lips, closes his eyes and takes a lingering swig. Some of the beer dribbles down his chin, adding a glint to his ebony skin. His face contorts into an expression of excruciating pain, then relaxes into one of complete calm. He puts down the can, slowly opens his eyes, and stares at nothing for a moment. Blackjack Willy Butler greets the day.

Willy is in his element, if not his home. He used to live in Carbonboro, before moving to upscale Murdale, seven miles and a social strata away. But whenever he can he slips back to Serene's place. Serene is a lousy housekeeper, but that's not why he goes there.

Blackjack devours the rest of the pork chop, lights a Newport, and heads to the bathroom to take a dump. In the middle of his exertions there's a knock at the front door. Butler grunts, not at the knock but at the progress of his bowel movement. Another knock, this time more insistent.

"Serene?" he hollers half-heartedly. "Get the door, Serene. It's Cap." No response. He wads a pull of toilet paper and wipes his ass. "Get outa bed woman," he shouts. "Shit," he mutters as he glances at the smears on the tissue, then drops it between his legs.

Willy stumbles out of the bathroom, still pulling up his pants. After another rap at the door he opens it, revealing a stocky, cockeyed black man in a busser jacket and chauffeur's cap. "What's hap'nin' Boss?" the man says.

"My man," Willy responds. "My main man Cap." His bloodshot eyes, vacuous a moment ago, now twinkle. "You caught me in the middle of a crap, Cap. I think I got me a hanger."

An unusual remark, except Willy and Cap have been friends since preschool, and their relationship had changed little since. More than soul brothers, they were like flesh and blood brothers — he the elder who teased and tormented the younger, and Cap the younger, who idolized him just the same.

Cap grinned sheepishly. "In that case Boss, you's definitely riding in back today."

Willy put on a starched shirt and Cap helped him into his tailored suit coat. "Lookin' g-o-o-o-d Boss," Cap cooed. "Where's Serene? I gots something for her."

Blackjack scowled. "Passed out, I guess. I musta been too much for her last night. You knows how that is."

Cap didn't, but he smiled salaciously anyway. "Sheet," he said, his misaligned eyes darting in dual directions. "Well, I'll just put this here," he said, shyly taking a late-blooming wildflower out of his jacket and tenderly placing it on the counter, over the former battleground of the ants. "Serene likes flowers, don't she?"

Willy shrugged. "How the fuck should I know? Let's ride."

Cap led Willy out to a leased stretch limo, compliments of Murdale City Hall. The limo came with tinted glass, facing back seats and wet bar. Blackjack had made only one modification — wide whitewall tires and spoked hub caps.

With a flourish he exhibited around no one else, Cap opened the back car door for Willy and closed it smartly behind him. Serene's clapboard house abutted a freeway ramp, but Cap knew to take the canyon road and not say a word. He never knew what to expect during the ride from Carbonboro to Murdale. Sometimes Willy wanted to sit up front and horse around; other times he sat in back and sulked. Once he punched the accelerator and jerked the wheel to chase a squirrel over a curb and up onto someone's lawn. Today, he sat in back and gazed listlessly at dilapidated houses until the road dipped into a wooded area, where the sun glistening off the dewy leaves spaced him out like a punch in the face.

Cap smoothly navigated the car down a long sloping curve. At the bottom of the hill the road abruptly narrowed into a rusty bridge that crossed a creek. As a child, Willy used to fish in the creek, sitting on a grassy meadow, his bare feet dangling in the water. But as the bridge came into view, Blackjack wasn't thinking about fishing or grassy meadows. He was thinking about his first piece of white meat.

He had been a junior in high school, and she had been his English teacher. A shy, sinewy woman of 25, with delicate bones and long dishwater blond hair that was usually in a bun. She had a stack of Joan Baez records and a desire to join the Peace Corps, a liberal knee-jerker whose mission was not merely to educate but uplift her students. She'd been told to watch out for Willy, that he was crafty and disruptive. But in him, she told herself, she saw a spark of intellect glimmering behind an impoverished mind. A speck of humanity which, if nurtured, might enable him to rise above his squalor.

Willy recalled how she used to hover over his desk in class, close enough for him to get a whiff of her perfume. Her breathing would

become shallow and her hand would tremble as she leaned closer to make a correction on his paper. She took a keen interest in his themes, not noticing most of them had been written by someone else. She began talking with him after class, and one day she suggested he come over to her apartment to rewrite a short story.

She had no conscious intention of seducing him that night. But it was she who had him sit on the sofa, and she who kept brushing against him as they went over the short story he hadn't even read, much less written. Nor had Willy meant to fuck her, although he had instinctively played her that way from the first time he'd had to talk to her after class, giving her just enough white jive to make her think they were communicating, meanwhile bumming Cokes and even cigarettes. Bumming her body was merely a logical extension. Nothing personal. It was just the way he played everybody.

He made his move when she got to talking about black writers and rage. He gave her his best malevolent glare, and she gazed back into his eyes, transfixed. Her mouth went dry and she began to wobble, dizzy with a fear and arousal she had only fantasized about before. Slowly, Willy closed the distance between his face and hers. "You want this mama," he cooed just before engulfing her lips and filling her mouth with his youthful tongue.

From a part of her psyche she had never dared explore came a soft moan. Letting the thrill wash over her for a moment, she finally shuddered enough to break away. "Willy, no," she said, trying to treat him like some innocent schoolboy with a crush on his teacher.

Willy just smiled. "You can't help yourself," he bluffed.

"I think you'd better leave," she protested, but let him take her limp wrist and pull her toward him. Mesmerized, she watched as he placed her hand over the growing mound in his jeans. "No, Willy, this is wrong," she said, but found herself unable to move her hand, even though he had taken his away. Then she watched in horror as of its own volition, her hand began to stroke his erection. "Oh God, no," she moaned, which was the last resistance she made.

What Willy couldn't take off he tore off her writhing body. She pretended she was being raped and tried to lay still. But when he started to penetrate her, she helped guide him in, and with a shudder she began humping, her eyes rolling back in her head and her nails digging into the arm of the sofa behind her head. He came fast but

she came faster, something the white boys at Claymore Christian College had never been able to accomplish.

On the way home that night, Willy took the canyon route to Carbonboro. As he approached the bridge he was doing 75 miles an hour. A young fawn had wandered onto the bridge, still awkward on its spindly legs. Willy had but a moment to see the deer, but in that moment, with his headlights bearing down on it at 75 MPH, for a split second before he creamed Bambi on the bumper of his mom's 1958 Bonneville, he saw in the animal's eyes that same look, the same fear and fascination that had been on his English teacher's face.

As Cap glided the limo across the bridge, Blackjack tried to remember the teacher's name but couldn't. He recalled how she had begged him not to tell anyone. How it would ruin her. But of course he told. He bragged to anyone who would listen. The day she resigned in shame and left town, she actually went to him and apologized. Dumb bitch, he thought.

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## Chapter 2

"What a bootieful day." Willy stretched as Cap drove the limo up Main Street to City Hall. "Lemme out front. I feels like catching some rays."

Cap shrugged and let Willy out, then drove down into the parking garage. Through a back stairway it was shorter from the garage to Willy's office, but after six months he still hadn't gotten over the novelty of walking in the front door of City Hall and strutting up the faux marble staircase to the second floor and the double glass doors to the Mayor's Office, his office, Mayor Blackjack Willy Butler.

Entering the outer office, he saw the latest in a string of "personal" assistants, a sultry mulatto named Tabatha, seated at her desk, engaged in her favorite pastime, which was perfecting her fingernails. Like the rest of Willy's string of secretaries, Tabatha had high cheekbones, pointy breasts, toned legs and an onion ass. And like the others, Willy had "promoted" her from his stable of leotarded barmaids at his bar, The Blackjack Lounge. The only thing that made

Tabatha different was that she hadn't let him fuck her. And she could type.

"S'up Tabby," Willy greeted. Tabatha didn't look up, as usual. Butler wondered yet again why he had made her his secretary, then crossed the room and took out the gold key that unlocked the mahogany door to his private office. The decor had been picked out by his predecessor, Simon "Punk" Gray, so the mayor's quarters were baroque, with florid furnishings and paintings by Muzak. But Blackjack had quickly transformed his inner sanctum into a slam bam room. Who could resist an invitation to party in the Mayor's Office? There was no futon or even a couch, so he wouldn't have to bother with *après* sex cuddling. He preferred bending pliant women over his mahogany desk, or letting them bounce on his lap, or suck his cock, or all three, while he sat in the mayor's plush executive chair.

Dope, booze and guns were secreted throughout the office, and Blackjack had the only key. Not even Cap was allowed to be there when he was out. So when he opened the door, he was surprised to see his budget director and city manager aspirant, Marques Taylor, a.k.a. the Blade, sprawled in Willy's plush executive chair, his legs crossed on Willy's mahogany desk.

Impressed by this uncharacteristic show of balls by his other long-time cohort, Blackjack's first impulse was to shout a hearty "my man." Then it registered that Marques had a gaping bullet hole near his right temple, and his brains had spilled all over Willy's plush executive chair. "Mutha fuck," Butler hissed. He quietly closed his office door and sagged against it. Then he put his hand to his forehead and tried to remember.

Marques Taylor had been the third leg of that unholy high school trinity, Willy, Cap and the Blade. If Willy was the boss and Cap the muscle, then Blade was the brains. In grade school he'd orchestrated their grocery store heists, and in high school he'd engineered their grades. More recently he'd been responsible for Willy's unlikely political rise.

Back in high school, the Blade was always talking about how he was going to cut somebody. But everyone knew it was just his way of ducking fist fights. He carried an illegal switchblade, but he never could get the hang of flicking it open, and nobody ever saw him actually use it on anything more threatening than an apple. The Blade got



his name not from his knife, but his stiletto build, and the width of the lapels on his Nehru jackets. Later he adopted a Lenin beard that only added to the look. A Creole, he had the soft caramel skin and short twirly hair so sensual in a woman — on Marques it looked effeminate.

The oldest son of the town's only "colored" doctor and his Sephardic wife, Marques had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, which for him was the white side. With his mocha skin, upper middle class upbringing and high I.Q., Taylor was shunned and bullied by both ends of the racial abyss. An unlikely chum for street urchins like Willy and Cap, he had to earn their respect, which he did with typical aplomb.

The two 10- year-olds were trying to figure out how to steal some baseball cards from behind the counter of Kelly's Market. Marques, who was a year younger, had come to purchase his self-imposed weekly allotment of cards — five packs, which he figured was exactly one-half of his allowance — when he came upon Willy and Cap lurking in the parking lot.

"Dat Mr. Kelly don't never go way," Cap was complaining. "We ain't got no money, so how's we gonna get dem cards?"

Willy practiced his hate look on the front of Kelly's Market. "Dunno," he said. "But I'm gettin' me a Willie Mays today, and that's it."

"What's shaking?" Marques asked when he got within earshot.

Cap scowled and shouted, "Go way Chocolate Bar," which is what the kids called Marques at the time. "T'ain't nuna your bees wax."

"What's not?"

"Get lost or I'll bust your face again," Cap responded. Marques shrugged and started to walk away.

"We're trying to figger how to cop some B-ball cards," Willy said. "Got any bright ideas?"

"Sure," bragged Marques, though he had never stolen anything in his life. "What's so tough about that?"

"Fuggin' Mr. Kelly," scowled Cap, disappointed that Willy was acknowledging Marques' existence.

Marques was silent for a moment. "No sweat," he said.

"Willy, go inside and tell Mr. Kelly I'm having a fit or something. Bring him out here, then Cap, you sneak inside and grab a whole box

of cards. Not the open one on top, but one of the unopened ones underneath. Got it?"

"Sounds dumb," said Cap, but Willy was interested in the scheme, because his role was the easiest. "Let's do it," he said and laughed.

"Shit, why not," said Cap. "T'ain't gonna work no way."

Cap hid at the side of the building as Willy burst in, and with wide eyes parroted Marques. "Come quick Mister Kelly," he sputtered. "Chocolate Bar's having a fit or something."

Mr. Kelly trotted after Willy, nervously wiping his hands on his apron. Willy didn't know what to expect, but there was Marques, flopping around on the gravel like a catfish in a bucket. He was foaming at the mouth, and his limbs were twitching at grotesque angles. Willy could hardly contain his giggles as Marques looked at him and twitched a wink.

"Guh," Marques gurgled. Without touching him, Mr. Kelly put his ear close to Marques' mouth. "What you say, son?" he asked.

"Guh, guh, guhwa," Marques coughed. He made some more nonsense noises and crossed his eyes, giving Cap time to sneak into the store and grab a carton of cards. Mr. Kelly leaned closer. "Pfft." Marques spit his gum into Mr. Kelly's ear and cursed. "I friggin' near choked to death on that gum. My papa's gonna sue your ass off."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Mr. Kelly. "Can I get you a drink or something?"

"Make it a Fudgsicle," responded Marques, apparently recovering. "And one for my friend, too."

"Sure," said Mr. Kelly. He trotted back into the store and brought back two Fudgsicles. "Here. It's on me. You okay now?"

"I dunno," said Marques as he unwrapped his Fudgsicle. "I'll catch you later."

Their mission accomplished, the three thieves rendezvoused at Marques' treehouse to split up their booty. Sure enough, there was one Willie Mays card, which Willy claimed of course.

It was the start of a long-term relationship, in which Cap and the Blade competed for Willy's favor. Instinctively, he played them off against each other, and they hated each other instead of him. In high school Willy was a star fullback and basketball center, while Cap threw blocks and set screens. Marques gravitated to theater, chess club and debate. Though Willy and Cap were hanging with homeboys

and delinquents, and Marques with thespians and geeks, they still maintained what might be called a working relationship.

It never showed up in the press clippings of Willy's athletic career, but he would have flunked out of school were it not for the signal system Marques devised to communicate test answers during exams. He even wrote the essays that enabled Willy to undo his English teacher. Cap could have cared less about grades, but he, too, stayed in school years longer than he might have, carried along by the Blade's cheating system.

In exchange, Cap grudgingly kept his hands off Marques' throat, and Willy was downright deferential, letting everyone know he was the Blade's protector. Each got something out of the relationship — Marques his protection, and Cap the father he never knew. But as always, Willy got the lion's share, including introductions to the girls in the all-school play, which he took full advantage of.

Even with Marques' coaching, Cap dropped out of school after the basketball season of their senior year and started doing yardwork. Willy graduated, barely, and was offered athletic scholarships from nearby colleges. But on his graduation night he and Cap got drunk, and the next day they enlisted in the Army. As usual, Willy was lucky and got stationed in West Germany, while Cap, as usual, was not so lucky and got sent to Vietnam. Something happened to Cap in Nam that resulted in a medical discharge, although he was never wounded. He returned to Carbonboro and became a cockeyed cabbie.

Marques got into Northwestern University in Chicago, where he majored in political science and minored in zaftig Jewish princesses who passed him around like a dildo. He also began to hang out with the theater crowd again and discovered his bisexuality. Afterwards he returned to Carbonboro, thinking the experience had made him more worldly. Through a political friend of his father he got a job in the Murdale Public Assistance Office, and buoyed by competency as well as equal opportunity, worked his way up to a supervisor's position.

When Willy got out of the Army, he returned to Carbonboro and became a fry cook at his father's barbecue restaurant. Inspired by *Shaft* and other blaxploitation films, a few years later he decided to become a cop. He barely made it through the police academy, but he was black and the department was looking for a token.

Soon, his fellow cops had dubbed him Blackjack Willy for his propensity for using his billy club, especially on smart-ass crackers. During his six turbulent years with the Murdale police force, Butler was named in nearly a dozen excessive force complaints, and an internal investigation into recreational drugs missing from the evidence locker. None of the complaints ever stuck, and the investigation was inconclusive. Despite his flaws, Officer Butler was looked up to in the black community, and he was the only one who didn't mind patrolling the east side at night.

Near the end of his checkered career in law enforcement, Blackjack received an award for killing an armed robber during a holdup at what was then a Sambo's restaurant. Butler and his partner, Bobby Freeman, who had become Murdale's only other black police officer, had stopped at the restaurant to get something to eat. Before entering, Freeman noticed a man at the counter holding a gun to the head of a hysterical waitress.

While Freeman returned to the squad car to radio for backup, Butler crept up behind some shrubbery. As the robber momentarily took the gun away from the waitress' head to stuff the cash register proceeds into his jacket, Blackjack emptied his .357 magnum through the plate-glass window. The robber returned fire, and tragically, one of his bullets struck Freeman, who was thirty yards away, radioing for backup. Two customers were winged by ricocheting bullets, and nine by shards of glass. The robber, a parolee from the neighboring county, was hit three times — in the arm, chest, and head — and died five hours later on an operating table.

Glossing over the fact that had Willy waited for the robber to exit the restaurant, violence might have been averted, the media made him into a hero. "Cop Kills Cop Killer," trumpeted the next day's headlines, and Blackjack's "hailstorm of gunfire" was deemed justifiable retaliation for the death of his partner.

Three months later the media elevated Willy to sainthood, when on the same day he resigned from the department, he announced he would be marrying his partner's widow, LaDonna, whom he had been having an affair with before she became a widow. Within months of their marriage, LaDonna put on 100 pounds and transformed from a quiet and submissive Kewpie doll into a loud and brassy beeyotch.

Friends were surprised, and Cap was crushed, when Willy married LaDonna. Even before she became overbearing, they were hardly compatible. But LaDonna had certain social skills that Willy came to rely on, not to mention her widow's pension and life insurance settlement. After loafing for a couple of years, Willy convinced LaDonna to use a chunk of the money to purchase a rundown bar and grill in a mixed neighborhood. He named their new business The Blackjack Lounge, replete with a flashing purple neon sign out front in the shape of a large, phallic, billy club. The lounge attracted horndogs and heavysset blonds pursuing racial flings, and assorted others looking to hook up. Cap began to bartend, the Blade started hanging out there, and it was like old times again.

For the next three years, Willy's life settled into a routine of being berated by his wife at home, then escaping to the club at night, where he hit on his waitresses and gave eventful rides home to lady patrons who pretended they'd had too much to drink.

Life for Public Assistance Supervisor Marques Taylor was also routine. His days filled with forms and poor people, his nights with frustrated dreams and scotch. He got laid, by members of both sexes, more often than a lot of people, but he was not happy. He hung out at The Blackjack for the same reason he'd always hung out with Willy — hoping he'd one day pick up his moves. Instead, all he got was a bellyful of his exploits. He envied Blackjack to the point of loathing for his cockiness and sexual prowess. It came so easy for him.

Hoping to prove his manhood in another arena, Taylor ran for City Council, twice, losing both times. Winning would have meant a lot to Marques' ego, but he was also idealistic. Inspired as much by LBJ as MLK, Taylor's vision was to eradicate poverty in Murdale by having the city issue coupons to poor people that could be redeemed at local businesses for goods and services. He thought such micro-economies could revolutionize social services across the country, but he could never get anyone in power to take his idea seriously, and he could never get power himself. Soulfully staring at his half-empty tumbler of J&B at The Blackjack late one autumn night in 1984, Marques was pondering his impotence just as Blackjack returned from a blow job in the parking lot. And then it hit him.

“My man,” Marques said to Willy.

“My main man,” Willy responded with a wink, and headed toward the bar.

“Lissen up,” Marques slurred, slightly drunk, and fully intoxicated by his brainstorm. “Blackjack, I’m gonna make you the mayor of Murdale.”

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## Chapter 3

A smile flickered across Willy’s face as he recalled that night. But he darkened again as he refocused on the bullet hole in Taylor’s head. Gingerly approaching his desk, he pressed a button on his intercom and leaned toward the speaker, which was inches from Marques’ shoe. “Tabatha, call Chief Carter and have him come to my office.”

“What for?” came the response.

“Just tell him to get his butt over here,” Willy snapped. He looked around, uncertain what to do, and finally settled into a side chair across from Marques.

There had been a full moon that night, and a breeze was wafting through the open windows of Willy’s late model El. He was slumped behind the steering wheel with his pants around his knees, slurping his Canadian Club over ice, languidly observing the dentist’s wife crouched on the floorboard, trying to consume his semi-rigid rod, which satisfied the stereotype.

She gurgled and moaned while he swished his ice cubes, sluggishly cooing “ooh baby” when he sensed she was starting to stop. He didn’t cum until she began gagging on his prod. He entwined his fingers in her beehived hair and crammed his cock in even farther, muting and mixing her groans with his spasms.

She whimpered contentedly in his arms afterwards, like she had been the one to cum. “You better get yourself home pretty mama,” Blackjack said as she started to close her eyes. “You don’t want your old man to come after me with a drill now do you?” he said lightly, already bored and impatient to return inside and brag.

“Oh, Blackjack, you’re so bad,” said Eileen, or Elaine, he couldn’t remember. “Let’s spend the whole night together sometime.”

“Sure baby, sure,” he said, and swatted her behind as she got out of the car. “Be cool now.”

Running for mayor was the last thing on his mind as he re-entered The Blackjack. All he wanted to do was freshen his CC and mimic the dentist’s wife’s choking noises to Cap. But when the Blade started rapping to him in that intense way, he listened. For he had learned that no matter how bizarre some of Marques’ schemes sounded, when he started talking that talk, there was usually something in it for him.

From behind the bar, Cap rolled his eyes. He never took any of the Blade’s ideas seriously until Willy had climbed aboard. “Once Boss becomes mayor, can I be fire chief?” he asked derisively.

Marques looked at Cap with baleful eyes. “Possibly,” he said. “Lissen to me Blackjack, jus’ lissen.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Willy responded. “Cap, fix me another,” he said and sat down at Marques’ table. “So what the fuck you want? Make it quick. I gots to go wipe off my dick.”

Marques paused and looked at Willy. “Dig it, Blackjack,” he said. “What’s the one thing you got that I ain’t?”

“Brains,” said Cap, and now it was Marques’ turn to roll his eyes.

“Think, Blackjack,” Taylor persisted. “What is it that you got?”

Willy shrugged. “Well, I’m, uh, bigger un you,” he said.

Taylor sighed. “Blackjack, what you got is, charisma.”

“Sounds like a social disease,” Cap chortled as he placed Willy’s drink in front of him.

Undaunted, Marques spread his arms in front of Willy’s chest. “It’s like, you just got a way about you. Call it charisma, confidence, or animal magnetism, you just got it. Always did. And there’s something else you got. You can stand up to the man.”

Marques didn’t have to specify which man he was talking about. They had never spoken about it. Willy had never even thought about it. But it was always there. For some reason, white people had never intimidated him.

On the basketball court, a good black player could play him even and wear him down in the second half. But against whites, especially the biggest, highly touted white star, Willy excelled. First he’d soften his opponent up with a few elbows, or a knee, down low. When the other guy started looking for the rough stuff, he’d make a few fade-

away jumpers and graceful hooks. And then, when the opponent got tentative again, he'd finish him off psychologically by sliding inside for a slam dunk. Though he got monstrous satisfaction out of dominating white guys, it never occurred to him to question how or why he was able to do it.

Marques, on the other hand, tended to get bleached. In debate and chess, nearly all of his opponents were white, and he usually lost the big match. Probably the best prep chess player in the state, he constantly over-estimated his opponents. He lost a regional chess tournament his senior year to a pimply-faced sophomore who kept thumbing his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose. Similarly, he fell apart at the regional debate finals, after he found out his opponent's father was a state legislator. Brutally self-honest, he'd never gone to law school because he was afraid that against white lawyers and judges in the big cases, he wouldn't have the, drive, to win. He knew he had the brains, but lacked the balls. At critical moments he always hesitated, and that was it.

But Willy never thought before he acted. He just acted. It all came so natural for him. Marques had often anguished over what he could accomplish if only he could bottle Willy's essence. But this was the first time it had occurred to him to actually try.

"So I'm macho man," Blackjack said. "What's that got to do with being mayor?"

Taylor looked through Willy. "You know why I could never get elected? It's not because I wasn't qualified, or didn't run a good campaign. It's because I'm just not, compelling..." He stared into his glass again. "Don't you see it nigger? Between my book smarts and your street smarts, we could do it. We could make you mayor of this entire city."

Blackjack distilled the Blade's rap down to the essentials. "So what's in it for me?"

Marques looked at Willy like he was the dumbest spook on the planet. "Who's the mayor now?" he asked quietly.

"Punk Gray," said Willy and started to smile, as did Cap, for Punk was the town's premier good old boy.

"And where is his office?" Marques prompted.

"City Hall," Willy and Cap said in unison.

"The recently remodeled City Hall," Taylor reminded them.



Blackjack imagined himself sitting behind the mayor's big mahogany desk, which he'd seen on TV. His smile broadened.

Next, Marques closed the sale. "Down here you play around with semi-pros, gypsy waitresses and stray cats," he said. "Take your act uptown and you'll be turning out classier hoes."

Blackjack visualized a statuesque real estate agent he'd once seen outside City Hall, bent over the mayor's mahogany desk, with his cock up her ass. His groin stirred.

"What about money?" he asked.

"Of course there'll be money," Taylor said. "More money than you can steal. Money and power."

"Okay," Willy mulled it over some more. "So what's in it for you?"

"The power behind the throne," Marques said. "There's a measure on the city election ballot that would change city government from a mayor-council system to a charter city with an appointed city manager. If it passes and you win, you could make me city manager."

Blackjack had no idea what that meant, but he shook his head at what he viewed as the pettiness of the Blade's aspirations. "I still don't see how you plan to pull it off," he said.

"All's you gotta do is smile nigga, and do what I say. I'll take care of the rest. Just like the old days. You'll be Boss Willy for real."

"Say Boss," said Cap. "When you becomes mayor, can I be your chauffeur?"

Blackjack chortled again. With friends like these, he mused, who needed slaves?

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## Chapter 4

Murdale Police Chief Hank Carter had been waiting for the phone to ring. Waiting for five months, two weeks and six days, which was the amount of time that had elapsed since Blackjack Willy Butler had become mayor.

The phone would ring, it would be one of Blackjack's ditzzy secretaries saying the mayor wanted to see him, and that'd be it. That dumb baboon would probably put his halfwit sidekick Cap in charge of the police, Carter thought. He could fight it, or look for a new job,

but what the hey. Hank was closing in on 60 — he figured he'd probably just take his pension, such as it was, and rock.

So when the phone rang and it was Mayor Butler's secretary, he assumed the moment had arrived. After all, it was the first time in five months, two weeks and six days the mayor had asked to see him. He didn't even bother to ask what Willy wanted.

Hank sighed. He'd been around law enforcement long enough to know life wasn't always fair. Nearly thirty years ago he'd started as a beat cop, directing traffic, subduing drunk frat boys and getting in the middle of family disputes. Later he became a detective, and a good one. When he made lieutenant he continued to work on the most challenging cases, and when he finally became chief — the same year Willy became a cop — he was a hands-on administrator. He supposed he should have resigned the day his biggest fuck-up became his boss. But he couldn't abdicate his perceived responsibility to the community, just because City Hall had been taken over by a lunatic.

Carter didn't love being a cop, but thought of it as a sacred duty. A holy mission. Though the justice system was far from perfect, he believed it was all that kept civilization from the barbarians. He'd never taken much interest in politics, though he knew politics had a lot to do with why it took him so long to make chief. But when Willy announced for mayor, Hank campaigned hard for Punk, and even harder against Willy.

For his efforts he was branded a racist, which he wasn't, at least not like Punk. Still, Hank viewed Willy as the epitome of the modern black man. So full of cunning, strength, and, for lack of a better term, soul. But also full of wounded pride, anger and vulgarity. Carter often wondered whether it was nature or nurture that caused so many black men to under achieve, to squander their DNA on booze, brawls and bitches. Then again, he'd remind himself, the same could be said of the entire gender.

When Butler became Murdale's first black police officer, Chief Carter had welcomed him. He'd looked forward to molding that raw talent he had seen score touchdowns on the football field at Carbonboro Community High School into a responsible peace officer. But Willy was uncoachable. He was always cutting corners or working an angle, and he had as little respect for the law as the perps.

Carter rode Butler, hard, hoping he would either change his ways or quit the force. Instead, after five tumultuous years, climaxing with the fatal shooting of his partner, he married money, opened a bar, then out of the blue became mayor. Even if Carter hadn't been so rough on Butler when he was a cop, he had no doubt he would be fired for some of the things he'd said about him during the campaign. About his character, and how the Sambo's shooting wasn't heroic. But afterwards, Mayor Butler had just ignored him, and Carter learned to go through his assistant, Marques Taylor.

Though odd, Marques seemed to be organized and intelligent, and the only person in the new regime who could get anything done. In Carter's mind, Blackjack was strictly old school, while Taylor represented an alternative vision of a post-racial black man. Carter also admired Taylor's ability to maintain at least marginal control over Blackjack's temper. He wondered if Taylor would be there when he got his walking papers.

Blackjack was staring at the Blade's corpse when his intercom crackled to life. "Chief Carter here to see you," piped Tabatha.

Butler opened his door a crack and beckoned to Carter. "C'mere," he said, then looked at Tabatha sternly. "Hold my calls."

She saluted sarcastically.

When Carter slipped through the partly opened door and saw Taylor's bloody corpse, his hand automatically went for his gun. "What the..."

Butler put his finger to his lips and quietly shut the door. "Someone done killed the Blade," he whispered.

After getting over the initial shock, the chief shook his head, almost in amusement. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out the prime suspect. Mayor Butler and his assistant hadn't been getting along lately. Something about Taylor wanting to be city manager and Butler stalling him. And there he was, dead in the mayor's private office. Motive, means and opportunity. It was the kind of situation Carter had fantasized — an open and shut case that would get Blackjack out of Dodge once and for all.

To take his firing like a man, Carter had been prepared to be respectful and call Blackjack Mister Mayor, if not your honor. But the balance of power had flip-flopped, and Carter felt like he was back on the street, dealing with just another thug. "Looks like about a .357

magnum,” he said, glaring at the hole in Taylor’s head. “You’re pretty familiar with a .357, aren’t you, Blackjack?”

The mayor shrugged, expecting the question.

“Where’s your piece?” Carter asked.

Butler shrugged again and pointed behind the desk. “That may be it over there on the floor.”

Using a pencil, Carter picked up the gun and smelled the barrel. He frowned at the stench of burnt gunpowder, then carefully laid it back down.

Carter looked disgusted. “Kee-rist Blackjack. Leaving calling cards, or like your police work, just incredibly sloppy?”

Mayor Butler was silent.

“OK Mr. Mayor, so where were you last night?”

Willy took a deep breath. “Well, uh, I was at the club. The Blade called and said he needed to see me at the office. He told me to come alone. He’s like that sometimes. So I told Cap to close up the club around midnight and pick me up here. I grabbed a cab and met the Blade here. I admit that. But after we done talking, I kicked him out around midnight. Then Cap showed up and drove me home. Then I come in this morning and find, this,” he gestured at Taylor.

“He was in your office when you got there last night?”

“No, he ain’t got no key. He was in the outer office.”

“So what’d you two talk about?”

“You know, politics, him wanting that position.”

“Politics? I understand you weren’t gettin’ along, that right?”

“Sorta.”

“Didja have words?”

“You could say that.”

“What would you say?”

“I’d say I was just playin’. So what? Nuthin new.”

“You say you kicked Mr. Taylor out around midnight. Where did he go?”

“Dunno.”

“Uh huh. What about this morning when you came in to work? What time was that?”

“Around nine.”

“I take it your secretary hasn’t seen Mr. Taylor. What about the door? Open? Closed? What?”

“Locked,” Butler said sullenly.

“Who’s got a key, besides you of course?”

“Nobody.”

“Taylor?”

“Nope.”

“Cap?”

“Uh uh.”

“Your secretary?”

“No way.”

“C’mon Blackjack, you’re making this way too easy. You were here with the victim, there was an altercation, and you shot him. Then, you come in the next morning and stage this ‘oh look what I found’ scene, and you expect me to swallow this? But you made one big mistake. Bumbling fool that you are, you locked the door behind you on your way out, and you’ve got the only key.”

“I didn’t do it,” Butler insisted.

“That’s it?”

Blackjack was silent.

Carter shook his head. “You got drunk, you got mad, you killed him. If you cooperate, who knows, maybe the State’s Attorney will let you cop to second degree.”

“Don’t you see this is a set-up?” Blackjack exploded. “Someone’s out to get me.”

Carter decided to switch gears. “What makes you so sure someone killed him?”

Butler looked perplexed. “What are you talking about? You think the Blade done offed himself?”

Carter was silent, trying to gauge Willy’s reaction. Was he stupid or just acting stupid? “Why’d you call me, Blackjack? You could have brought in the county or the State Police, maybe even the FBI. You know what I think of you.”

Willy returned Hank’s glare, then shrugged. “To tell you the truth, he told me to,” Butler said, pointing at Taylor. “He once told me that if I ever got really jammed up when he wasn’t around, that I should talk to you first.

Carter was astonished but tried not to show it. “Why would he say that?”

Butler looked at his shoes, the words sticking in his throat. "He said you'd be the only cracker I could trust."

"Do you trust me?" Carter asked in disbelief.

Willy had to laugh. "No fucking way."

Hank conceded a tight smile. "You can trust me on this, Mr. Mayor. If you did this, I'm gonna nail you. And I'll enjoy every minute of it."

"And if I didn't, you'll figger it out," Butler said.

Carter didn't respond. As much as he hated to admit it, something wasn't right. It was all too tidy. Even for someone as inept as Blackjack Willy.

"So what's it gonna be, Chief?" Willy asked. "You takin' me downtown or what?"

Carter reached for the phone. "We're already downtown, you hoser. Can you dial direct with this thing or do I need your bimbo's assistance?"

"Use the third line," Willy said. "Tabatha knows not to listen on that one."

"I'll bet," Hank muttered as he called his office. "Dulworth," he growled into the phone. "Very quietly now, I want you and Det. Garcia to get over here. No lights, no sirens. We got a homicide in the Mayor's Office ... No, it's not the mayor. Alert forensics, the lab people, the coroner, the whole shebang. But keep it on the q.t."

"Q what?" Dulworth asked.

Carter grimaced at the voice at the other end of the phone.

"No Lt. Dulworth, do not alert the media. I don't even want you to alert the dispatcher. Nobody. Keep a tight lid on this, understand? There's gonna be a shit storm. Let's try to get some work done before it hits." He hung up.

"OK Mr. Mayor, let's go over it again. After you supposedly kicked Mr. Taylor here out of your office around midnight, and before he magically reappeared in your locked office this morning, you went home to your wife? I suppose Mrs. Butler will verify that?"

Willy was about to answer in the affirmative when his office door was violently flung open and LaDonna swooped into the room. "Where the hell were you last night?" she demanded. She was about to pound on Willy's chest when she saw Marques slumped in the mayor's chair, blood and brains oozing down his face. "Willy, you

didn't!" she gasped, and then fainted dead away, making a resounding thud as her ample anatomy kissed the carpet.

Carter called headquarters again. "Dulworth, you better call an ambulance, too. Looks like the mayor's wife might have a concussion...No Lieutenant, she just fainted...Yeah, I'm sure...Uh, Roger, hurry on over here, but low profile, I mean that."

Tabatha appeared at the door. "I'm sorry, she just rushed in," she began, and then looked at Marques. She stared coldly at the corpse, then turned to Blackjack. "You scuz," she said. When there was no response, she turned on her heel and started to withdraw from the room.

"Miss, uh," Carter began.

"Johnson," Tabatha finished.

"Uh, Miss Johnson, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to stay in the outer office there, until we can get somebody down here to talk with you."

Tabatha looked shocked. "You can't possibly think I had anything to do with this," she shuddered.

"No Miss Johnson, but you are a witness to the crime scene, and we're going to want to know what you saw this morning when you came in. Just routine, as they say."

"I didn't see nothing and I didn't do nothing. I just wanna go home."

"I understand. But if you'll just stick around until we can talk with you, then we won't have to visit you later."

Johnson seemed to regain her composure. "All right, but I'm taking some vacation days, you hear Mr. Mayor? I'm taking some time off." She went back to her desk, but not to her nails.

Standing between the bodies of Marques and LaDonna, Hank and Willy stared at each other. "OK Mr. Mayor, so much for alibi number one. So where were you last night?"

"Look, I don't need no alibi 'cause I didn't kill nobody," Butler said. "Like you yourself said, maybe he kilt hisself."

"Cut the shit and give it to me straight this time. After you left your office, where did you go?"

"I went to Serene's," Willy said softly, in case his wife was just pretending to be unconscious. He called Serene, and when she didn't answer he turned to the chief. "I'll take you there," he said.

"I'll take *you* there," Carter said.

The clatter in the hallway meant the cavalry had arrived, and the entire town would soon know about the goings on at City Hall. Lt. Dulworth was the first through the door, dressed in, of all things, a camouflage vest hurriedly thrown over his white dress shirt, and a gaggle of SWAT team wannabes in tow.

Carter glowered at the man he was grooming to be his successor. An opaque, pedestrian and plodding fundamentalist Christian, Dulworth was compulsively honest and fastidious about going by the book. Though a better Indian than chief, he was also a better administrator than cop — Carter thought his instincts stunk. But as chief, Dulworth would be a benign influence on the force, which Carter believed was the best he could hope for.

Dulworth could be attentive and inquisitive, but Carter found the hardest part of the grooming process to be talking to him about police work. On even the simplest cases, Dulworth never seemed to be able to find the pieces, much less put them together. He was also useless for bouncing things off of because Carter could always predict his response. Once in awhile he would stumble across some obvious detail others had missed, but unless someone else was there to notice, he wouldn't see the significance of what he had found.

"Lt. Dulworth, we've got the body of the mayor's assistant over there, and probably the mayor's gun over there. Over there is the mayor's wife, who just fainted. We need to get her out of here pronto. Over there is a Miss Tabatha Johnson, the mayor's secretary, who is as close to a witness as we have at this point. Have Det. Garcia get a statement from Miss Johnson and then get her out of here, too.

"I'll be dealing with Mayor Butler, here. He is currently, uh, being detained, let's say. He isn't under arrest, but for the record, Mr. Mayor, I'm now formally reminding you of your Miranda right to an attorney, and that anything you say can be used against you. And so far, that's just about everything you've said."

"I don't need no attorney," Blackjack scowled. "I didn't do nothing."

Carter rolled his eyes, both at Butler's response and at what he was about to say. "Lt. Dulworth, I want you to take over the crime scene."

"Take over?" Dulworth looked dazed.



“The crime scene, Roger. I need you to take your tac boys outside and secure the perimeter. Make sure nobody gets in here, especially the media, got it? Gather some evidence, talk to some people, build me a case.”

Carter paused and looked toward the door, where Det. Garcia was scowling at him because he'd talked to Dulworth first. “Det. Garcia,” he said reluctantly, “you're in charge of the investigation.”

Isabel Garcia was Murdale's first female Hispanic police officer, and like a lot of firsts, she was accepted only grudgingly, and only because of her exceptional abilities. It didn't hurt that she wasn't hard to look at, although it was rumored she swung the other way. Not that it mattered, Carter would tell himself. Not that any of it mattered. So he tried to pin his ambivalence about her on her prickly pride that could be wounded by the least slight. Sure she got hazed by the other officers, but did she have to threaten a sexual harassment, race discrimination lawsuit?

He'd managed to talk her out of the lawsuit, not by promising more sensitivity training, but by making her promise to be less sensitive, which he tested often, which was his way of flirting, because despite everything, he found himself attracted to her. He'd told her she could sue the department, make a lot of money and become famous, or make detective. One or the other, but not both, and as he'd hoped, she decided she liked being a cop.

She'd scored points with him and her fellow officers when she stood up to her lawyers, civil rights groups and the media by dropping her case. She could be gregarious, solicitous and charming, but underneath, he could still feel her resentment. Like the Jews, Carter thought, maybe it was her insecurity that motivated her to work harder and smarter than the rest — for whatever reason, she was his best investigator. That was the bottom line, although the fact that she wasn't white and wasn't black could also become an asset if the case went racial, he thought.

“I'll take care of it,” Garcia said.

“Det. Garcia, let the specialists do their jobs,” Carter said. “Don't try to be a one-woman Mariachi band. We're a team. You report to Lt. Dulworth, and Lt. Dulworth, you report to me. Got it?”

“Yassir,” Dulworth and Garcia said in unison, but with different inflections.

LaDonna began to stir as the paramedics arrived. When they reached for her she huffed, "I don't need no help," then took another look at Marques and slumped into their arms, practically bowling them over. Fanning herself, she let them load her on a gurney and roll her out to an ambulance, past a gathering crowd of city workers.

Carter turned to Willy. "OK Blackjoke, take me to this Serene."

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## Chapter 5

Leaving City Hall via the rear stairwell, Carter and Butler came across Cap loitering on the landing. "Pull the car around Boss?" he asked, his face brightening like a dog about to be taken for a walk.

"No Cap, you sit this one out. Me and the chief here is going out."

"Whasup Boss?"

Before Carter could stop him, Butler blurted out, "Well, it seems your bro the Blade got hisself kilt in my office last night."

"Kilt? He ain't my bro."

"Well, he ain't nobody's bro no more."

Cap looked warily at Carter. "Boss, you knows I was with you all last night until I took you home. We was at The Blackjack, and then home, right?"

Willy gave Cap an impatient look. "It's OK," he said. "I done tole the chief I saw the Blade here, and you picked me up after closing up the Blackjack."

"You saw the Blade here before I picked you up? You sure? I didn't see no Blade. I just picked you up here and took you on home."

"I also told him about Serene," Willy said.

Cap looked crushed. "I took you to Serene's," he said without conviction and then looked at Carter again. "But we was together the rest of the time."

Carter interrupted. "Cap, I'd like to talk to you later, but right now let's get you out of here."

As the three of them made their way down to the basement garage, Carter got on his walkie talkie. "Dulworth, secure the back stairwell, damnit." Then they got in Carter's personal vehicle. "Where can I drop you, Cap?"

“Take me to Papa Spudnuts” Cap said. “I can go hang with Toby.”

“Who’s Toby?”

“You knows Toby. He cleans up City Hall.”

Carter was lost. “I thought Boss Willy was supposed to clean up City Hall.”

It was Cap’s turn to look lost.

“Toby’s the ‘tard from the workshop,” Butler said, meaning the Pulaski County Community Workshop for the Developmentally Disabled.

“He ain’t no retard,” Cap retorted. “He’s smart. People just think he’s dumb. He tole me so hisself.”

Guiltily, Hank realized he’d seen Toby pushing a broom at City Hall for years, but had never bothered to say more than the minimum when the hulking simpleton would earnestly say hi to him.

The illegitimate son of a local judge, Toby Hartstead had some undiagnosable personality impairment that fell somewhere between autism and simpleton. Though his lurking presence tended to scare the bejeezus out of people, he was harmless most of the time, although some years ago he’d been caught peeking through the dorm windows of some college girls he’d followed home. His father stepped in long enough to get things papered over, and there had been no more complaints after Toby got on the janitorial crew at the workshop. Toby’s uncle ran a popular downtown eatery called Papa Spudnuts, which specialized in blue-plate specials and potato doughnuts. Most afternoons Hartstead could be found at Spudnuts, cleaning tables and mopping floors.

After letting Cap off at the diner, the police chief and the mayor set off for Serene’s in Carter’s unmarked squad car. Like Willy, Hank preferred the back way to Carbonboro, but this morning he took the highway. “Seems like trouble follows you everywhere,” Carter said. “Ever wonder why that is?”

Butler frowned. “I is who I is,” he said. “I gets by.”

“You sure do Blackjack. It’s everybody around you that takes the hits.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

When they knocked on the door to Serene’s ramshackle house in Carbonboro, there was no answer. “Wake up Serene,” Willy hollered. “It’s me. C’mon Serene, open up.”

When there was still no answer, Butler got out his keys and found the one that fit Serene's door. Uncharacteristically he fumbled with the lock. "Serene," he called when they got inside. "Get up. I needs to talk with ya."

He entered the bedroom, where Serene was still in bed. He shook her gently. "C'mon, wake up hun," he said, using an unfamiliar term.

He was startled that her skin felt cold and stiff. He shook her harder, and then with both hands on her shoulders he shook her so hard her head bobbed. But Serene wasn't ever going to wake up again.

Willy lowered Serene back down on the bed and moved away. Chief Carter somberly lowered the covers, revealing Serene's pallid body. He gave a low whistle. "Damn, Mister Mayor, now that's what I call an alibi."

Butler opened his mouth but no words came. "I dunno what the fuck," he finally blurted. "I was here, Chief. I slept with her. She was fine. Ya gotta..."

"Believe you?" Carter finished the sentence for him. "Yup, I believe you were here last night, I surely do."

"This is crazy," Butler protested. "This is really fucked up. I'm telling you, someone's trying to set me up."

"Who'd want to do that?" Carter asked sarcastically.

"Shit," Butler responded. "Who the fuck you think?"

"Never mind," Carter said. "We'll go see Punk soon enough. So give it to me one more time. What happened last night?"

Willy frowned. "Well, Chief, I had a bit to drink last night. I'm not sayin' that I blanked out or nothin', but some of it's kind of hazy right now, so lemme think. I know me and the Blade hooked up at my office. But the next thing I remember, I'm waking up at Serene's."

"So you don't remember Cap showing up at City Hall and taking you here?"

Willy paused. "No. Come to think of it. I just assumed, because when I get too fucked up, he knows to take me here instead of home."

"Why's that?"

"Serene puts up less of a fight."

"And you don't know where Cap went after that?"

"I guess that's true, too," Butler said, gauging its value.

“OK, so the last you remember, you and Mr. Taylor were talking in your office, that right? What were you talking about?”

Again Butler paused. “It had to do with that city manager thing. He wanted to be city manager, and I was giving him shit about it.”

“What do you mean you were giving him shit?”

“Well, I told him I had to think about it.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. I guess because he wanted it so bad. I was just playing with him.”

“I’m sure. Then what?”

“Well, this is where things get hazy. I don’t remember coming here, but like I say, Cap musta drove me. I do remember being in bed with Serene, and, you know.”

“Know what?”

“Well, I, you know, had intercourse with her.”

“You fucked her?”

“Yeah.”

“Didja kiss her?”

“Huh?”

“Well, did she wake up, squirm, scream or holler, perhaps sing some negro spirituals?”

“What are you getting at, Chief, that I did a corpse?” Willy thought about it for a moment and couldn’t remember her ever moving or talking. Which at the time hadn’t bothered him at all.

“Well?” Carter was waiting.

“I just figgered she was asleep.”

“Asleep? You’re laying pipe and she don’t even say whoop dee doo? How can that be?”

“Sometimes she takes them sleeping pills,” Butler answered.

Carter stared at Mayor Butler in disbelief. “So then what?” he prodded.

“Then? I guess I musta gone to sleep. I got up this morning, Cap showed up, and we went downtown.”

“Was she alive when you woke up?”

“I, I dunno. I didn’t bother her. I thought she was asleep, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” Carter bristled. “So far, your alibi is that you spent part of the night with someone who turns up dead, and the rest of the

night with someone else, who is also currently deceased, and you don't have a clue as to how either of them got that way. So are you telling me you didn't kill them, that you don't remember killing them, or what? Work with me."

"What I'm trying to say," Butler said slowly, "is that someone is trying to set me up. Can't you see that? It's a conspiracy to take down another uppity nigger."

Ah, the race card, Carter thought. It was only a matter of time before that got played. But it reminded Carter that he had to be careful not to taint the investigation by appearing to be biased. Was that what Blackjack was counting on?

As Carter used his car radio to instruct Lt. Dulworth to coordinate with Carbonboro police on the second crime scene, Willy stared at Serene's lifeless body. Serene Fountain had been raised by her mom in that same clapboard house, which was just up the street from where Willy grew up. They'd known each since they were rug rats.

Plain but pleasing, she'd never been his "girlfriend," yet had always been there for him. For sex, solace, or labor. Lately she had been cooking at the Blackjack. Not smart, but perceptive, Serene accepted early on her lot in life, which was black and female. Often pursued but never married, a melancholy mix of dooper and Baptist, she had been through a broken family, teen abortion, abusive pimps, fundamentalist preachers, support groups, halfway houses and of course Willy, who had used her like a pit stop for his life.

She was, in fact, the first girl Willy had ever done it with. Thirteen years old, they'd gotten stoned on a bottle of Thunderbird wine behind a shed where her mother kept a chicken coup. Dusk with a full moon rising, they were getting silly watching a rooster prancing outside the cage. Serene was sitting on the ground with her back against the shed, Willy beside her.

While Willy was getting excited watching the rooster strut his stuff, Serene was dreaming about getting out of the chicken coop that was Carbonboro. "What do you want to do?" Serene asked, looking at the chickens.

"I'm gonna do whatever I want," Willy said, imitating the rooster's strutting with his head.

"I mean about gettin' out of the chicken coup?"

Willy missed the analogy. “You want to let one of them chickies out and have some fun?”

“I mean about life, Willy, about getting out of Carbonboro and doing something different.”

Willy still didn’t know what she was talking about. “You want us to get down?” he asked. “You wanta get down?”

“No Willy,” she said, tears silently leaking from her eyes. “Don’t you ever think about doing something, more?”

Which angered Willy. “I knows how to do it. I’ve done it lots of times.”

High, horny, confused, frustrated, insecure, he hadn’t meant to club her face with his open hand, just swipe the air. He hadn’t meant to do it. But it felt good. And when she looked back at him in submission, he knew he’d done the right thing. The rest just flowed.

As the mournful sound of approaching police sirens became audible, Willy shook his head. “She was a good woman,” he said to Chief Carter. “Good woman.”

After the police arrived, Chief Carter conferred with Carbonboro’s police chief, who was none too happy to see Mayor Butler without cuffs on. Carter worked out jurisdictional details, then whisked Butler back to his car. “You sure you don’t want a lawyer?” Carter asked after they’d gotten in. “I haven’t arrested you, yet, but Carbonboro is out of my jurisdiction. It’ll take some time for their guys to process the crime scene, same as mine, but after that...”

“Don’t need no lawyer. Let’s go see Punk. He’s the person you need to be talking to.”

“You know, Mr. Mayor, pretty soon there’s going to be the media and all that, and you got a City Council meeting tomorrow night. How you gonna handle all that without Mr. Taylor?”

“I’ll figger something out,” Blackjack said. “Just get me the fuck outa here.”

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## Chapter 6

Upon a rolling hillside poking out of scrub brush and cornfields, midway between Carbonboro and Murdale, perches a neo-antebel-

lum mansion. With its manicured golf course, asphalt tennis court and chlorinated pool, the Pulaski County Country Club served as unofficial headquarters, rendezvous and hideout for what used to be known as the landed gentry.

Casimir Pulaski was a hapless Polish calvary officer who died in the Revolutionary War. But the club was more commonly known as “Punk’s Place,” because that’s where you could usually find Simon “Punk” Gray. He’d hung out there long before his sixteen years as mayor, and after Butler’s upset victory that spring, embarrassed club members had made him chairman of the board.

Fifty years ago, Punk had been a rebel without a clue, pissing away his family’s fortune on fast cars and faster women. Then his parents died in a mysterious fire at their home, leaving Punk as sole heir to the Carbonboro Container Corporation. Punk had never had an interest in the family business. But after the death of his parents he took control of the antiquated box factory and within five years had it humming like one of his finely tuned cars. Within ten years he’d expanded the business into scrap iron, grain elevators and trucking, and within fifteen he’d sold out to a Japanese firm and rolled his millions over into ever more lucrative investments. He took some hits in bubble bursts and financial swindles, but he still had a ton of cash stashed in his basement.

Punk took to money and power like he was born to it, which he was, and it was only natural that he become involved in politics, first as a bankroller and string-puller, then mayor when Blainey Tuxmann, who had ruled Murdale seemingly since it had been Indian territory, was gently urged to step aside by city elders on account of his meandering mind.

A blue-collar southern Illinois town of 20,000, many of Murdale’s residents had their roots in coal mines, cornfields or fruit orchards. Culturally, if not economically, Punk was one of them. So when he announced for mayor, the major contenders faded away, and his only competition was Lindsey Novic, a long-haired political activist at Murdale State University. Punk promised, “I’ll take care of it,” and the silent majority vote carried him to a landslide victory.

Though he didn’t need the money, under Punk’s administration petty bribes and payoffs were the coin of the realm. But it was orderly, and nobody seemed to mind. The roads got patched, the sewers



got extended, and the strip malls followed, as did integration, if grudgingly. Punk also liked to build edifices. He siphoned off federal downtown renovation funds to refurbish City Hall, adding a Doric facade and a faux clocktower that clangled on the hour.

Befitting a big shot, Punk had his share of affairs, but sex wasn't a priority with him. Nor was family. His wife Audrey had raised their kids, Juli, Sandi and Bernard, until they married and moved out of the house. Punk's real family was composed of his club buddies, fellow second generation men of leisure, who made their money trading inside information over mint juleps and gin rummy in the Peach Blossom Room at the country club.

When former cop and lounge owner Willy Butler announced he was opposing Gray for his crowning fifth term, Punk figured Blackjack was just another gadfly who would put up token resistance. What he hadn't figured on was Marques Taylor. Taking advantage of Blackjack's undeserved image of heroic cop, Taylor made Butler into a law and order candidate who vowed to clean up corruption at City Hall.

Willy had little interest in politics, which was just fine with Marques. But after patient coaching by Taylor, Butler was able to deliver a credible speech on the subject, and even answer rudimentary questions from the media, which was the only kind he got. He also had a way of disarming reporters with spontaneous bullshit that made him sound authentic. Such press conferences tended to be rowdy affairs, with the reporters trying to pin him down, and Butler reducing them to sympathetic laughter with Muhammad Ali imitations. The bottom line was Blackjack made good copy.

A student of human behavior, Taylor felt the only way to beat Gray was to get him riled up. So Taylor had Willy hold press conferences at which he would accuse Gray of everything from stealing from the city treasury to being a "County Club Mayor who caters only to the country club set."

Gray was as used to being accused of taking public funds as he was to doing it. But when Blackjack got on him about the country club, it struck a nerve. The country club was family. So Punk called a press conference of his own to explain how he was just a regular Joe, but ended up making some disparaging remarks about Butler's character, which came too close to sounding racist.

“My opponent accuses me of spending my time at a reputable fraternal organization, while he spends his time operating a bar where the darker elements go,” was what he’d meant to say. Later he denied saying “where the darkies go,” but that was how Taylor had Willy respond, and the media, always looking to spice up its election coverage, went along.

Once Taylor had made it seem like Gray had raised the race issue, he followed up with another “Willy conference,” at which Blackjack charged, “the only darkies at the country club are slaving in the kitchen.” Saying that belonging to an all-white club was “panty-mount” to joining the Ku Klux Klan, Willy said the club should vote to “entergrate,” or else Gray should resign his membership.

He had Gray there. There were no black members of the Pulaski County Country Club, which is the way most of the members wanted it, Punk included. Punk knew he had to do something, but he couldn’t imagine breaking “tradition.” Even more unthinkable for him was the alternative: quitting the club. So while publicly defending the club — “the only reason we have no African Americans is because none have applied” — privately he awkwardly broached the idea to the other board members that they accept “just one quiet and respectable colored family.”

Integrating their country club was not what the other club members wanted to hear. And when election day rolled around, some of them stayed home, figuring Gray would win anyway. But Taylor had mobilized the city’s poor and disenfranchised who’d never before bothered to register, much less vote, and by the slimmest of margins, the Blade’s “Blackjack Brigade” carried him into office.

Chief Carter knew enough about politics to belong to the country club, but he never felt comfortable there. He had been one of the few to support Punk’s half-hearted effort to recruit a black member, and had quietly stopped going there when the club remained lily-white. Although respectful around Gray, Carter never liked him, finding his petty larceny and sense of entitlement repugnant. Yet during the campaign, Carter had been Gray’s staunchest supporter. He viewed most elections as a choice between lesser evils, and Punk versus Blackjack was no contest. At least Punk respected custom and tradition. Blackjack, he felt, had no moral compass at all. Carefully avoid-

ing defending Gray, Carter focused his public statements on Blackjack, calling him a loose cannon.

Though Carter's charges were accurate, he wasn't good at public speaking, and his criticisms came across as shrill. Avoiding the mistake Gray had made, Taylor managed to get Butler to ignore Carter's rhetoric. Taking the high road worked, and the police chief's accusations never got traction.

Carter had been saddened, even depressed, by Butler's victory. But Punk was inconsolable. To be defeated by anyone, much less a, a niggra, it was unacceptable. He spent a small fortune on an unsuccessful recount, and it was no secret he had threatened on numerous inebriated occasions to hire someone to "cut that jigaboo down to size."

But Carter doubted Gray had anything to do with Taylor's murder, much less Serene's. If this was a frame-up, it was too elegant for Punk. But of Butler's many enemies, Punk was the most obvious suspect, and the most prominent. And unless he confronted Gray about the matter sooner or later, it would appear he wasn't looking at any suspects except Willy. So it might as well be sooner, and it might as well be with the mayor present, so he could see for himself.

When the chief and the mayor entered Punk's Place, they found the ex-mayor in his customary gunslinger's seat behind a gold felt card table, chewing a dead cigar and sharing the day's first round of Bloody Marys with several of his wags. "Morning, boys," Gray said, with just enough emphasis on "boys" to let them know it wasn't a slip. "Come to renew your membership?" he dryly asked Carter. Turning to Butler he added bitterly, "Mr. Mayor, what a pleasure. I didn't know they allowed darkies in here."

Blackjack scowled as Punk's wags melted away into the sunroom.

Hank dipped his head and said "Morning Simon."

"Simon?" Punk responded. "What's with Simon?"

"Punk, I need to ask you some questions."

"Well, sure, sit down." When Hank and Willy remained standing, Punk got up.

"What's the matter Chief, has Mr. Mayor made some more scurrilous accusations about my late administration?"

"You killed the Blade, and then you killed Serene," Blackjack erupted. "You killed em, man."

Punk looked puzzled. "What blade? Who's Irene?"

"Don't gimme that," Butler began and took a step toward Punk before Carter stiff-armed him. "You sonofa..."

"Look," Gray began, his temper rising. "I haven't a clue what the hell you're talking about. I don't know nothing about any blade or Irene. Besides, if I was gonna kill somebody, it'd be you, Blackjack-ass."

"Marques Taylor," Carter said quietly. "The mayor's assistant. They called him the Blade. Now he's dead."

"Marques Taylor," Gray repeated, pretending he couldn't recall the name. "You mean Blackjack's lackey? So how you gonna tie your shoes now, boy?"

This time it took Carter's full weight to restrain Willy from tearing into Punk. "That's right Punk, the mayor's, associate," Carter said. "Know anything about it?"

"Now Chief," Gray said, starting to get the picture. "If I wanted to get back at Mr. Butler I'd go straight at him. Why should I have anything against this Marques Taylor fellow?"

Carter knew Gray should have everything against Taylor, but he also suspected Punk was too dense to figure that out, as was Willy. "No reason," Carter said. "But you know how these darkies all look the same, and it seems Mr. Taylor was sitting at the mayor's desk when he was shot."

"Now hold on a minute," Gray stammered. "Sure, I've said a few things about Mr. Mayor here, but the only kind of coons I hunt got four legs, and I don't shoot 'em."

"Yeah, well it looks like you've done a pretty good job of treeing this coon," Carter responded.

It took a moment for Gray to catch up, and he couldn't help smiling. "Chief, c'mon," Gray chided, starting to regain his composure. "I spend my days here and my nights at home. You can ask my buddies, ask my wife, check my phone bills and bank account, I got nothing to do with whatever this is."

"I figure you probably don't," Carter conceded. "But I just needed to hear you say it, wanted Mr. Butler to hear it. Well Mr. Mayor?"

"I tell you he's trying to set me up."

Carter shrugged. As he began to guide Blackjack toward the door, the chief added as an afterthought, “By the way, Punk, you wouldn’t still happen to have a key to the Mayor’s Office, would you?”

Carter cocked an eye at Punk, who blanched. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out his key ring, from which still dangled his famous gold key to City Hall.

“Book him,” Butler snapped.

“Hold on,” Carter responded. “Willy, take out your key.”

Butler fished out his own oversized gold key. Both men hesitantly held up their keys to Carter, but neither would relinquish his hold. Carter took them both by the wrists and pulled their hands together to match up the keys. Three sets of eyes squinted intently at the keys, until Carter gave out a low whistle. “Not even close.”

Punk looked as surprised as Willy, but Carter had been toying with them both. Taylor had had Blackjack campaign to “take the golden key away from the golden calf.” But after the election, he decided to let Punk keep his key, and instead had the police department quietly change the locks, before giving the new mayor a slightly larger gold key of his own.

“Who’s Irene?” Punk asked as they again turned to leave.

“Serene,” Willy blurted.

“Okay, who’s Serene?” No one answered. “I see. So Blackjack’s sidekick and his girlfriend both got snuffed. Sounds like someone’s trying to simplify his life, Chief, don’t you think? Or has he got you bamboozled, too?”

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## Chapter 7

“You know, Mr. Mayor, it’s gettin’ to be ‘Meet the Press’ time,” Carter said as he slowly drove back to town — the back way.

Willy stared at the trees. “We’ll hold us a Willy conference,” he mused aloud, thinking that’s what the Blade would have done. “Chief, how ’bout you write us a statement?”

Carter started to curse, then looked sideways at Blackjack, too surprised by the utility of his request to be angry. “A statement?” Carter asked. “What kind of a statement?”

Willy was quiet for awhile, trying to think like Marques. "Oh, you know," he began. "Something like ... Two people been kilt ... I knew 'em but I ain't a suspect ... we're looking into a political motive ... something like that."

"Not a suspect?" Carter snorted. "First of all, there is no 'us.' You will have to write your own statement. And so far, you're my only suspect." And maybe Cap, Carter thought to himself.

"Then how come you ain't arrested me yet?"

"I wouldn't be planning any Caribbean cruises," Carter responded. "By the way, now that Mr. Taylor is gone and you're out of the office, who's running the town?"

"I dunno," Willy laughed. "I think the town runs itself. I never ran the town, and neither did the Blade. He just ran me, sometimes." Blackjack smirked at the realization.

When they arrived at City Hall, a restive crowd of gawkers and city workers had gathered, and reporters were staking out all the entrances. Three sets of TV minicam lights ignited when someone recognized the chief's car, and the crowd swarmed down the wide steps toward the street. Instead of using his passkey to the underground garage, Carter decided to park in front of City Hall and let the media have a photo op.

"Is the mayor under arrest?" the reporters shouted and poked their microphones at the closed car windows. The chief and the mayor had to bark several shins to get their car doors open, then Cap appeared and began to clear a path. "I'll have a statement in a half hour," Butler shouted as he shouldered through the crowd and marched up the steps. "Up in my office."

Carter felt cornered. He didn't want to say anything but he couldn't stay silent. He found himself mimicking the mayor. "The police department will also have a statement in a half hour. At the Mayor's Office."

Carter followed Butler through the crowd, grimly staring at Blackjack's thick neck and muscular back, and wondering where his officers were. With the reporters in tow, they went straight to the Mayor's Office, which was striped off with yellow police tape. They entered the office and locked the door behind them. Taylor's body had been taken away, but Det. Garcia was still poking around in the mayor's

inner office, while Lt. Dulworth appeared to be lollygagging in the reception area.

I thought I told you to secure the perimeter, Carter said to Dulworth, as Blackjack scowled at Garcia.

"I did," Dulworth said. "But they took the body away and we're pretty much done here, except for Nancy Drew over there."

Carter shrugged. "What have you got for me?" he asked.

"Preliminary investigation indicates victim Taylor was shot point-blank with Mayor Butler's gun while sitting in the mayor's chair," Dulworth said. "Coroner's performing autopsies this afternoon. Det. Garcia talked to the secretary. She didn't seem to know much, except she was sure she saw the mayor unlock his door this morning. The lock doesn't appear to have been tampered with, so whoever has a key is a prime suspect."

"What's she doing?" Carter asked, referring to Det. Garcia.

"I don't know, but she sure looks good doing it," Dulworth said, gesturing toward her behind.

"Don't go there," Carter warned.

Feeling their eyes on her derriere, Garcia turned around. "I'm wondering," she said as she walked out of the Mayor's Office.

"Wandering?" Carter didn't understand.

"Wondering," Garcia repeated. "Wondering why Mayor Butler isn't in handcuffs and under arrest."

Blackjack leered at Garcia. "Cuz I didn't do nuthin, sugar tits," he said.

Garcia narrowed her eyes.

"That's enough, Blackjack," Carter intervened. "The mayor is being detained as a material witness, but he won't be arrested until we've gathered some evidence," he told Garcia. "So by the book, build me a case."

"I already have," Garcia said through clenched teeth.

"Tell it to Lt. Dulworth," Carter said. "Now, are you two about finished here?"

"For now," Garcia said.

"There's been some new developments," Carter said, and proceeded to fill them in on Serene's suspicious death. "We'll talk back at the station," he added as they left.

A receptionist from down the hall appeared with a batch of messages. The first was from Tabatha: "I quit." "*The Murdale Snooze, Pulaski Urinal, KOAL-TV, Associated Press, St. Louis Globe fucking Democrat,*" Willy snarled as he crumpled up the notes and threw them toward a waste basket. "Where's *Jet* and *Ebony*?"

Cap showed up, looking frightened. "What's going on, Boss?"

Blackjack looked at Carter to see if he was going to let him answer. Carter acted like he wasn't listening.

"Cap, I got something' to tell you that you ain't gonna like. We went by Serene's, and Serene is, well, gone."

"Whacha mean gone?"

"Well Cap, we went over there, and she was like, dead."

Cap looked puzzled. "Serene, dead? Then he began to wail. "Oh no, not Serene. Fuck man. Not Serene. How can that be?"

"I don't know, Cap, it's sort of a mystery."

He could see Carter was about to interrupt, so he changed the subject. "Right now Cap, I needs you to step up an' take care of a few things for me. Unnerstan'?"

"Right Boss," Cap said, straightening up. "Whacha need?"

"I need you to stay outside the office and keep everybody away. Don't let no one hang out there, you got it?"

Cap left the room and began to vent his anger on the reporters who were blocking up the hall. "Go on down to the other end of the hall or you'll be sorry," he shouted. The reporters could see First Amendment arguments would be falling on deaf ears and sullenly retreated.

Since the Mayor's Office was still a crime scene, Carter walked into Taylor's more modest side office and sat down at his cluttered desk. The mayor followed him into the office and had to move some papers to make room to sit on a small divan, the only other furniture in the room. Butler put his feet up and closed his eyes, while Carter found a legal tablet and pen. He looked around at the papers and file cabinets and made a mental note to have someone inventory his office for clues.

Carter stared at the yellow paper and tried to figure out what to tell the media. It's one thing not to reveal what you know, but quite another to conceal what you don't know. Yet he had to say something. Someone had to maintain order. With an irritated grunt he



picked up a pen. "How you want me to refer to Serene?" he asked Blackjack. "Your main squeeze or piece on the side?"

About a half hour later, they opened the door and found no one but Cap outside. From the other end of the hall the reporters glowered at them. "Way to go, Cap," Willy whispered. He waved expansively at the reporters and they crowded into the office reception area.

"What are you gonna say, Willy?" Carter whispered as they mounted a small podium in a corner of the office.

"I'll know what to say when the time comes," Butler hissed.

Carter cleared his throat as the reporters started shouting questions. "I have a short statement," he said and paused to let the electronic media finish plugging in their equipment. "Shortly after 9 a.m. this morning, Marques A. Taylor, age 45, of 1606 Grand Ave. in Murdale, was found shot to death in Mayor William Butler's office. Pending an autopsy later today, the preliminary cause of death appears to be a gunshot wound to the head. As many of you are aware, Mr. Taylor was the mayor's special assistant slash budget director."

Carter let the rustling subside before continuing. "At approximately 11 a.m. today, a Serene Fountain, also 45, of 906 W. Briarwood in Carbonboro, was found dead at her residence. Cause of death at this time is undetermined. Miss Fountain was uh, an acquaintance of Mayor Butler's."

Another stir went through the room at this new information. In a louder voice, Chief Carter continued. "At this point we don't know if the two deaths are related, and so far there have been no arrests. But we are treating both incidents as possible homicides. And since these incidents are still under investigation, there will be no questions," he said.

The reporters howled in protest, and as Carter started to walk away, Blackjack grabbed his arm. "Now Chief," he said airily. "You knows these ladies and gennelmen have been standing around all day waiting to ask us some questions, so let's give 'em a shot. Fire away ladies an gents."

Carter was trapped, as he couldn't leave the microphone to Blackjack alone.

Ron Jon Marks of *The Pulaski Journal* fired first. "Have you found any evidence, like a murder weapon?" he asked, having been tipped by a friend at the state crime lab.

Carter paused, gauging how much Marks knew. "We have a weapon in custody that is being tested," he conceded.

"What kind of weapon, was it a gun?" Marks asked.

"Yes, it was a handgun."

"Well, whose gun is it and where was it found?" Marks asked, spilling the rest of his knowledge.

"We are checking that now," Carter fibbed. "But to answer those kinds of questions might give out information only the killer might know."

Anne Skilby of the Carbonboro *Gazette* changed the subject. "Serene Fountain? How do you spell that?"

"Like it sounds," Carter responded. "Like a water fountain. F-O-U-N-T-A-I-N."

"Thanks," Skilby said and blushed. "But who was she? What was her relationship with Mayor Butler?"

Blackjack moved closer to the microphones. "She was a, part-time employee at my restaurant. A childhood akwin, acquaintance, who I knowed for many years. She was a very nice woman, a Christian woman, who I will miss like any other friend. Like Marques."

Which was good enough for the media's one-line descriptions.

"Well, that's quite a coincidence that two people Mayor Butler knew are killed on the same night. Do you have any suspects?" asked Paul Springster of the AP.

"What kind of suspects?" asked Carter.

"Murder suspects, what do you think?"

"Who said anyone was murdered?" Carter continued to answer questions with questions.

"Has anyone been murdered or not?" Springster asked, fearing his national wire story had just gone down the tubes.

"What I said is we are investigating both deaths as possible homicides," Carter responded. "For all we know, they could turn out to be suicides, accidents, natural deaths or some combination. We simply don't know at this time."

Springster heaved a sigh of relief. “Mystery Deaths of Mayor’s Aide and Female Friend *Investigated* as Murder” was still racy enough to make the A-wire.

Matt Santorini of the *Murdale News* tried to follow up. “Since you did say you are conducting a murder investigation, do you have any presumed suspects?”

“It’s you guys who are in the presuming business, not me,” Carter snapped. But not wanting to let Blackjack entirely off the hook, he added, “no one and everyone is a suspect.”

Seizing on the opening, Santorini followed up. “What about Blackjack, I mean Mayor Butler?”

“What about Mayor Butler?” Carter parried.

“Is he a person of interest?”

Carter couldn’t help himself. “He’s not that interesting. Like I said, no one and everyone is a suspect.”

“Does that mean the mayor *is* a suspect?” Santorini persisted.

“Look, Matt,” Blackjack interrupted, poking his head into the microphones. “If you’re asking if I killed Marques or Serene, the answer is no. These were both, dear friends of mine, and I can’t imagine why anyone would want to hurt them.”

Some of the reporters groaned at this over-simplification. Everyone knew the mayor and his assistant weren’t getting along.

“With all due respect Mr. Mayor, everyone knows you and Mr. Taylor weren’t on the best of terms,” Santorini asserted.

“If you want to look at political motives, why don’t you ask who I beat in the election,” Butler shot back.

“What are you saying? That you suspect Mayor Gray?” Santorini used the title out of habit. “Chief Carter. Is Simon Gray a suspect?”

Carter looked irritated. “We talked with Mr. Gray this morning,” he said.

“What did he say?”

“He said he didn’t do it.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Of course I believe him. Mr. Gray is no more or less a suspect than anyone else, even you Santorini. You haven’t had much news to write about lately, have you?”

“What else did he say?” Santorini wanted to know.

“You’ll have to ask him that, Matt.”

Santorini groaned, realizing his story had just gotten more complicated. He'd have to call Gray for a reaction, and Punk always made for a grueling interview.

Gerhard Charles, the precocious editor of the *Murdale Times* alternative weekly, piped up. "Does it concern you that the non-suspect is not only the mayor, but black? That no matter how high you climb, once there's trouble, you're just another you know what?"

Carter glared at Charles, annoyed but not surprised that he'd go after the race angle. He decided to avoid the inference. "I repeat, His Honor is no more or less a suspect than anyone else at this time."

"If there are no more questions, the chief has to go investigate, and I gotta go, mayor," Butler interrupted. He made a move toward his office, then realized it was still taped off. The reporters were just starting to sniff blood when Blackjack caught himself. "Say Chief, whadaya say we open the door and let the cameras film the crime scene from out here? That OK?"

Carter shook his head in admiration at this media ploy. "Why not?" he responded. "Film at eleven, right?" he said as Willy opened the door to his private office.

"You got five minutes," Blackjack said.

The reporters enthusiastically nodded their heads, jubilant at this surprise access. "Cap, in five minutes, clear 'em out of here," he added as he followed Carter out the door. "And don't let none of 'em past the tape neither. Nobody gets into my office."

"Right, Boss."

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## Chapter 8

Blackjack had seen a few corpses in his time. But the only autopsy he'd ever attended was for his partner and the Sambo's bandit, and only because Chief Carter had ordered him to go. It had been pretty much as he had expected — a sterile white room in the basement of Murdale Memorial Hospital, a body, pallid and bare, resting on a stainless steel table that looked not unlike a car lift at a repair shop, and dissection instruments that resembled miniature mechanic tools.

He'd felt foolish wearing a mask, rubber gloves and surgical gown, and not helping the situation was Pulaski County Medical Examiner Stephen Edelman, an irreverent Hebe who would mutter irresistible gallows humor as he went about his business, then glare at anyone who tittered at his jokes. After watching flesh and organs get lanced and extracted, Blackjack had concluded that autopsies were no sweat, but no walk in the park, either.

Hank Carter, on the other hand, had attended scores of autopsies for murders, vehicle crashes, suicides and natural deaths under mysterious circumstances. He found the procedures to be not necessarily enjoyable, but illuminating. For him, autopsies told not so much how people died as how they had lived, which could yield clues to their demise.

An autopsy, he felt, was the most efficient kind of police interrogation. No lies, no alibis, no lapses of memory, no talking, for that matter. Just the, well, bare bones. Dead men indeed told no lies. He also liked the solitude of a morgue. If it weren't insane, not to mention illegal, he thought probing the entrails of cadavers might not make a bad hobby — so much more engaging than reading, and more factual, besides.

But when Mayor Butler and Chief Carter donned hospital garb in anticipation of the autopsies on Serene Fountain and Marques Taylor, Willy was the one who was jocular while Hank was grim-faced. "I don't know why you want me here," Willy said. "You thinking, the wounds will bleed or something?"

"Maybe," Hank responded. "You never know what an autopsy might reveal."

The hell if I'm going to lose my cool, Blackjack thought, conceding to himself that he'd rather be somewhere else. "Well, let's roll," he said, faking bravado. "Let's get it on."

The examination of Taylor's brain went pretty much as Carter expected. "Semi-black male, 41, maybe five-foot-eight, hundred thirty-five pounds soaking wet," Edelman muttered as he went about his work. "Right now this one is about half dry, I'd say dead about 12 hours. Decent health, no visible wounds on the torso and extremities...save for a rather imposing crater near the subject's left temporal lobe... The bullet appears to have been fired at close range,

conceivably but not necessarily self-inflicted...Now where is that sucker?"

He had to fish around to find the bullet, a .357 magnum that because it was a hollow point, had flattened out when it struck the skull, ricocheting around his cranium instead of coming out the other side. Marques would have died instantly.

"Was Taylor right-handed or left-handed?" Carter asked Butler.

"Lefty," he responded.

Edelman massaged Taylor's hands. "Definitely a lefty," he said.

Had there been just one corpse to examine, Carter might have taken more seriously the notion of suicide. But it didn't feel like suicide, and even if it was, there was more involved.

Reading Carter's mind, Edelman picked up Taylor's hands again and sniffed them. "We'll check it, but doesn't appear to be powder burns on either hand," he said.

The liver, kidneys and other internal organs provided few surprises. "If the bullet hadn't got him, this barbecue might have," Edelman muttered as he retrieved a bit of half-digested pork from the large intestine. As he sliced into the bladder a putrid smell filled the already stenchy room. "Looks like Mr. Taylor imbibed last night, scotch I'd say," Edelman said and made sniffing noises through his mask.

But Carter *was* surprised when Dr. Edelman peered into Taylor's anus and found scars and lacerations. "Looks like our boy's been shoving things up his butt the wrong direction," he quipped.

"Child abuse?" Carter asked hopefully.

"Too recent," Edelman responded. "I'd say our boy was a fagela. Oh Lord, I'd better do an AIDS test. Just to be safe, keep your distance and don't get any blood on you. Dagnabbit."

Willy was stunned. "AIDS?" He blurted incredulously. "You sayin' the Blade had AIDS?"

Edelman looked at Greene's corpse. "Not necessarily, Mr. Mayor. We just need to be safe.

"Carter grimaced. It had never occurred to him that Taylor might have been homosexual. Now he found it amazing that it hadn't. The effeminate features, trace of a lisp, and the way he stuck out his butt. Carter had just chalked it up to some weird strain of black intellectualism. Because he was biased about homos, he conceded to himself. A

second before, he had viewed Marques as a somewhat odd but effective functionary; now he fought back the impulse to think of him as a fairy.

“What about that?” Carter asked Blackjack, who was trying to conceal a smirk beneath his mask. “You and Taylor have a thang goin’ on? I thought we were gonna wait until the second feature before getting into crimes of passion.”

“Shit,” Willy said. “I knew the Blade swung both ways. I heard that when he wasn’t at the Blackjack trying to pick up my clientele, he was down at the Deja Vu.”

“Was he HIV positive?”

“If he was, he never told me.”

“What about his boyfriends?”

Butler looked at the floor. “I wouldn’t know nothing about that.”

“C’mon Blackjack, cough up some names.”

Butler paused. “I dunno. That spade Sammy Louis and taco Julio Xerxes, but that’s just a guess. The Blade knew better than to talk to me about his tutti fruttu side. We wasn’t tight like that.”

Blackjack seldom paused, and Carter filed it away for future reference. Sammy and Julio were the usual suspects. Murdale’s two most notorious drag queens, whose names dotted the police blotter for tawdry disputes and messy lovers quarrels. Even if he was biased against homosexuals, Carter still couldn’t imagine Marques letting those two degenerates play butt darts with him. Either Willy was holding something back or he really didn’t know about Taylor’s gay life. Which wasn’t hard for Carter to imagine. If he was Blackjack, he wouldn’t have wanted to know. either. Maybe Serene would tell more.

“Where you want me to dig in?” Dr. Edelman asked Carter, genuinely puzzled, after Serene was wheeled in. “No visible wounds, no bruises to the neck, no look of terror, as from suffocation or rape. Black female, 42, five-foot-three, hunerd-ten pounds, deceased about the same amount of time as Mr. Taylor. Only this lady looks more serene, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“How come she looks so serene?” Carter asked.

Edelman spread Serene’s legs and peered into her vagina. For one thing, it looks like Adam’s seed is still lying at heaven’s gate,” he said.

At least one element of Willy's alibi had held up. Blackjack smiled with his eyes and darted a glance at Carter, who just as rapidly lowered his gaze.

"OK, Willy," Carter said as Dr. Edelman's scalpel continued to hover indecisively over Serene's body. "Besides Adam's seed, what else will we find when we open up Miss Fountain?"

"Some chitlins an' greens, whole milk and maybe some Mad Dog 20/20," Blackjack said and winked at Dr. Edelman, who didn't understand. "She also did downers, muscle relaxers she called 'em, and she was partial to gin."

"Barbiturates and alcohol? It's as good a place to start as any," Edelman said and artfully flicked the scalpel into Serene's chest. "Show me what you got, baby," he said as he sliced downwards.

Serene's inside looked ten years older than her outside, but there were no signs of recent trauma. Her heart seemed healthy, her lungs corroded but not cancerous. In essence, the stomach confirmed most of Willy's predictions, with the singular exception of a half-digested Quaalude. "Won't be needing this anymore," Edelman muttered as he snagged it with his tweezers. But there weren't enough other pill particles to necessarily suspect overdose. "Hm," Dr. Edelman said, "this one's a bit of a puzzler. Maybe the blood tests will tell us more."

Carter met Butler's eyes and held them a moment, before reluctantly turning to Dr. Edelman. "Doc, there's just one more score I was wondering if you could settle for us. Would you say that Miss Fountain had her last, consummation, before or after she had expired?"

Dr. Edelman tried not to look surprised. He did some more probing and "hmming." "Kind of hard to say," he said finally. "Looks like a close call. Could have gone either way...But in my professional opinion, I'd say this lady was somewhere between here and there. Comatose perhaps. It would have been like shtupping a corpse, whether she was one yet or not.

"I guess we'll call that a draw," Carter said to Butler, who didn't know what to think. "Seen enough?"

Willy had seen more than enough.



## Chapter 9

After checking on the mayor's wife, who had already checked out of the hospital after her fainting spell, the chief drove the mayor back to City Hall. Willy was already looking forward to grabbing Cap and heading to The Blackjack, where he could chill out and tell everyone what a fucked day he'd had. On most Mondays, Marques made him stay late at the office, going over the agenda for Tuesday's City Council meeting. But there'd be no briefing today.

Carter slowed the car as they approached the Police Department, but then kept going. "Say, Willy," Carter said as if he'd just thought of it, whadaya say we head over to The Blackjack and have us a couple brewskis?"

Willy scowled, realizing his fucked day was still fucked.

The Blackjack Lounge, a dimly-lit, garish, red velvet and mirrored monstrosity, was Willy's sanctuary. He might reside at home, hide at the office, and pass out at Serene's, but it was at The Blackjack that he hung out. With, as Punk Gray might have said, "the good ole dudes."

There was JoJo Harrison, a handyman-burglar, Brownie Debs, a one-armed printer and blues singer, and Weegee McNeely, who did nothing at all. Though they thought of themselves as Blackjack's posse, they were more like sycophants or henchmen.

Carter had only been in The Blackjack a couple of times, once to pay his perfunctory respects at Butler's inaugural reception, and once to haul out a dusted gorilla who had just hacked his wife to death with a machete. It wasn't that he felt uncomfortable in juke joints. He'd just as soon spend his money in someone else's establishment.

The good ole dudes were already lit but somber, and when they saw the police chief follow Blackjack into the bar they turned sour. "What's *he* doin' here?" Harrison muttered under his breath.

"We seen you on the TV with Blackjack today," Debs said cordially, still being on parole. "Lemme buy you a drunk, I mean drink."

Blackjack broke in. "Two Bud Lights," he ordered Hal, a scruffy, long-haired hippie type in his 20s, who bussed tables and sometimes filled in as bartender before Cap arrived.

"Can't get nobody to drink these diet beers," Butler told Carter. "Maybe you'll like em."

A couple of the waitresses who'd just come on cowered in the background. "So whasup?" Hal boldly asked Blackjack as he delivered their beers. "Did you snuff the Blade or what? And Serene? Gimme a break, man," he giggled.

It was the ultimate insult. Hal was The Blackjack's only white male employee. Hired to be the house nigger, the one to scrape the plates, take out the garbage, and suffer verbal abuse, he wasn't supposed to raise his eyes to Blackjack, much less dis him. But it hadn't worked out that way. Hal had been subservient enough, yet he never groveled, and a shadow of a smirk never completely vanished from his face.

One time Butler caught him after he'd snuck outside to blow a reefer. Willy was ready to really lower the boom, not just fire him but do the cop routine. But Hal met Blackjack's most ferocious glare with a shit-eating grin, and with pot smoke still wafting out of the sides of his mouth, offered a courageous, "mah man?"

Willy had cracked up. "Mah *main* man," he had responded giddily and followed through with a three-part soul-shake. Hal had even managed to tame Cap, who treated anyone around Willy as a rival. The first time Willy had called Hal "my main man" in front of Cap, Hal had immediately disowned the title. "Cap's your main man," he corrected. "Cap's the franchise."

So when Hal brazenly accused Willy of murder, Blackjack's first impulse was to deck him. But he didn't. Hal always seemed to cut through the bullshit, to get Willy to reflect in spite of himself. Instead of making a direct denial, he asked Hal, "You so smart, what you think?"

"Don't matter what I think. It's what *he* thinks," Hal said, gesturing at Chief Carter.

Normally, Carter wouldn't have bothered humoring a scruffy busboy or anyone else who asked about an open case. But he wanted to get a conversation going, and Hal was as good a place as any to start. "So Hal, that your name?" Carter asked.

"Harold, uh, Harold Anderson," he stammered. "Everyone just calls me Hal around here, though."

"So Hal, where were *you* last night?"

“*Me?*” Hal responded nervously and wiped his hands on his apron. He turned a chair around and straddled it. “Since you asked, I was *here* last night, right up until closing.”

“See anything unusual?”

“Well, let’s see,” Hal stalled. He looked toward the ceiling and tried to catch his breath. “Checked in about four forty-five, fashionably late as usual,” he mumbled, then began to gather steam. “The afternoon crew, Suzy and Terri, were finishing up. The night shift, Kris and Dianne got here about five, and Hickery, Dickery and Debs over there got in about five o’two — they like Kris and Dianne’s booties better than Suzy and Terri’s. Cap was behind the bar. He looked like he was in a bad mood, so I didn’t mess with him. Blackjack showed up around seven.”

“Was Mr. Taylor here?” Carter asked.

Hal looked startled. “Now that you mention it, no. That was kind of unusual.”

“How about Serene Fountain?”

“No, Serene’s off weekends. Last time I saw her was Friday. Sundays Margaret cooks. By the way, Blackjack, who’s cooking tonight? Mondays are Serene, I mean, were.”

“Put out a sign we’re not serving food tonight,” Willy told Dianne. “Say we’re mourning Serene and the Blade, so there won’t be no food.” Monday was not a big night anyway, and besides, he had no intention of feeding Chief Carter.

“You want us to stick around?” Kris asked.

“If you wanna get paid,” Butler said, knowing they wanted to leave.

“So what happened next?” Carter asked Anderson.

Hal took a couple of breaths to steady himself. “Let’s see. After Blackjack got tired of busting my balls, he started in on the waitresses. Then they put on some Marvin Gaye, and he and Debs showed the waitresses how to do the stop-and-go ... from behind. I guess we’re talking ten now. Blackjack left, I assumed to avoid LaDonna, who came in to close up. But I have no idea where he went. After taking out the garbage, I went home around midnight and that’s about it.”

Carter shrugged. “Gentlemen,” he said expansively and turned to Debs, McNeely and Harrison. “Anything to add? ... I didn’t think so.

How about you, ladies?" he asked the waitresses peering from the kitchen door. Shaking their heads, they withdrew to the kitchen.

Debs, McNeely and Harrison looked at each other in disbelief. In unison they rose to leave, without a clue as to where they were going. Apparently where the rest of the patrons had gone. Blackjack looked around the bar, now deserted except for Hal, Hank and himself. "You're doing wonders for my business, Chief."

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## Chapter 10

Carter was about to respond when Cap rushed through the door. "I came fast as I could, Boss," Cap said. "Whacha need?"

"Mah main man," Willy said. Cap always perked him up.

"Why don't you get behind the bar and fix us some real drinks."

As Cap started to move away Carter spoke. "Wait a minute, Cap. Sit down and take a load off. Let Mr. Mayor fix *you* a drink."

Cap looked hesitantly at Willy, who shrugged and got up. "What can I get you?" he asked Cap.

"Whatever you's havin'," he said and reluctantly sat in Willy's chair. Blackjack looked at Hal, who had made no move to leave. "Hal, why don't you go on back to the kitchen and start cleaning up. Get the girls to help and then send them home."

"No problemo," Hal said and left.

Carter paused. Cap, he thought, was too simple-minded to lie, but too addled to tell the truth. To Cap, truth was a murky mix of what he thought you wanted to hear, what he thought Willy wanted him to say, and what he thought sounded good. With the mentality of a child, he would probably be a lie detector operator's nightmare. You could trip him up and he'd just make up another story, just as transparent, ad infinitum. Even if you got out the thumbscrews, he'd just keep telling more stories.

"Cap," Carter began, deciding to come at things sideways. "You got a last name?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

“My mama would never tell me who my papa was, so’s I got’s a last name, I just dunno what it is. I always went by my mama’s name, which was Capman ‘fore she died.”

“I see, so what’s your first name?”

“Cap.”

Carter sighed, realizing this was going to be even harder than he’d thought. “No, I mean what did your mom name you?” he asked patiently.

“Reuben, but I never goes by that.”

“Reuben? I didn’t know that,” Willy teased as he arrived with three glasses and a bottle of speed rail whiskey. “From now on you’ll be Reuben. Rude Reuben,” he said and started to sit down.

Cap looked like he was going to cry.

Carter gestured with his eyes for Butler to return behind the bar. “Nobody’s gonna call you Reuben,” Carter said, grasping at anything to put Cap at ease. “By the way, where you live?”

“Upstairs,” Cap gestured toward the ceiling. “It’s real nice up there,” he added, although it wasn’t.

“I guess you’re just about Willy’s best friend,” Carter continued, easing into his questioning. “Does that mean you were with him last night?”

“I already done tole you I was with the Boss all night. We was here, then we went to his office, and then I took him home.”

“Well now, wait a minute. Didn’t Willy leave the bar before you did?”

“That’s right.”

“And you didn’t take Willy home, you took him to Miss Fountain’s, right?”

“I mean we went to Serene’s.”

“Good. So after closing The Blackjack, you caught up with the mayor around midnight. Right?”

“Uh huh.”

“OK, did you see anyone when you got to City Hall?”

“Nope.”

“How about Mr. Taylor?”

Cap looked confused.

“The Blade. Did you see the Blade maybe?”

Cap’s mood darkened. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I never seen him.”

“OK, so where were you while you were waiting for Willy?”

“With Toby. He let me play with his buffer.”

“I thought you didn’t see anyone.”

“I didn’t. Except Toby.”

“OK, so while you were going around with Toby, did you see anybody else?”

“Like I tole you, I didn’t see nobody. And neither did Toby.”

“And then what, Cap?”

“Well, lemme see. I went upstairs to check on Boss, an he’s, uh, kinda sleeping.”

“At the mayor’s desk?” Carter broke in.

Cap paused. “I guess so.”

“Damnit,” Carter hissed to himself. “Let me rephrase.”

“Re what?”

“I’m going to ask you again, when you found Blackjack, where was he?”

“Sitting at his desk.”

“So how did he look?”

“Whachu mean?”

“Well, did he look happy or sad, excited or mad or what?”

Cap looked at Willy. “He looked asleep.”

“You sure?” This time it was Willy with the question. “You sure I wasn’t drunk or stoned? Or both?”

“Boss, you was just snoozing. I woke you up and you tole me to take you to Serene’s, so I did.”

“So who locked the door on the way out?” It was Chief Carter again.

“Boss musta done it like he always do.”

“You sure about that?” Willy interrupted again.”

Cap paused. “Come to think of it, you *wuz* kinda groggy, and you gave me the keys to lock up.”

“So then what?” the chief pressed on.

“Well, I drove the back way to Serene’s, and kinda walked Boss to the porch, because he was falling asleep again. After opening Serene’s door, I gave him back his keys.”

“Did you go inside Serene’s? Carter asked.

Cap paused again. "No, I helped him to the door, but he went on in and I went home."

"And then what?" Carter asked.

"Whachu mean?" Cap retorted hotly. "I done tole you, I came back here."

Carter felt drained. "Just a little more, Cap. And then you fetched the mayor the next morning, is that right?"

"Thas right."

"At Serene's?"

"Uh huh. I brung her some flowers."

"So you saw her then?"

Cap looked like he was going to cry again. "No, she was sleeping. I left 'em on the table."

Carter paused, not for effect, but because his mind was a blank. "OK Cap, you did real good," he said finally.

"Yeah, you did so good now I'll probly get the death penalty for sure," Willy said, unable to resist teasing him.

"I'm sorry Boss," Cap said with alarm. "Really it wasn't that way at all. We went straight home."

Once Willy got Cap going he liked to play with him for awhile, but this time he didn't. "Cap, I'm just kidding. You done saved my ass, really. I'm a free man today."

After nobody said anything for awhile, Carter downed the last of his whiskey. "You're free for now, Mr. Mayor. But stick around," he said as he wearily got up. "Because I'll be talking to you soon."

Once the chief left, the bar started filling up. But suddenly Willy didn't feel like being there anymore. "Hey, Hal," he shouted loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Take out the garbage. Cap, kick everybody outa here. Let's close this joint up and go home."

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## Chapter 11

From the east side, where Willy had his bar, to the west side, where he lived with LaDonna, Willy rode up front with Cap. Usually on those rides Cap wanted to rap, while Blackjack's mind was on how he was going to deal with LaDonna when he got home. But tonight

Cap seemed preoccupied, intently watching the road. Finally he spoke. "You didn't tell nobody, didja?" he asked, looking straight ahead.

"I don't know whacha talkin' 'bout," Blackjack replied.

"You sure the Blade don't tell you nuthin' 'bout me?"

"Cap, the Blade is dead. He ain't saying nuthin to nobody."

"That he is," Cap said. "Muthafucka."

Cap pulled up to LaDonna's condo. "Catch you later," Willy said as he got out. "Pick me up first thing in the morning. Be cool now."

Upstairs, LaDonna was sitting erect in the dark, a skillet by her side. She had been calling the police all day to find out if her husband had been arrested yet, and was livid that Willy had never checked in to find out if she was OK. Emotionally frazzled, she'd decided that when her husband came in she was going to beat on him until he knocked her down.

When Willy opened the door, she expected him to be cold and evasive as usual. But when he stepped inside, his face dimly illuminated by the hall light, he looked tired, vulnerable. She'd never seen him like that before, and an unfamiliar instinct was aroused. She felt maternal. Not seeing LaDonna, Willy quietly closed the door and sagged against it. "I'm here Willy," LaDonna cooed softly. Slowly she crossed the room and embraced him in a smotherly hug.

Outside in the limo, Cap sat motionless, staring through the windshield until his tears blinded him. He began to rock and moan and sob. Breathing heavily, he dropped his head on the steering wheel and cried for Serene, the only woman he'd ever loved.

"What the hell's he doing now, jerking off?" Carter muttered to himself from his stake-out position down the street. "Two people dead and he's beating his pud. Kee-rist."

Most cops find stake-outs unendurably dull. But Carter liked them for the same reason he liked autopsies — the solitude. He wasn't expecting much from this stake-out; indeed, he was praying it would be uneventful. Being able to cross Cap off the list would simplify things, and he was rooting for Cap to be innocent.

Addled as Cap was, Carter rather liked him. He hoped Toby had really let him play with his buffer, and that Cap never saw the Blade after he picked up Willy. But he also knew Cap was somehow in-



volved in whatever Blackjack was involved in, if only because he didn't seem to have a life of his own.

Carter had a splitting headache, and he realized that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. But his brain cramp was from frustration as much as hunger. As he watched Cap writhing in the car, he turned the case over in his mind. "Damn," he said aloud. There were so many possibilities. He was distracted from his musings by the sound of Cap gunning the El Dorado's engine to life. "Let's go home," he whispered. "Cap, behave yourself."

Cap drove to his attic apartment above the Blackjack Lounge. But instead of going upstairs, he parked the limo and got in his own car, a beat up Pontiac, and headed out to the rural county. Carter pretended he didn't know where they were going until they were practically there — the Deja Vu.

Seldom did a night go by when squad cars weren't called to the Vu. Shootings, stabbings, muggings, interracial, intersexual and perhaps interplanetary brawls. So often did the bar show up on the police blotter that the local newspaper dropped it from its Police Briefs section. The rule was no bomb threats, mugged newspaper carriers, or Deja Vu stories unless someone croaked. Everybody knew it was a gay bar, yet the conservative Pulaski County Board never yanked its liquor license. The unspoken understanding was that if all the perverts went there they wouldn't be someplace else.

Despite the number of crimes that occurred there, Deja Vu was the only local bar Carter had never been in. The Vu was the jurisdiction of the Pulaski County Sheriff's Department, and when city investigations required someone going out there, Carter always managed to send somebody else. It wasn't that he was afraid of faggots. But they did make him uncomfortable.

So when Cap pulled into the parking lot, Carter had to stop himself from blowing his cover and honking at Cap to go back home. But it wouldn't have mattered. Cap jumped out of the car and ran inside, looking either eager or angry, Carter hoped the latter. Moments later, Sammy Louis and Julio Xerxes, both in drag, walked out of the bar with Cap right behind them. "Terrific," Carter muttered. "Jesus fucking terrific."

They exchanged words, Julio, or Julia as s/he called him/herself when he was a she, put up his/her hands like s/he was denying some-

thing, and then Cap decked him/her. Sam/Samantha, who was no sissy even though s/he was dressed like one, jumped on Cap's back and tried to claw his eyes. Cap whirled around and Louis kicked the back of his knees until they went down in a heap. They grappled until Cap got the upper hand. He straddled Sammy and began pummeling his/her face. It took four bouncers and several customers to pry him off.

At the sound of sirens in the distance, Cap broke away and ran to his car. No one tried to stop him from driving off. Nor did anyone notice Carter as he drove after Cap. "Well, at least the night wasn't a complete waste," Hank muttered to himself.

Cap drove back to The Blackjack Lounge. After turning off the engine, he continued to sit in the car, making the same motions that looked to Carter like masturbation. Or crying. Carter still wasn't sure. Finally, Cap went up the rickety wooden stairs that led to his attic apartment. Carter could see a single light go on, and Cap's shadow flickering through the curtain as he paced the room.

"Turn off the light and go to sleep," Carter whispered. "It's been a long day. Lemme go home."

But Cap's light didn't go off, and every time Carter convinced himself that Cap had fallen asleep, he would see his shadow flicker past the window again. As the minutes turned into a half hour, Carter pushed his carseat back and fell into a doze. Sometime later he awoke to a flickering light and the acrid smell of smoke.

Groggily, Carter reached for his car radio. "Chief to base," he said through parched lips. "Get the firetrucks and an ambulance to Blackjack's Lounge. We got us a big fire here. A subject is inside and I'm going after him."

More awake, Carter sprang from his car and lumbered up the wooden outside stairs. He was about to kick the door in when it exploded outward, followed by billows of smoke and a fleeing Cap, who would have leaped off the stoop had Carter not grabbed him and guided him down the steps. Cap's bare arms and legs were scorched, and he'd inhaled a lot of smoke. Once Cap stopped coughing, Carter had to stop him from trying to go back inside the bar, not to get his stuff, but some of Willy's. They almost came to blows before Cap recognized the chief. "What *you* doin' here?" he asked.

“Just happened to be in the neighborhood,” Carter said and blushed hotly.

“Oh.”

Carter trotted back to his car as Cap sat down on the curb, his panic fading into shock. “Make sure there’s an ambulance here,” Carter radioed. “Somebody wake up the mayor and get him down here. Wake up the arson squad, too.”

Carter returned to Cap. “You all right?”

“I think so.”

“That’s some pretty nasty burns you got. Maybe we better have a doctor look at you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Jesus, what happened?”

“Dunno. I was going to sleep when I woke up and the whole place was on fire. I just got out as fast as I could.”

“Did you go anywhere after you took Willy home?”

“Went straight home.”

“You sure?”

“I done tole ya.”

Even if Carter showed Cap a videotape, he had a feeling Cap would still deny he’d been to *Deja Vu*.

By the time firefighters arrived, the building was fully involved, as they say. A squad car showed up, its lights and siren blaring, and Willy sprang from the passenger seat just in time to see his purple neon *Blackjack* sign crash to the sidewalk. All that was left of his bar was burning rubble. Willy took one last look into the lounge, at the fixtures and walls aglow like a vision of disco hell, and turned away, eyes watery not just from smoke and ash.

Next he looked at the beaded paint and debris on the hood of his leased limo, and his posture stiffened. He strode over to Chief Carter, quivering with rage. “*Now* do you believe somebody’s out to get me?” he hollered in Carter’s face. “Are you gonna do something or do I have to do it myself?”

“Do *what*, you fuckin’ n...” Carter turned away, swallowing the word and his shame. When he turned back, *Blackjack* was daring him to finish. Instead he shifted gears. “Cap’s alive. Burned pretty bad, but alive. We could use your help getting him in an ambulance.”

Willy's shoulders sagged as his anger turned back into despair. "Cap? Where is he?"

Cap was perched on the back bumper of an ambulance, refusing to get in. A paramedic had managed to stick him with Demerol, but to the ambulance was as far as Cap would let them move him. When he saw Willy, he broke into sobs. "I'm sorry Boss. Ah tried to stop the fire, but it got too big. And then they wouldn't let me back in."

"It's OK, Cap, it wasn't your fault," Willy said, staring at the blistering burns on Cap's arms. "Now let these people help you. They's good doctors and they want to fix you up. You do what they tell you, ya hear?"

Cap looked down at his arms, seeing the burns for the first time. The fight drained out of him, as did consciousness. Blackjack caught him as he fell, and helped paramedics slide him into the ambulance.

LaDonna arrived in her pink Caddy, and fully dressed for public view. She sniffed at the remains of the bar, far from disappointed that the dive was gone. She'd let Willy go ahead, partly to compose herself. But by the time she rejoined her husband, she looked almost concerned. "Are you OK, hun?" she asked Willy.

"I'm fine. It's our business that burned down."

LaDonna tried to look at the remains of the bar and sad at the same time. "Oh, my goodness."

Willy looked at LaDonna, trying to read her. "Cap's been burnt pretty good, but I think he'll be all right."

Another challenge for LaDonna's emotions. "That's good," she managed, then turned to Chief Carter to play a role she was better at — the angry citizen. "You better find who doing this, before we all be killed," she started in.

"This dump insured?" Carter asked bluntly.

"Yes it is insured, thank goodness," LaDonna said. "We'll probably get more for it than it was worth. But Willy would never burn it down."

"What about you?"

"What *about* me?"

Carter was far too tired to be polite. "You are the only other person who might benefit from its, liquidation," he said.

"*Me?*" LaDonna gasped. "This was my business, too."

"So where were you tonight?"

LaDonna's eyes got big and she took a step back. "Where *was* I? With my *husband*. Where were *you*?"

"Doing my job," Carter spat, still angry he had fallen asleep. "Look, I'm sorry. It's been a long day and a long night. We're all under a lot of stress."

But LaDonna wasn't finished. "Whachu mean where was I? You think I burned this place down? My own business? You think I killed Marques and Serene, too? That what you think?"

Willy had caught the last couple of exchanges, and watched as LaDonna started to fall apart. "You hear what this man is sayin' to me?" LaDonna asked him, her voice starting to break. "Can you believe this?"

Willy paused, calculating what the best play would be. Generally he didn't mind seeing LaDonna go off, as long as it was at someone other than him. And from his point of view, the chief's new theory was not without merit. But suddenly he moved between LaDonna and the chief and poked his finger into Carter's chest. "Unless you got evidence, and I mean hard evidence, don't you go accusing my wife of nothing, you hear? I'm still the mayor, and if I see anything about this trash on TV, I'll fire your ass and get someone else to run the investigation. Even if it has to be the Ku Klux Klan, I won't have you dissing my wife."

Carter looked warily at Blackjack. A few hours ago he would gladly have let someone else take over the investigation. Now he was hooked. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mayor," Carter said through clenched teeth, then eased up. "And please accept my apologies as well, Mrs. Butler. It's been a tough day for all of us, and I did not mean to accuse you of anything. I hope you will assist in the investigation, but I realize tonight is not a good time, and we'll work something out more to your convenience, ma'am."

LaDonna had been surprised that her husband had stuck up for her, and she wanted to press her advantage. She began to chicken neck but Willy broke in. "Take a chill pill, sweet meat," he said lightly. "You knows getting all wound up ain't good for your blood pressure. And besides, the *police* chief done apologized, and he's supposed to be trying to catch the bad guys, and we need to help him, lest he think we're the bad guys, right?"

Given a chance to calm down, LaDonna had caught her husband's emphasis on the word "police," and realized she'd best be cool. "Of course we'll cooperate," she said tartly.

Carter pulled Butler off to the side. "There wouldn't be any reason why Cap might want to do something like this, is there? I mean, he *was* the only one inside ... that we know of ... so far." Carter was so tired he was half talking to himself.

Willy looked more pained than angry. "Cap would never do something' like that. He *loved* The Blackjack." Willy was also talking to himself.

"Well, is there some reason he might want to, hurt himself, or someone might want to hurt him?"

Butler glanced at Carter, trying to gauge what he knew. "Cap's kinda, he gets into a lotta accidents, but he ain't got no reason to hurt hisself on purpose."

Another pause, Carter thought, but didn't follow up. "Just one more thing Mr. Mayor. Where were you tonight?"

"After you left, Cap drove me straight home. I spent the night with my wife," he said, as they returned to LaDonna's side.

"Seems I heard you say that once before today," Carter said under his breath, irritated again.

"Chief, my husband was with me the whole night," LaDonna said, pulling Willy's arm into her ample bosom. "He was with me and I was with him."

Blackjack's eyes narrowed as they bored in on Carter's. "You're losing it, Chief. You better get your shit together before this thing gets out of hand."

Carter silently turned away and headed slowly back to his car. For the first time in his life, he had to concede that Willy was right.

## Day 2: Tuesday

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### Chapter 12

Dressed in a funereal tuxedo, Blackjack Willy surveys the smoldering ruins of his bar. It is twilight and he is alone. Dazed, he walks slowly through the simmering bar stools and high hat tables. Gazing wistfully at the remains of the disco dance floor, he tugs at his crotch. A procession of big-ass women in straw skirts and bikini tops appear. Somnambulanty parading past, they do an obscene slow-motion boogaloo across the dance floor. Willy's prod starts to swell. The women vanish and Serene is there. Shrouded in a pale sheet, she floats past with a longing look on her face, although her eyes are dead. Embarrassed, Willy tries to cover his erection. Serene turns into the Blade, who is also dancing obscenely, with a pulsating hole in his head and blood gushing out his temple. Marques becomes Cap, whose clothes are on fire, and his dance turns into slow-motion writhing. Willy tries to scream, but can't find his voice.

Suddenly Blackjack is lying in a casket, and the conga line has become a funeral procession. Chief Carter looks down at Willy and slowly shakes his head in disgust. Willy struggles to speak, and as his lips start to move, Carter spits a wad of tobacco in his face. Some of Willy's cronies file past, jiving and laughing. Tabatha the secretary and Hal the busboy skip by, arm in arm. Tabatha blows a powder into his face as if she were turning him into a zombie. Smirking as usual, Hal takes a plate of leftover barbecue and slowly scrapes the bones onto Willy's lap. He tosses the plate in the air, winks at Blackjack and flips him the bird. Next, Willy sees Serene's haunting face looking down at him. As she leans down to kiss him she says something he can't understand. The last person in line is Punk Gray, who is wielding an ax. Punk slowly raises the ax high above his head and takes aim at Willy's crotch. Willy tries to move but can't. As Punk swings the ax, Willy shudders awake, bathed in sweat.

Blackjack turned his head and looked at LaDonna, who was snoring noisily. Quietly putting his hands behind his head, he rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling. Seething with silent rage and resent-

ment, he realized LaDonna and Cap were all that was left of his safety net, and he had to tread softly. He didn't want her but he needed her. At least for now.

Because now that he thought about it, LaDonna made a pretty good suspect. She had reason to hate Serene and she certainly hated The Blackjack Lounge. The Blade was another matter. If she was mad enough to shoot somebody, wouldn't she have shot her husband? Then again, maybe it was a plea for attention that got out of hand.

Cap could also be a suspect, Willy thought. Marques wanted to meet at the Mayor's Office instead of the bar because he was avoiding Cap, and for good reason. The Blade had pulled a sick practical joke on Cap, which Willy had not told Chief Carter about. Yet. But it provided a perfect motive for Cap to kill the Blade, he mused.

But Blackjack had to admit that the most obvious murder suspect was himself. He could only imagine how he had committed the crimes, because much of the night was a blank. One moment he was sitting with his legs up on his desk, just like he found Marques the next morning. The next thing he remembered for sure was waking up at Serene's.

He could easily imagine being too drunk, getting up to take a leak, returning to find the Blade in his chair, and blowing him away just because. He couldn't remember Cap driving him to Serene's, where maybe he accidentally smothered her while going at it. But the fire? He knew he didn't start the fire, at least not on purpose.

The only one who was at the scene of all three crimes was Cap. He had a good reason to kill the Blade, and perhaps he was secretly jealous that Serene was sleeping with Blackjack. But he also had no reason to torch the club, especially since he lived right above it. Unless Cap felt despondent and wanted to hurt himself. Either way, if Blackjack couldn't remember what really happened, Cap might have to take the rap. It made him wish his wife really was the culprit.

"LaDonna, hun," he said and gently nudged her shoulder. "Wake up, hun."

LaDonna's eyes fluttered open. As she wakened, her face filled with horror. Closing her eyes, she rolled tightly against Willy's side and tried to force herself back to sleep.

"I know," Willy said. "But we gotta get up. Big day today. *Big* day. The media, the police, not to mention the City Council."



LaDonna looked at him groggily. "Whacha need?"

"I need ya to come downtown with me. Would you do that for me?" He gritted his teeth. "Please, hun?"

"And do what?" LaDonna asked, flattered.

"I needs ya to do what the Blade does ... did. I need ya to be my, my right-hand man."

"I'll do whatever you want, sugar, you know that."

"That's my baby. Wait right here. I'll go make coffee."

As Blackjack got out of bed to perform this unprecedented task, LaDonna's mouth dropped open. Listening to him fumbling and cursing in the kitchen, she smiled to herself and giggled.

After bringing LaDonna her coffee, Willy entered the shower and hung his head under the spray. A look of excruciating pain crossed his face, then one of total calm. Blackjack Willy greeted another day.

Towelng himself off, he frowned in the mirror. The thought of having LaDonna by his side the entire day sickened him. "Fix my tie, sweet meat?" he asked her as he finished dressing.

LaDonna looked up from her dressing table, where she was overly applying makeup. "Of course, darling."

Feeling awkward behind the wheel of his wife's pink Cadillac, Willy drove to Murdale Memorial Hospital.

"What we doing here?" LaDonna asked.

"Need to see Cap."

"What for? He's OK, isn't he?"

"Sure, he going to be fine. I just want to look in on him — what do they call it, a curtsy call?"

LaDonna had to laugh. "Well, I'll wait in the car. Don't you be long now."

"I won't, hun."

Entering the hospital, Willy stopped an orderly and demanded an ice cream cone.

"Sorry, canteen isn't open," the orderly said and tried to brush past.

"Get me a fucking ice cream, boy," Butler thundered.

Realizing that Willy was big, black, threatening and the mayor all at the same time, the orderly scurried off for a freezer key.

Not used to visiting people in hospitals, ice cream was the only thing Willy could think to bring Cap. But when Cap saw the sugar cone, his eyes brightened.

“Boss,” Cap gasped, his eyes welling with tears. “Mah man,” Willy said lightly. “S’up dawg?”

“I kinda burnt myself. It hurts. You know.” A tear trickled down his cheek. “I’m sorry Boss. I’m so sorry.”

“C’mon Cap, t’ain’t your fault, is it? Here, eat this ice cream I brung ya.”

Cap accepted the cone like a pacifier, holding it gingerly between his bandaged paws and licking contentedly.

“Cap,” Willy began softly. “I was wondering. You don’t think maybe that fire had something’ to do with what you was talking to me about before?”

“Talkin’ ‘bout what?”

“You know, about whatever it was you thought the Blade told me.”

Cap stopped licking and looked apprehensively at Willy. “I dunno whachu talkin’ ‘bout.”

“You know Cap. About that secret.”

“I don’t think so,” Cap said and went back to his ice cream cone.

Willy looked at Cap in exasperation. He’d never really tried to talk to Cap seriously before, and he didn’t know how to now. “So when they springing you?”

“Dunno. They tole me they had to observate me, but if that comes out OK I kin leave today.”

“Operate?”

“No, they said it was observate, different from a op’rashun.”

Willy couldn’t contain a laugh as he figured out what Cap was talking about. “Well, I sure hope your observation comes out OK,” he said and started to leave. “Say Cap,” he asked as he got to the door, “when you gets out, where ya gonna stay?”

“Dunno.”

Willy thought about it for a minute. There was a nice guest room at the condo, but LaDonna would have a fit. “How about we put you up at Serene’s place?”

Cap froze. “Ghosts.”

Willy thought about laughing, but didn't. "I reckon I'd be afraid, too. OK, you'll stay at my place. I'll work it out with LaDonna."

Cap would have loved to stay with Willy, but something made him protest. "I can stay with Toby over at the high rise. He won't mind."

Willy tried to imagine convincing LaDonna and shrugged. "Whatever you say, my man. Nuthin's too good for my main man."

"Thanks, Boss."

"So how is he?" LaDonna asked when Willy returned to the car.

"Fine," Willy said. "He be gettin' out any time now."

"You didn't tell him he could stay with us, did you?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't do that to you, hun."

LaDonna smiled to herself again. The Lord sure works in mysterious ways, she thought.

When they got to the Mayor's Office, reporters were clustered outside. As soon as the media spotted Butler they began shouting questions.

"Not now, not now," he hollered over the fracas. "Can't you see I'm with my wife? I'll be having a Willy conference later on. So there's no reason for you to be hanging around my door 'cause I'll be in a, a zecative section."

"With yourself?" one of the reporters cracked.

Willy opened the door and ushered LaDonna inside, locking it behind them. Then he closed the vertical blinds. When he looked around, the phone was ringing, the coffeemaker was off, and he was alone with his wife. "Now where's that fucking bitch?" Willy hissed and then remembered Tabatha had quit. Rolling his eyes and calming himself, he turned to LaDonna. "Here's where you'll sit," he said and motioned to Tabatha's desk.

LaDonna looked pleased. "What you want me to do?"

"First thing is not answer the phone," Willy said. "And don't open the door neither."

"Where do you sit?"

"In there," Willy said and started to unlock the door to his private office, then stopped. "Uh, LaDonna, there is something else you can do. Find a line that's not ringing and call a cleaning service. And order me a new chair." Resignedly, he sat down at a second desk across from LaDonna that Marques had sometimes used. "Till then I'll be right here," he said. "Right here."

## Chapter 13

The Unicorn Salon was the last place on earth Hank Carter would go for a haircut. From the old fashioned barber pole with the red stripe repainted a hot pink, to the dainty periwinkle aprons that were draped over customers, the whole place made him want to puke. Not to mention the crossdressing co-owners, Sammy Louis and Julio Xerxes. But Hank was the first customer in the door Tuesday morning, and he took a seat at the pastel vinyl barber chair of the last person on earth he would ever let cut his hair — Julio Xerxes. Louis took one look at Chief Carter and high-tailed it outside to smoke a menthol Virginia Slims 120.

“Do you have an appointment?” Xerxes asked facetiously, winking with the eye that wasn’t black and swollen.

“No, but I was hoping you could squeeze me in,” Carter said, trying to hide his discomfort.

They normally wouldn’t open for an hour or so, after they got lit, and had no customers until noon, but Julio flipped effeminately through his appointment book. “*Si si*, you’re one lucky *hombre*,” he chirped. “Believe it or not, I have an opening *pronto, senior*.”

“*Gracias*,” Hank played along. “Just a trim if you would be so kind.”

“*Si*.” Xerxes stepped back, cocked his head, stuck his index finger into his cheek and eyed the chief appraisingly. “Do you realize you’d look absolutely stunning with a bleach and a perm? Why don’t you take a walk on the wild side? I’m all set up for it.”

“Just a trim, Mr. Xerxes,” Carter said.

“Suit yourself,” Xerxes said and grabbed his scissors. “You can call me Julio,” he added nervously. Gingerly, he approached the chief from behind. Carter’s hair was already military short, so Xerxes snipped at the curls at the nape of his neck.

Xerxes’ hands grazing the back of his neck made Carter’s skin crawl. He took it for as long as he could and finally spoke. “I couldn’t help noticing that’s quite a shiner you got there, Julio. Mind telling me where you got it?”

“Oh, you know, lover’s quarrel,” Xerxes said, and nervously snipped at Carter’s hair.

“Where?” Carter repeated.

“Deja Vu.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

“Who gave it to you?”

Xerxes stopped snipping and took a step back. “This is none of your business, *senor*. Nobody’s pressing charges, and it’s out of your jurisdiction, no?”

“That vial of white powder in your smock isn’t out of my jurisdiction. But that’s not what I’m here for Julio. Just a trim and some neighborly conversation with my barber.”

“Hair stylist,” Xerxes corrected. He grabbed the loudest electric shears he could find but Carter stopped him. “That’s enough off the back,” Carter said. “Now take some off the top, what’s left of it.”

Reluctantly, Xerxes came around to the chief’s frontside, making sure he didn’t do what he usually did, which was to brush his crotch against the customer’s knee until the customer flinched, or didn’t. With slightly quivering hands, he combed Carter’s thinning hair down his forehead and poised his scissors to cut. “Here?” he asked, looking at Carter.

Carter held his gaze. “Who hit you?”

Julio stood motionless for a moment, then cut the front. “Sammy,” he said. “I told you. We had a lover’s quarrel.” He snipped the hair around Carter’s ears.

Carter pulled his head back. “Sammy Louis didn’t do that. Blackjack’s buddy Cap knocked you silly, didn’t he?”

Xerxes paused. “What if he did?”

“I want to know why.”

Xerxes held his breath. “Homes, if I’m under suspicion for something I want to know what it is. I’m not saying nothin’ until I talk to my lawyer.”

“Calm down, Julio,” Carter said.

“I’m plenty calm,” Xerxes said and started to yank Carter’s apron off.

Carter waved his hand away. “Could you even up my mustache? I never can get the ends straight.”

Xerxes warily approached Carter again with his clippers. “Straight is not my strong suit,” Xerxes forced the joke. Delicately, he dabbed at Carter’s bushy, Midwest mustache, trying to imagine something

more continental. But first he used his thumb to push the chief's nose up to get at his nostril hairs.

Carter glared down his nose at Xerxes and in a low voice asked, "Why'd Cap whup you an' Sammy Louis' asses last night?"

Xerxes took his thumb away from Carter's nose and began sniping at his mustache for a long moment before speaking. "Well, we kind of pulled a practical joke on Cap, and he didn't like it."

"What kind of a practical joke?"

"Well, Sammy and I showed Cap a good time, only he thought we was Samantha and Julia, if you get my drift."

"How good a time did you show him, if you get *my* drift?" Carter countered.

"Well, after we all got pretty liquored up, we invited him out to the parking lot to smoke a, smoke. Then Sammy and Cap got in the backseat of my, uh, my car, to make out, and I sat up front and watched through the rear-view mirror. After some smooching, Sammy goes down on Cap, gets him hard as a motherfucker. Then Sammy says that to really please a woman, he has to go down on her, and she'd show him how." Julio stopped, realizing he was enjoying telling the story way too much.

But Carter wanted the money shot. "And then what happened?" he growled.

"Well, Sammy pulls out Big Bertha — that's what he calls his *pito*. But it's dark in the car, and when Sammy guides Cap's luscious lips over what Cap thinks is Sammy's pussy, he don't notice 'til it's too late, and Sammy has him licking Big Bertha like it's a lollipop. Sammy says it was the best head he ever had, until Cap says he can't find her hole, and that's when Sammy yanks off his wig and we turn on the light and start laughing. Cap, he just freaks out. I never seen a negro run so fast. Then again, Cap never seen Big Bertha before." Xerxes tried unsuccessfully not to chortle.

Louis returned just in time to hear Carter ask Xerxes, "Why'd you do it?"

Xerxes was silent as he applied some mustache wax. "I, I don't know," he stuttered. "Cap seemed horny, an we thought it might be fun to give him a walk on the wild side, *comprende?*"

Louis' mouth dropped open as he realized what they were talking about.

“Cap goes to the Deja Vu?”

Yet another pause, as Xerxes made one more adjustment to Carter’s mustache. “I guess. There. All done.”

“Oh, you’re done all right. You and Mr. Louis done sexual battery, sexual assault, and conspiracy to commit mayhem for starters.”

Both their mouths had dropped open. “OK, look, it wasn’t our idea,” Sammy said defensively.

“Oh yeah, so whose bright idea was it? Blackjack?”

“I guess it don’t matter no more, since he be dead ... but the Blade put us up to it,” Sammy said.

“Marques Taylor?” Carter scoffed. “Are you blaming your misconduct on a dead person who can’t defend himself?”

“No, for real,” Louis persisted. “Paid us plenty to keep silent.”

Carter’s opinion of the Blade darkened. “What was his angle?”

Sammy shrugged. “Dunno exactly. Sometimes he likes to watch. But you don’t want to cross the Blade. He be like a sneaky fart, silent but deadly.”

“Go on,” Carter said. “You got my attention.”

“Well, the Blade offered Julia and Samantha — that’s us — a thousand bucks to show Cap a good time at the Vu. Now, Cap may not have both his oars in the water, but he’s a cherry-ass stud, so we say sure, we’ll give it a try.”

Louis was also enjoying retelling the story. “So the Blade and Cap show up at the Vu, all discoed out, looking like a couple of *Soul Train* rejects. And the Blade starts feeding Cap these insipid pickup lines, like ‘you so sweet you must be made a candy,’ and we pretend the lines are working on us. We did just what the Blade asked. We showed Cap a good time. But the next night, Cap came back and beat the shit out of us. But we ain’t pressing charges. I figure we’re even now.”

“Even? But you showed Cap more than a good time, didn’t you? You had to expose and humiliate him. Was that part of the deal?”

Sammy looked at his shoes. “The Blade said he’d give me another grand if I got Cap to suck Big Bertha, I mean, my penis.”

“OK, so back up,” Carter said. “Marques Taylor was also at Deja Vu?”

“Damn right he was there,” Sammy replied. “He set up the whole thing.”

Carter turned to Xerxes. "That right?" he asked.

Julio rubbed his neck. "Yeah. I guess I kinda forgot to mention that the Blade was sitting in the front seat beside me," he said.

Xerxes reached for the chief's smock again and Carter grabbed his limp wrist. "You guys are really sickos. How much do I owe you?"

"It's on me."

"How much?"

"Five bucks."

"Here's ten. Don't waste it on no cheap gerbils." Fleeing from the hair salon, Carter caught a glance of himself in the mirror. Julio had twirled his mustache up like a Frenchman.

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## Chapter 14

Carter returned to the cop shop in a foul mood. When the dispatcher waved a fistful of telephone messages at him, he shrank away. "No calls unless it's urgent," he snarled. "And that goes double for reporters."

Emptying the dregs of the morning's first pot of coffee into a stained cup, he glared at several patrolmen who, noticing his mustache, greeted him with "*bon jour*." Escaping to the isolation of his cluttered office, he collapsed in his well-worn swivel chair. It was only 9:30 and he was already exhausted. Warily he looked at the pile of crisp manilla envelopes neatly stacked on his desk by Lt. Dulworth.

Roger had probably been at work since 6 a.m. compiling the components of the case into tidy files in chronological order. First would be the forensic results on the evidence in the Mayor's Office, and next would be a similar dossier on Serene's death. Beneath that would be the preliminary autopsy results on Taylor and Fountain, and finally the report on the fire at the Blackjack.

Reluctantly, Carter flipped through the first file. Blackjack's recently fired revolver held five hollow-point .357 bullets and an empty casing. His fingerprints were all over the gun. The door to the Mayor's Office did not appear to have been tampered with.



An inventory of the contents of Taylor's office was as boring as it was thick — Somehow Dulworth had listed just about every scrap of paper found in Taylor's cubbyhole. He'd have to ask Dulworth to summarize.

Serene's file included preliminary reports from Carbonboro police on what was found at her house, including prescription drugs, pipes and other pot paraphernalia, but nothing heavy. To Carter's surprise, no weapons were found in the house, either. He thought Blackjack would have guns stashed everywhere he went.

Carter glanced at the part of Taylor's autopsy report describing his anus, but overall it contained nothing new. The report on Serene was the same, save for a single enigmatic notation by Dr. Edelman: "No sign of trauma, but too young to die of natural causes." Carter leaned back in his chair. Maybe the toxicology reports would reveal more, but that would take days, and he knew the white power structure wouldn't wait that long before demanding he move on the mayor.

Carter scowled at the last file containing the preliminary reports from the fire department's arson investigation. "Damn," he hissed. He'd never fallen asleep on a stake-out before. "I'm too old for this," he muttered. The report on The Blackjack Lounge read like a manual on how-not-to prevent a fire. "Inoperable smoke alarms, flammable refuse, frayed wiring, unsafe gas lines," it went on. The fire appeared to have started in the kitchen, around a deep fryer, right below Cap's attic apartment.

There came a brisk tap at his door. Without looking at his watch he knew it was 9:30 a.m. sharp, and Lt. Dulworth had arrived for his morning briefing. "Come in Rog," Carter said too softly. "One-two-three," Carter whispered under his breath. There came another triple tap. Carter cleared his throat and twirled his already twirled mustache. "*Entre vous, gendarme,*" he said louder.

"Morning Chief," Dulworth said as he always said as he sat in the same straight-back chair. He looked at Carter quizzically. "You look different," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, you lose weight or something?"

Carter groaned and twirled his mustache again. Dulworth peered at him intently. “Ah,” he finally said, a knowing smile crossing his face. “New shirt.”

Carter glanced with dismay at the faded white shirt he’d had since before his divorce. “Not quite,” he said and twirled the other side.

“Oh, I know,” Dulworth said, noticing the repetition of Carter’s twirling. “You got a new mustache.”

“And a haircut,” Carter said. “But what’s new about it?”

“Those ends twisted up?”

“That’s right Roger. We’ll make an investigator out of you yet.”

As usual, Dulworth missed the sarcasm. He was silent, waiting for Carter to officially start the briefing.

Carter made him wait. “Well, what have you got for me today, Lieutenant?”

Dulworth smiled and whipped out his clipboard. “Press call-backs at 11, City Council meeting tonight, but I’ve cleared most of your day to work on what I’ve dubbed Blackjackgate.”

“Very original,” Carter said.

There was another knock at the door. “Come in, Detective Garcia,” Carter said.

Garcia entered, late as usual. She was also scowling as usual.

“*Que pasa?*” Carter asked.

“Why haven’t we arrested the mayor?” Garcia cut to the chase. “If you had, his bar might still be standing.”

“What’s your case against Mayor Butler?” Carter challenged.

“Just like it says in the textbooks — motive, means and opportunity,” Garcia responded. “We got a suspect with a history of violent behavior who apparently had a falling out with an associate, and who knows what with his girlfriend. We got the mayor at his office with Mr. Taylor around the time of his murder. The mayor’s gun is the murder weapon and it has his fingerprints on it. And oh by the way, he’s the only one with a key to his office. We also have the Mr. Butler at Miss Fountain’s at the same time she was murdered, and just for good measure, his bar was insured for \$200,000. What’s the frickin’ mystery, *amigo?*”

“Well, let’s start with what makes you so sure anybody was murdered?”

Garcia's eyes narrowed. "What the *chingada* are you talking about?"

"What I mean is, Mr. Taylor could have shot himself and Miss Fountain could have committed suicide."

"Fountain killed herself?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

Garcia was silent for a moment. "I guess they could," she conceded. "But why? And what about the fire? They couldn't have set the fire."

"How do you know the fire wasn't an accident?"

Garcia was stymied again. "Too many coincidences?"

Carter sighed. "Maybe someone else started the fire."

"Why would someone do that?"

"Maybe his wife didn't like the bar business," Carter said.

"Gimme a break," Garcia sputtered. "Why are you ignoring the obvious?"

Carter paused, looking for something logical to say. "My gut," he finally settled on.

"Your gut? I don't recall seeing any mention of that in my police training."

"C'mon, Isabel, you know that what makes you such a good detective is your gut. Your instincts. And doesn't this whole thing feel way too pat to you?"

It was Garcia's turn to pause. "Maybe," she conceded again.

Dulworth had something to say. "All right, Chief. Let's say Mr. Taylor and Miss Fountain happened to kill themselves the same night, and the very next night Mayor Butler's firetrap of a bar just happened to go up in smoke. But what I still don't get is how did Mr. Taylor get into the Mayor's Office? You think maybe there's a secret passageway?"

Carter rolled his eyes. "There's lots of ways," he sputtered, as frustrated at the flimsiness of his own theories as at Garcia's inability to refute them. "Somebody else, maybe even Taylor, coulda had a key. Maybe someone left the door open. There's any number of ways."

Carter picked up the fat inventory on Taylor's office and waved it. "Anything interesting in here?"

“Not really,” Dulworth replied. “Mostly official papers and the like. There was a bunch of press clippings and a lot of stuff on city managers, even an acceptance speech.”

“But nothing unusual, say a threatening letter or something?”

“Not really.”

“Not really?”

“Not at all. It could have been my office, except not as neat.”

“Well, were there items or papers that had to do with his private life?”

Dulworth scanned the alphabetical list. “A few,” he said.

“There was a thank-you card from somebody named Bobbi for a birthday gift, and on his calendar I found a note about an appointment with Mr. Capman.”

“How’s that?”

“For Saturday, it said ‘Cap’s big date.’ No big deal.”

“Cap’s big date?”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it.”

“What do you suppose that means?”

“That he had an appointment with Cap, what else?”

“But why would it say date?”

“Because it’s shorter than writing appointment.”

“What makes you think it wasn’t just what it says, a ‘big date’?”

“What kind of a big date?”

“Never mind,” Carter said. “As to more mundane matters, Lt. Dulworth, set me up a press conference for noon. Remember, if there’s more than three reporters at a time that want a piece of your hide, always set up a press conference. It’s easier that way.”

“Yassir.”

As Dulworth and Garcia got up to leave the office, Garcia turned around. “You know, Chief, if Blackjack didn’t commit all these crimes, maybe someone’s out to get him.”

Carter frowned. “Maybe.”

“What I mean is, maybe we ought to take him into protective custody.”

“You mean arrest him.” Carter laughed.

As Dulworth started to close the door Carter called to him. “Lt. Dulworth?”

Dulworth froze. “Yeah?”

“Maybe Detective Garcia has something there. Could you get the mayor down here?”

“To put him in protective custody?”

“No, Roger, just for a chat.”

Dulworth looked disappointed. “Yassir.”

“And maybe we ought to put somebody on Cap, too.

What do you think?”

“Think what?”

Hank sighed. “Please keep an eye on Cap after he gets out of the hospital. OK?”

“Uh huh. I mean, Roger that.”

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## Chapter 15

When no one answered the phone at the Mayor’s Office, Dulworth decided to go there himself. Sensing something was up, the reporters camped in the hallway crowded around him as he knocked on the Mayor’s Office door. There was no response, and when he pounded, Blackjack unleashed a tirade of profanity.

“Open up, it’s the police,” Dulworth hollered, indulging his fantasy of arresting the mayor.

Butler opened the door a crack. “What you want, Dullwad?”

“That’s Lt. Dulworth, Mr. Mayor.” He squeezed inside and Willy shut the door. “I’m taking you down to the station. Chief wants to see you.”

LaDonna looked alarmed. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Nothin’ ma’am. The chief just wants to talk to your husband ... for now.”

“Let’s go,” Willy said, relieved to have an excuse to get away from his wife.

“Want me to go with you?” LaDonna asked.

“That’s OK, I can handle it. You, uh, TCB.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Willy looked around and noticed the agenda and reports for that night’s City Council meeting piled on Taylor’s desk. “Go through

this,” he said and plopped it in front of her. “Gimme a, a briffin when I gets back.”

LaDonna looked skeptically at the pile of papers. She was a decent bookkeeper, but city government made about as much sense to her as football.

As Dulworth emerged from the office with the mayor, the reporters descended on them. “Is the mayor under arrest?” Santorini asked.

“You see any handcuffs?” Blackjack huffed as they brushed past.

“Well, what’s goin’ on?”

Willy stopped and sneered at Santorini. “None of your fucking business,” he said. “You never did like me, didja Sanitary?”

“Sure I do,” Santorini replied. “You make great copy.”

During the short walk to the police station, city workers stared at them silently, and murmured to each other after they passed. Carter was refilling his coffee cup when Willy arrived. “Morning Mr. Mayor,” he said casually. “We really must stop meeting this way. Come inside my office.”

Dulworth looked at Carter, hoping to be included. Carter ignored him.

“Siddown Willy,” Carter said and gestured to a chair.

Blackjack paced instead. “You got the murderer yet?” he snapped.

“I may be looking at him,” Carter replied.

“Then how come you ain’t arrested me yet?”

“Willy, I told you I wasn’t going to give you any more free advice, but I’m going to anyway — if things shake out the way they are looking, the difference between death and life in prison may be whether you decide to cooperate before it’s too late. If you come clean, maybe prosecutors won’t want to crucify Murdale’s first black mayor, and let you cop to manslaughter or something. Crimes of passion.”

Butler laughed at that one. “Fat chance. They already want to lynch me,” he said and glared at Carter, who shrugged.

Blackjack was still a prime suspect, and Carter still hated him, but suddenly he realized he didn’t dislike him anymore. He wondered if that was the effect Blackjack had on everyone, the secret to his survival. “Mr. Mayor, fireworks been going off all around you,” he said. “If you’d like us to post somebody outside your door, let me know.”

“When LaDonna gets mad, she can scare anybody off,” Butler said, thinking Carter was talking about the media.

“I know LaDonna’s imposing, but do you think she’s tough enough to stop a bullet? Assuming you aren’t the one who’s been killing and burning, has it occurred to you that you might be next?”

It hadn’t. “Sure it has,” he said. “I can take care of myself. If you want to protect somebody, go protect Cap.”

Carter paused. “That’s another thing I was wanting to talk with you about. Cap.”

“What about Cap?” Butler took a seat.

Carter frowned. “Willy, is there some reason why Cap might want to harm Taylor or Fountain?”

Blackjack was silent.

“Did you know Cap hung out at the Deja Vu?” Carter asked.

“That’s bullshit, man. Let me tell you something’ about Cap. He may be a little shy, but he ain’t no tutti frutti.”

“He was there last night, before the fire.”

Butler picked up a glass paperweight and began turning it over in his hand. “How you know?”

“I talked to Julio Xerxes and Sammy Louis. They say he whooped ‘em pretty good.”

Blackjack couldn’t help smiling slightly. “That so?”

“Why would he beat up two fags?” Carter asked.

Butler tried to gauge how much the chief knew. “You tell me,” he parried.

“Maybe for the same reason he might want to set fire to your bar, with him inside.” As Butler slumped in his chair, Carter gave him one more nudge. “Willy, why don’t you tell me about Cap’s big date?”

Blackjack looked at his shoes and gathered his thoughts. He couldn’t believe his luck. Chief Carter had found out about Cap’s big date, which was a perfect motive for murder. Now all he had to do was sell it. Willy studied the paperweight in his hand, still not sure how much Carter knew. “The Blade did it,” he finally blurted. “The Blade set the whole thing up.”

“Set what up?”

“Cap’s big date.”

“How you know?”

“He told me.”

“Cap told you?”

“No. Blade.”

“When was this?”

“Sunday night. In my office. Before I blacked out.”

“All right, Blackjack,” Carter said and propped his feet up on his desk. “Let’s hear it. Tell me another story.”

“Well, you see, Cap always had a thing for Serene,” Blackjack began slowly. “But he didn’t know what to do about it. If he’d axed me, I coulda hooked him up with Serene anytime. Instead, he went to the Blade for advice. Big mistake.”

“Why would he go to Mr. Taylor for advice?”

“Cap and the Blade never got along, but maybe Cap seen how he coached me on being mayor, so he figgered Blade could do the same for him. But the Blade, he likes them practal jokes. So, Sunday, the Blade don’t show up at the Blackjack, which is kinda unusual. Then, he calls and says he has to see me up in the Mayor’s Office, and not to tell Cap.”

“So I told Cap to close up and pick me up at the office after midnight. I walked over to City Hall and found the Blade outside. We went inside, had a couple drinks, and I think he’s going to talk to me about the city manager thing, but instead, he starts telling me about Cap’s big date. And suddenly I get why he didn’t show up at the Blackjack.”

“Go on,” the chief prompted.

“Well, the Blade starts telling me how Cap went to him wanting help with Serene, and he says he told him that before putting the moves on Serene, he should get some practice. And he offers to help Cap score with a chick at the Vu. Cap’s slow, but not so slow he don’t know the Vu is a gay bar, and he asks why there. Blade says he says plenty of hot chicks go to Deja Vu, but since all the dudes are gay, there’s no competition.

“Then, he says he got Sammy Louis and Julio Xerxes to go out there in drag and show Cap a good time. So Blade says he took Cap out to the Vu Saturday night, where they hooked up with Samantha and Julia.”

Carter shook his head, disgusted both at the malice of the prank, and the ease with which Blackjack was telling the story. “Go on,” he prodded, though he knew he no longer had to.



“So Blade says them shemales start acting all drunk and giddy, rubbing up against Cap and getting all grabby, and he tells Cap to invite them outside to get high.” Blackjack’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “So they go to someone’s car, and Julia goes down on Cap. Then he whips out his own cock and says it’s Cap’s turn to suck. Blade says when Cap figures out what’s goin’ on, he jumped out of the car and took off.”

Carter grimaced. “Blackjack, how come you didn’t tell me about this before?”

“Outa respect for Cap.”

Carter knew that was a lie, and was only surprised that it had taken Blackjack this long to give Cap up. As Butler’s voice trailed off, Carter decided to begin cross examination. “You say Taylor told you this the night he died in your office?”

“That’s right,” Butler said.

But Mr. Mayor, you told me he wanted to talk about being city manager.”

Blackjack didn’t miss a beat. “Well, I thought he wanted to talk city manager shit, but instead he tells me about Cap. I think he was trying to blackmail me, threatening to tell everybody what happened if I didn’t give him that job. But I just laughed. I mean, you gotta admit it was pretty damn funny. So finally I tole ‘em I didn’t give a shit who he told, and to get outa my office before I ... well, just get out of my office.”

“Let me get this straight,” Carter said. “Mr. Taylor tells you this sick story about your best friend, what do you call him, your main man, and you think it’s funny?”

Blackjack paused. “Well, I thought it was funny at the time. But now I don’t. It would fuck Cap up if it got out, so that’s why I didn’t mention it before.”

Carter stared at Butler for a long time. “So what’s Cap got to say about this?”

Willy shrugged. “He was real mad at the Blade, that’s for sure. But he wouldn’t say much when I axed him.”

“What do you know about last night’s fight?”

“You telling me is the first I heard of it.” Blackjack sighed heavily. “I hate to say it, but maybe you should be looking at Cap.”

“Well, Mr. Mayor, they way I see it, he’s into whatever you’re into. If he killed Taylor and Miss Fountain, how do I know you didn’t put him up to it? How do I know you weren’t in on Cap’s big date?”

Carter stared at Blackjack, to catch a reaction. There was none. In fact, there was less than none. So Carter tried again. “Look at it from my point of view. Even Lt. Dulworth can see he was everywhere you were, everywhere the bodies turned up, not to mention the fire.”

Butler looked away. “Look, I didn’t kill nobody. And Cap didn’t kill nobody neither. Had no reason to. And set fire to my bar? No way.”

Carter rolled his eyes. “OK, how about this,” he tried again. “Let’s say maybe you did pass out in your office, but Mr. Taylor didn’t leave, and when Cap saw him sitting in your chair, maybe he went berserk. Maybe he went off on Serene, too, jealous suitor or whatever. Even if you aren’t involved, if you know something about Cap you’re not telling me, that makes you an accomplice after the fact. Either way you do real time.”

“I’ll check with Cap again,” Blackjack diverted. “If he knows anything, I think I can get him to fess up.”

“I’ll bet you can,” Carter replied.

“So what’s next?” Willy asked.

“For starters, we need to do about another news conference.” Carter said. “We can start calling it the Hank and Willy Show, maybe take it on the road.”

“How come? You got nuthin new to say. Everything’s still under investigation, right?”

“There is the small matter of last night’s fire, and we got to say something to keep the maggots off our backs. Meantime, are you going to talk to Cap?”

“Like I said, I’ll have a father-son talk with Cap,” Blackjack said.

“Don’t leave out the birds and the bees this time,” Carter muttered.

## Chapter 16

Returning to the Mayor's Office, Willy had to run the media gantlet again. "Get the fuck outa my way," he snarled as he elbowed reporters aside. "You'll get your piss conference after lunch."

Inside, LaDonna had settled into Tabatha's role and was even doing her nails. A cleaning crew was already inside Willy's office, shampooing the carpet, and a new chair was on the way.

"You ready to brif me?" Butler asked.

"I don't know, Willy. Do you think this is really a good idea? Maybe you ought to call off tonight's meeting and declare a day of mourning."

Willy nodded. "That's a good idea, about calling a day of mourning. But there's no need to call off tonight's meeting. I can handle it. We don't want it to look like I'm hiding something."

LaDonna shrugged. "Whatever you say, Mr. Mayor." Blackjack hated City Council meetings, but with his bar gone, it was the only excuse he had to get out of the house. And with Serene gone, it was the only place he had to go. He stood in the center of the room, at a loss. "So what the fuck's going on?" he finally sputtered.

LaDonna had found Tabatha's appointment calendar and flipped it open. "Looks like you were scheduled to meet with Marques this afternoon, and that's about it. Tomorrow you're supposed to have lunch with the Chamber of Commerce, and in the afternoon you got to talk to the Community Development Director."

"Cancel those on account of the day of mourning," Willy said. "I reckon we can skip that meeting with the Blade, too."

"You also need to think about Marques' funeral," LaDonna noted. "I'll talk to the insurance company about the bar, so don't worry about that."

"Thanks hun. By the way, we'll be having a meet the press pretty soon. It could get nasty, so why don't you go on home? Maybe go shopping. And if some reporter catches up wicha, don't say nuthin. Anything you'd say would just get twisted, know what I mean?"

LaDonna shrugged. "What about you?"

"No problem. They don't know their ass from a hole in the ground."

Willy escorted his wife down to her car. His spirits lifted as he returned to his office, even though he was again surrounded by reporters. Slipping into his office he called Carter. "Come on up," he said. "Time to rock 'n' roll."

When Carter arrived, the first thing he noticed was a missing pair of legs. "Where's that secretary of yours, Tarantula, or whatever her name is?" he asked.

"Quit," Willy snapped.

"Not as dumb as she looks," Carter snapped back. "So what do you know about her?"

"Tabatha? Tabatha Johnson, I think. Early to mid 20s, from out West somewhere. Come here to take art classes at the college, then started waitressing. I gave her a job at The Blackjack when she come round, and after she worked there for awhile I took her up here."

Carter paused. "She got any reason to kill your friends or burn down your bar?"

Butler tried to think of a reason but couldn't. "Not that I know of."

"How is she in bed?"

Blackjack winked knowingly, although he didn't. "Dy-no-mite," he lied.

"So she might be jealous of your other exploits, your wife?"

"I s'pose so," Willy agreed. "Now that you mention it, that bitch could really be bitchy, except when I stuck my prod up her ass, and then she just purred like a kitten."

Carter cringed and changed the subject. "How's Cap?"

"He's doing all right. Getting out later today I thinks."

"Good. I figured you don't read the newspaper, so I brought you these." Carter tossed several newspapers on Blackjack's desk.

"Mayor Denies Involvement in Mystery Deaths," read the banner headline in the *Murdale News* (the fire at the Blackjack had occurred too late to make the morning edition). Grunting and shaking his head in disgust, Willy began to read aloud. "Mayor William Butler has denied involvement in the bizarre double deaths of his right-hand man, Marques Taylor, and a female acquaintance, Serene Fountagne [sic], who were both found dead under mysterious circumstances Monday morning."

"According to Murdale Police Chief Hank Carter, Mayor Butler discovered Taylor, 41, shot to death in his office when he arrived for

work Monday morning. A short time later, Miss Fountain's nude body was discovered at her Carbonboro home.

"Carter said both deaths are being investigated as 'possible homicides,' and suspects are being interviewed. Mayor Butler, who has denied any involvement, was among those questioned."

Quoting unnamed "sources close to the case," Santorini's story went on to summarize the evidence implicating Blackjack — his gun inside his locked office, the city manager dispute, and Willy's "purported relationship" with Serene. A sidebar interview with former Mayor Simon Gray went further, with Punk calling for Blackjack's resignation, because the situation "cast a dark cloud over the Mayor's Office." Inside, an editorial piously agreed, suggesting that "guilty or innocent, Murdale would be better served if Mayor Butler stepped aside until the cloud of suspicion has lifted."

Butler didn't bother to look at the rest of the newspapers, which carried similar narratives. "When we get the killer, I'm gonna sue," he ranted. "How can they write stuff like this?"

"I believe they call it freedom of the press," Carter said quietly.

Toby appeared at the door. "How's Cap?" he asked.

"Fine Toby," Willy said. "He be gettin' outa hospital any time. By the way. How would you like to let Cap bunk with you for awhile, till we find him a place to stay?"

"That'd be fun," Toby said. "I'd like that."

"Good." Willy looked at Toby who looked back, expecting some direction.

"That's real nice of you to let Cap stay with you," Carter said finally. "You can go now."

Toby left, and the mayor and police chief looked at each other. Butler broke the silence. "Ready?"

Carter shrugged. "Let's do it."

"What caused the fire at The Blackjack?" Santorini shouted as the reporters were still crowding into the office.

Carter waved the question aside and took out his handwritten statement. "At approximately 1 a.m. this morning, a fire of undetermined origin destroyed The Blackjack Lounge at 817 East Oak St. One person who lived above the bar, Reuben Capman, 42, was taken to Murdale Memorial Hospital with non-life-threatening burns. He is expected to recover. The arson squad is investigating the cause of the

blaze, but there is no evidence at this time that the fire is even of a suspicious nature ... It appears from the initial investigation that the mayor's bar was a firetrap," he said, departing briefly from his prepared text. "There are no suspects at this time, and no evidence that the fire is in any way connected with the deaths that occurred yesterday. But like the other incidents, we are continuing our investigation to determine whether or not there was criminal activity involved, and who might be responsible."

"Kee-rist," sputtered Springster of AP, who had already filed a story on the fire. "So what's news?"

Carter shrugged. "Make something up, that's what you usually do, isn't it?"

"How 'bout you Mr. Mayor? Do you think the fire is connected to the deaths of Miss Fountain and Mr. Green?" asked Anne Skilby of the Carbonboro *Gazette*.

Willy put on a somber face. "I am very saddened by what has happened, and by the prejudiced stories that are being written about me. But I have full faith in Chief Carter here that he will bring the cupids to justice that done kilt my friends and burnt my bar down. I just hope you folks will print it when he does." Responding to the editorials, he added, "Until then ladies an' gennelmen, it'll be business as usual 'roun' here."

"What about tonight's City Council meeting?" Asked Gerhard Charles of the Murdale *Times*.

"Like I said, bidness as usual."

"Well, have you found a replacement for Mr. Taylor?"

Butler shrugged. "Blade was one of a kind, irreflatable."

"You mean you're going to run tonight's meeting by yourself?" asked Santorini. "This I gotta see."

"Ain't nuthin to see," Butler shot back. "I'm the mayor and I always run things 'roun' here."

"Back to the murders," Springster began. "Have you got any new leads?"

"Deaths," Carter corrected. "They're not even alleged murders yet, Mr. Springster." Thinking about Cap, he continued. "In answer to your question, we are continuing our investigation. We have developed some new information — I wouldn't call them leads, although you probably will — and we are checking them out."

“Would you say Mayor Butler is any more or any less of a suspect today than yesterday?” Springster asked hopefully.

“No, I wouldn’t say His Honor is any more or any less of a suspect today. But I will say he has been cooperating in the investigation.”

“Are you saying he is helping in the investigation?” asked April Gamble of WPSI-TV.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say he’s been helpful,” Carter responded with a chuckle. “But he has been cooperative.”

Skilby wanted to get back to the Carbonboro angle. “Mr. Mayor, it’s been alleged that your relationship with Miss Fountain was more than just plutonic. Any comment?”

“I won’t dignify that question with an answer,” Butler replied. “As I said yesterday, Miss Fountain was a dear friend a mine, a decent Christian woman. You shouldn’t be sayin’ things ‘bout her after she’s gone.”

There was an uneasy silence, and then several of the reporters muttered “thank you” and packed up their equipment. Carter did several curt stand-up interviews for the TV cameras, but uncharacteristically, Blackjack refused.

Retreating into his office and slumping in his chair, Willy waited until everyone had left. He sighed heavily and stared at the ceiling. Reaching into his bottom desk drawer, he pulled out a bottle of Southern Comfort and drank himself into a stupor.

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## Chapter 17

Willy was snoring noisily at his desk when Cap banged on his door. “Boss, you in there? It’s me, Cap.”

Blackjack shuddered awake. He frowned briefly, then smiled. “Mah man,” he said groggily and stumbled to the door. “Mah main man Cap. How’d your observation come out?”

“I’s here ain’t I?”

Willy looked at Cap’s bandages and winced. “You sure?”

“Don’t worry about me. Now c’mon, it’s past three. Meeting time. Whole bunch a people waiting.”

As part of an energy conservation policy Taylor had implemented, public meetings were held in the afternoon instead of at night. Since Willy often braced himself with booze before presiding over meetings, when he belatedly stumbled down the stairs to the first floor and entered the City Council Chambers, no one paid particular attention to his bloodshot eyes and distilled breath. There was nothing pressing on the agenda, but the ornate chamber was jammed with expectant spectators and media, all hoping to see Blackjack mess up without the Blade there to coach him.

But Willy was sanguine about soloing his first meeting. Like playing against a white player, his instincts took over. Clearing his throat just loud enough to quiet the room, he led the council in the Pledge of Allegiance.

“It ain’t my turn, but I’m gonna give tonight’s prayer,” he said, slurring slightly. “Dear lawdy Jesus. Tonight we offer up a special prayer for you to take care a da souls of our dearly departed friends, Marques Taylor and Serene Fountain. We have faith in de almighty lawd dat He’ll find dem dat did dish, an’ bring ‘em to justice. An’ now, to pay our respects to the deeply departed, we’s havin’ a moment of silence. In Jesus’ name we pray.”

During the silence, the mood changed from feeding frenzy to somber, even respectful. “Clerk Edith, please take the roll,” Willy said when his instincts told him it was time. Next, Mayor Butler had the city clerk read the minutes. “Do I hear a mushion to ‘prove the minutes?” he asked after the minutes were read.

Alderman Syd Applebaum raised his hand. “I musion we ‘prove the minutes,” he mimicked dryly.

“I second,” Alderman Don Sherry said without looking up.

“All’s in favors, all ‘posed, the nays, I mean ayes, have it,” Butler said. Glancing at the one-page agenda he continued. “Committee reports?”

Public Improvements Committee Chairman Applebaum reported that the summer’s sidewalk and alley improvement program was a smashing success, and commended Street Superintendent George Du Bois for his efforts. Next, Utilities Committee Chairman Kerrie Danute discussed the latest developments in the city’s protracted effort to get federal funding to fix the sewers, and Cemetery Committee Chairman Keith Marion reported more vandalism in the city ceme-



tery. "It doesn't appear to be any of that devil worshipping, just some kids," he said.

When there were no more committee reports, Butler went on to old business, which was just as routine. Nor did new business provide any sparks. Usually the council members were truculent and gregarious, trying to grab the spotlight. But this night they were sitting back and watching Mayor Butler like everyone else, waiting for him to self-destruct. But Butler wasn't self-destructing. In fact, the meeting was as orderly, and if possible, perhaps even more boring, than when Taylor was there. Which was making everyone except Willy restless and frustrated. Blackjack was enjoying himself. He'd never realized before how easy it was to play mayor.

Willy stared down at the agenda. "Mayor's Report" was the next item. Blackjack's mouth went dry. At this point he always recited what the Blade had written for him, and then ad libbed something at the end. But tonight there was no report, and his mind was a blank. It was the moment everyone had been waiting for. As the seconds passed and Willy didn't look up from his agenda, several spectators cleared their throats and the three local TV crews ignited their mini-cam lights. Still, Willy sat motionless, staring at the agenda. When he finally looked up, his eyes glistened.

"Ladies an' gennelmen," he began hoarsely, and took a slow sip of water. "As you knows, in the past twenty-four hours, I has suffered the loss of three things that I loved — my 'sistant, my bidness an' a dear friend. This city has also lost a dear friend in Marques Taylor, who loved Murdale and wanted to make it a better place to live and grow. And now he's gone.

"There has been some things said about me, that I'm the one that done this. But as you kin see, I'm just as much a victim as anyone else, even worse. I mourn the loss of Marques Taylor, and I think it'd only be right if we all paid our respects to our, our fallen comrade. So I'd like this City Council to approve an official day of mourning for Marques Taylor. All city offices will be closed, 'cept for the fire and police departments, of course. Will someone second that emotion?"

It passed unanimously.

Mayor Butler paused, and almost reluctantly added, "Well, I guess that's just about it. Let's ... do I hear a motion to 'journ? The ayes have it, let's go home."

The Mayor looked down at Santorini, who was scowling at the press table, and winked. Santorini shook his head in frustration. Instead of “Mayor’s Effectiveness Hampered by Murder Investigation,” tomorrow’s headline would probably be a respectful “Mayor Sets Day of Mourning for Slain City Official.” Then Santorini shook his head again and chuckled. Blackjack might be unschooled, but he was also unbowed. He returned Butler’s smile and grudgingly held up his thumb.

When the reporters gathered around, Willy blew them off. “The day a mourning done started, and I ain’t talkin’ to nobody while I’m mourning,” he said and looked for Cap, who was posted by the door. “Good evening gennelmen. Me and my main man Cap are heading out.”

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## Chapter 18

Willy led Cap back to his office, where he settled into his new executive chair and cracked the seal on a fresh bottle of Southern Comfort. The City Council meeting forgotten, he lifted the bottle to his lips and then offered it to Cap, who took a swig. “Say Cap, got any a that hemp on ya?”

“I do, but you gotta get it because I can’t reach it,” Cap said and gestured with his bandaged hands.

Cap leaned over to let Willy reach into his jacket pocket and retrieve a joint. He froze as the overhead florescent lights flickered out.

“Sundown, my man,” Willy reassured him. “Some save the planet bullshit the Blade come up with.”

“I knows, Boss,” Cap said as he tried not to tremble. “But it always creeps me out.”

“Everything creeps you out,” Blackjack said in the dark. “You needs to chill out.”

He fumbled around on his desk until he found the switch to the banker’s light, which bathed the office in a gloomy green glimmer, which was more conducive for what they were about to do anyway. Blackjack stuck the joint in his mouth and generously lathered it up with saliva. Lighting a match with one hand, he fired up the doobie

and took a deep hit. "Good shit," he said while holding his breath. "You always got the best shit, Cap."

Actually, Blackjack had all the sources, and Cap was just a bag man. But he smiled proudly and sucked in some smoke when Willy held the joint to his mouth. "Don't you be nigga-lippin' that now," Willy said with a laugh as he pulled it away. They smoked in silence, until the joint was too small for Willy to hold. Cap opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue like he was an ash tray. Willy had trained him to eat the roaches, but this time he did it himself, then winked at Cap.

Blackjack put his legs up on his desk and leaned back in his chair. Realizing that's how the Blade was sitting when he was shot, he took his feet down and put his elbows on the desk. Dropping his head in his hands, he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

As the marijuana seeped through his brain, Willy peeked at Cap. His misaligned eyes, peering in different directions, usually cracked him up when he was stoned. He never could tell which eye was the one that was looking at him. Staring at both made him dizzy, and if he tried to look at one, it would slide away and the other eye would be looking at him, until he looked at that eye, and so on. As a child he had found it mystifying. But this time he saw evasiveness, along with the rage and madness that others saw in those wayward orbs.

He tried to remember a time he didn't know Cap and couldn't. Cap would do anything for him, he thought. But would he kill for him? And would he go to prison for him, if it came to that?

What few people besides Willy and Marques knew was that Cap was gentle by nature. Except when he got riled. Willy recalled the time there'd been some trouble with rednecks at the lounge. Cap was behind the bar and Blackjack was in the kitchen when three out-of-town truckers who had been attracted by the purple neon sign walked in, and didn't realize they were in a black joint until they noticed the interracial couples. Their racist comments were getting on everyone's nerves, except for the busboy, Hal, who saw a chance for mischief.

Serene happened to walk in with two of her nieces, ages 4 and 6, to pick up her paycheck, and as they walked into the kitchen, one of the truckers said to the other, "Would you look at that. Niglets!"

Hal quietly followed Serene into the kitchen, where Willy was standing over the grill, and told him he should call the police.

“What for?” Blackjack asked, a spatula in one hand.

“Because some truckers are talking shit,” he said cryptically. When that didn’t get a rise out of Blackjack, he added, “man, they’re calling the white chicks you-know-what lovers.”

Blackjack didn’t say anything, and he certainly didn’t call the police. He just put down the spatula and reached for a stout billy club he had stashed under the sink. He tapped it against his other hand as he walked up to the swinging door to the bar and peered through the round window to get a look at the truckers.

It wasn’t hard to find them. They wanted another round of beer, and were trying to get the barmaids’ attention by saying, “hey nigger lover, bring me another pitcher.” None of the barmaids wanted to wait on them, so the truckers got louder, and one joked that maybe the nigger lovers only understood ebonics. The couple dozen other patrons were starting to steam, and everyone in the place was probably armed, especially the truckers, who were likely high on meth as well, Butler surmised.

At that point, a cop or any sensible person would have called for backup. But as Hal suspected, Blackjack couldn’t resist trying to bounce those cocky white rednecks off the premises himself.

“Take your girls out the back door, get in your car and go,” Willy told Serene quietly.

He smacked the club into his hand three times, like a basketball team might do at the end of a timeout, then began flexing his muscles and taking deep breaths to pump himself up. He also made sure he was packing his snub nose .38, just in case.

Hal stayed in the kitchen as Blackjack pushed open the swinging door and walked into the bar. “You crackers got a problem?” he loudly asked as he approached the truckers.

“Yeah we got a problem,” said the biggest of the three. “The service sucks, and there’s too many niggers in here.”

“Gennelmen, we don’t use the ’N’ word ‘roun’ here,” Blackjack said evenly. “I think it’s time y’all hit the road, Jack.”

“And who’s gonna make us?” the biggest trucker asked.

Blackjack smiled. “I’d be more than happy to show you pussies the door.”

“Oh yeah Ace, you and who else?” the trucker challenged as he stood up and flexed his muscles.

Before Blackjack could respond, Cap brushed past him and punched the trucker in the jaw. The trucker didn't budge, and then caught Cap with a clubbing hook that sent him reeling against the bar. The trucker turned to Blackjack with a wicked grin on his face and beckoned for his best shot. Blackjack smiled back more confidently than he felt and casually approached the trucker. Assuming a karate stance, he spun a leg kick to the trucker's head — and missed when the surprisingly agile hulk snatched his chin back. “C'mon twinkletoes, you gonna dance all night or we gonna rumble?” the trucker taunted.

Blackjack was about to reach for his piece when an airborne Cap sailed past him head first into the trucker's gut. The trucker grunted as he stumbled backwards over a table and fell heavily to the floor. Cap landed on top of him, hitting, clawing and smacking him with his forearm. The trucker, who'd had the breath knocked out of him, couldn't defend, and Cap pummeled him mercilessly. Stunned and terrified, the other two truckers froze when Willy slammed his billy club on a table, and they watched helplessly as Cap beat the man's face into a bloody pulp. Blackjack had to pry Cap off the trucker before he would stop.

“Don't you come back here, you honky redneck mofos,” Blackjack hollered as they dragged their semi-conscious friend out of the bar. “You be messin' with the *man*.”

Afterwards, everyone congratulated Cap, who didn't seem to remember fighting. “I didn't do nuthin,” he kept saying. “Dunno what yer talkin' 'bout. I don't believe in no violence.”

Which was true. In school, Cap was a bouncing kangaroo on the gym floor, a natural boxer who loved to spar and shadowbox. But unlike other kids from the neighborhood with less ability, Cap never took his talent into the ring, or the back alley. He was the same way with guns. When Willy got his first BB gun, Cap loved to go with him into the woods to shoot beer cans off stumps. But he'd run away crying if Willy aimed at birds or squirrels.

In the Army, Willy turned out to be an average shot, but Cap became a marksman, and represented his platoon in military shooting matches. After Willy became a cop he sometimes took Cap to a shoot-

ing range, but Cap shied away from shooting at targets with silhouettes. He still preferred going out to the woods and shooting at beer cans with one of Willy's guns. A lot of men sleep with a piece beneath their pillow, but Cap slept with one of Willy's.

Cap had a lifetime of reasons to pop a cap into the Blade, Willy thought. But he worshipped Serene. If Willy was somewhere between Cap's brother and father, Serene played the role of his sister and mother, as well as unrequited love. Serene seldom got in situations. But if Cap was around and someone got too fresh with her, his response tended to be quick and aggressive. In high school, everyone knew that Willy and Serene were doing the nasty, and Willy often boasted about his exploits to Cap. But if anyone ever suggested that Serene was anything other than pristine, Cap would bristle. "You dunno what yer talkin' 'bout," he'd explode. "Serene ain't no ho."

Cap loved Serene too much to make a move on her. Which, Willy thought, could twist a man up inside, and easily be sold as a crime of passion. He looked at Cap's divergent eyes again. "So how you feelin' mah man?"

Cap looked up from his hands. "Kinda itchy," he said and lightly rubbed his bandaged arms together.

"Don't be scratching, you baby," Willy scolded and hesitated. "You know Cap, you an' me, we goes back a long ways, don't we?"

"We sure do, Boss."

"I always tole you everything, and you always tole me, too, right?"

"Thas right."

"Then how come you won't tell me that secret about the Blade?"

Cap looked stricken. Willy didn't try to break the silence, and stared straight at Cap, neither of whose eyes would meet his own. Finally Cap spoke. "Cuz, cuz it was, sick, Boss."

Butler acted like he didn't understand. "What do you mean sick?"

"Just sick. Real sick."

Another long pause, and Cap began fidgeting with his bandages again.

"Cap, I gotta make a confession to you. There's something' about the Blade I never told you neither."

Cap stopped scratching.

"There was this one time, oh, long time ago, before me becoming mayor and all. Well, the Blade told me he could set me up with this

hot-looking babe and all, and I believed him. But when I got to the date, it turned out that she wasn't no chick at all, but some guy dressed up like a chick, know what I mean?"

"So what didja do about it?" Cap asked softly.

Blackjack took a deep breath. "I coulda killed him."

"Me, too," Cap said even softer. His face was blank, except for the tears trickling down his cheeks. "I just wanted to be with Serene, you know? And the Blade, he fucked me over. He made me do something perverted."

In the distance a train whistle moaned. "Cap," Willy began gently. "You didn't do nothing to the Blade, didja?"

Cap looked distant. "I dunno Boss, I just dunno."

Willy pressed on. "What do you mean you dunno?"

"Well, I, I did this voodoo shit on him, but I didn't think it'd work. The love potion never did."

"What voodoo shit?" Willy asked, surprised.

"Well, I took me some dandelions an' some wild onions and a hair a his," Cap said with mounting hysteria. "And after he tricked me Saturday night, I poured lighter fluid on 'em, set 'em on fire, and said this thing."

"What thing?"

Cap began to sob. "I told the Monkey Demon to kill the Blade."

No longer surprised, Willy was astonished. "Dandelions and Monkey Demons? Where'd you pick up this voodoo shit?"

"Tabby. She's a witch."

It took a moment for the name to register. "Tabby? You mean Tabatha? That bitch secretary? She been feeding you this bullshit?" Willy got up and walked over to Cap, no longer thinking about whether he would make a good patsy. He gently grabbed Cap's wrists and pulled his bandaged hands away from his tear-drenched face. "Cap, you listen to me now, lissen real good. Tabby ain't no witch, and you ain't put a spell on nobody. She was just playin' with your head like the Blade was."

"You sure?" Cap dabbed at his tears with his shirt sleeves.

"I'm sure." But Willy wasn't so sure about Tabatha anymore. "So what kind of shit did Tabby tell ya?"

"She gimme this luv potion and said if I think good thoughts, Serene'll like me. She also tole me if I don't like somebody, I can use

a spell to get back at ‘em. Well, I tried it on Serene, but she don’t act no different, so I figger I didn’t wish hard enough.” Cap’s voice started to break again. “Only after the Blade done what he did, I tried the other spell, and this time maybe I wished too hard, cuz now they’re both gone.”

Willy didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He finally decided to laugh. “Cap, my man, you didn’t do nuthin to nobody. All that voodoo shit is bullshit. Tabatha don’t know shit, I’m telling ya.”

“Well then, who did it?”

Willy was silent.

“And what about the Monkey Demon?” Cap added.

“I’m tellin’ ya, there ain’t no Monkey Demon.”

“You sure?”

“Like money in the bank. Tabatha the one tole you about this Monkey Demon?”

“No.”

“So where’d you get that?”

“I have dreams sometimes.”

Willy thought about that for a moment. “Cap, there ain’t nuthin else you forgot to tell me, is there?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno, like maybe some dream you mighta had about Blade.”

“It wasn’t me Boss. It was the Monkey Demon.”

Blackjack winced. He didn’t know shit about psychology, but he’d busted scads of Monkey Demons, wretched twisted scumbags who on the outside were meek, mild and self-righteous, but who when fueled by alcohol, drugs, or passion, became monsters. Did Cap have a Monkey Demon inside him, or was Tabatha’s voodoo just one more malicious mindfuck that passed for logic in Cap’s muddled mind?

Not having the longest attention span anyway, Blackjack was distracted from his musings by a loud humming noise in the hallway. When Cap heard the noise he brightened. “Must be Toby,” he said. “He says I can stay at his place tonight. We gonna have a good time.”

Butler opened the hallway door and motioned to Toby, who turned off his buffer. “Toby. Take a break and come in here.”

“I likes to buffer,” Toby said defensively, like he’d done something wrong.



“I knows you do, and you do a bang up job of it. But take a break for a minute.”

“Yes sir, uh, Mayor Boss. By the way, you know where Cap is? He s’posed to stay with me tonight.”

“He’s right here, Toby. As a matter of fact, why don’t you just take Cap home with you right now?”

“But the floors aren’t finished.”

“That’s OK. They’ll still be there tomorrow.”

Toby looked mistrustfully at his buffer. “You sure?”

“I’m sure Toby. If anyone asks you, just tell them the mayor said it was OK. OK?”

“OK.”

Cap appeared beside Willy at the door. “Hi ya Toby. What’s shakin’ dude?”

“Not much. Mayor Boss says we can go on over to my place now. You ready?”

“Sure.” Cap turned to Willy. “Boss, there’s just one thing. Last night, when I was in the hospital, I dreamed about the Monkey Demon again. And he was coming for you. You sure there ain’t no Monkey Demon?”

Willy looked at Cap almost with pity. “I’m sure Cap. You just go on with Toby and don’t worry about nothing. Ain’t no Monkey Demon, and if there was, I’d take care of him, you know that.”

Cap looked relieved. “Thanks Boss. See you tomorrow. Let’s hit it, Toby.”

“Soon as I put away my buffer,” Toby responded, and they left.

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## Chapter 19

Blackjack thought about going home to LaDonna. Instead, he went back inside his office, closed the door and poured several fingers of Southern Comfort into a tumbler. He stared at the glass for a time, then wearily lifted it to his lips. As he was about to knock it back, there was a knock at the door. He frowned, shook his head and didn’t move, but the knock came again. “Who the hell is it?” he growled.

"It's the fuzz," came Chief Carter's response. "Open up, and don't let me hear no toilets flushing."

Blackjack frowned and put down his glass. "Caught any serial killers lately?" he asked when he opened the door.

Carter shrugged. "How 'bout you?"

It was Butler's turn to shrug.

The chief looked at the mayor and sniffed the air. "Smells like someone's been smoking rope, Blackjack. Didn't anybody tell you that's illegal?"

"I was just having me a nightcap," Butler said, gesturing at the whiskey and knowing Carter's views on recreational drug use was that he had better things to worry about. "Care to join me?"

Carter eased into a chair. "Don't mind if I do."

Butler found another glass and poured a Southern Comfort neat. Carter downed it and shuddered. "I gotta hand it to you," he said finally. "You ran that meeting just fine."

Willy smiled, recalling how easy it was to snow the white boys with the old shuck and jive. "Sheet."

"So how did your talk with Cap go?"

"Can't we do this tomorrow?" Butler resisted. "I'm really fagged out."

"No need to shoot the shit, just cut to the chase. You think your pal's guilty or innocent?"

"What about innocent by reason of insanity?"

"I'm more partial to guilty but insane, but let's hear it."

"It's got something to do with a Monkey Demon."

"Monkey devil?"

"Monkey *Demon*. Some wild beast Cap done dreamed up with Tabatha."

Willy arched his eyebrows for Carter to see. Carter was unimpressed. "Tabatha? Who's Tabatha, a witch?"

"You know, my secretary Tabatha. My former secretary, I should say. And what else she is I ain't sure."

"I knew I should have put a wire on you," Carter said. Prepared for bullshit, he settled back into his chair. This was going to be good, he thought. Witchcraft and monkey beasts, with a foxy vixen cast as the heavy. If there was one thing Blackjack was good at, it was telling stories. "All right Mr. Mayor, what are you talking about?"

“Well, it seems that before Cap went to the Blade with his love problems, he took ‘em to that bitch Tabatha.”

“You mean witch Tabatha, don’t you?” Carter couldn’t resist.

“Hey, I don’t know what she is, except maybe spooky. Cap says she gave him a love potion with some hokey pokey to say, and he tried it out on Serene. It didn’t work, of course, but after the Blade pulled that prank on him he used it again on the Blade, and well...”

“Well what, Willy? A Monkey Demon killed Taylor and Fountain, and torched your bar for good measure?”

“I don’t know, Chief. The thing is, Cap ain’t real clear sometimes between what’s real and what’s just a dream or something. Sometimes he don’t remember things he’s done.”

“Hm. You mean like Three Faces of Eve, a split personality?” Carter stroked his chin to hide his chortles.

“Say what?”

“You know, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Cap drinks a potion and turns into a monster and then doesn’t remember it. Or a werewolf perhaps? Very creative. You should become a mystery writer. But how did this Monkey Demon get into your locked office and shoot Taylor without you letting him in? And how did Cap a.k.a. Monkey Demon snuff your girlfriend while you were there, without you knowing a thing? And what about Punk? I thought he was the Monkey Demon, I mean killer. Maybe Punk and your secretary are in cahoots.”

Blackjack was about to go for it, but stopped short. “Maybe they did some of it,” he mused aloud.

Carter accepted the second shot Blackjack had poured. So now he had two suspects, one too drunk to remember what happened, and the other too schizoid. “So how does this Tabatha figure into this?” he asked. “No, let me guess. Love scorned, right?”

Willy seemed to blush. “Chief, I told you I did Tabatha, but the truth is, I never did. She tried for me, but I put her off. I had too many other things going on to bother, and of course she didn’t like that. It’s possible she might a done something’ to Serene, maybe poisoned her or something. Maybe she shot Blade, too, maybe even burnt down my club. She never did like working there.”

One busy witch, Carter thought. Still, it was interesting that Willy had conceded he’d never had sex with her. That could only mean

she'd never given in to him, which meant she had more fortitude than he'd given her credit for.

"Mr. Mayor, you look like you'd blow about a 3.0 on a breathalyzer. Whadaya say I taxi you home?"

Blackjack didn't protest.

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## Chapter 20

While the mayor and the chief were talking in the Mayor's Office, outside City Hall, Lt. Roger Dulworth slouched in the driver's seat of a black 1978 Chevy Caprice "unmarked" squad car. Seeing Cap and Toby emerge from City Hall, he gunned the engine to life. It was a short walk down the street and around the corner to Toby's high rise apartment, but instead of waiting and catching up, he followed his quarry at two miles an hour in his car, and parked across the street with the engine idling as the two stood outside talking. Dulworth didn't see much point in following Cap, since it was obvious to him that Blackjack was the culprit. Still, maybe Cap might slip up and somehow implicate the mayor, he decided.

Roger Mark Dulworth, Jr., came from stolid Murdale stock — his mom was a seamstress and his dad a butcher. In his formative years, Dulworth had been a precursor of the nerd, an early '60s high school oaf complete with a pocket pen guard and horned-rimmed glasses, everything, in fact, except brains.

But it wasn't a lack of smarts as much as interpersonal skills that banished him to the lowest echelons of the high school social strata, far beneath the jocks and geeks, beneath even the boozers and beatniks, to the company of special ed geeks and abused children. Though among them he was not of them, and his only solace in life became food, which gained him a baby fat corpulence and the moniker "Lumpy."

Roger plodded through school, but with the tenacity of a tortoise, and after working for a year at an area orchard he lost some weight, enrolled at Pulaski College, mastered courtship techniques long enough to meet, marry and thrice impregnate an unremarkable woman named Leah, and completed police academy. Dulworth's dad

happened to be on the same bowling team as then Lt. Carter, and somehow cajoled Carter into getting his son on the force.

A grudging mentor, Carter tried to teach his foundling some of the tools of the trade. Dulworth was a slow learner, and Carter never could figure out why he wanted to be a cop. Roger wasn't like other cops. He never indulged in high-speed chases, cruised after hour bars, or took as much as a free doughnut. But over time Carter came to be impressed with his lack of corruption, a rare trait in the profession, even if it stemmed from just as rare a trait, which was naivety. Yet lately, Carter had been trying to prepare Dulworth for the passing of the shield, reasoning that a lot of other bumbling idiots had also held the job, and at least Dulworth didn't suffer from that most common of occupational hazards, testosterone poisoning.

Still, Carter didn't trust Dulworth with more difficult tasks, especially those that involved thinking. Roger understood police procedure better than tactics, and responded better to directions than explanations. For once Dulworth started thinking he was prone to ad libbing, and once he did that his instincts invariably failed him.

Unaware that he might be tailing a Monkey Demon, Dulworth was sanguine, having followed what he'd thought was appropriate tailing procedure. Indeed, for once he hadn't been noticed by the people he was following. Instead, Cap and Toby were in animated conversation as they approached the high rise. Dulworth watched as Toby unlocked the security door and ushered Cap inside. He continued to watch as they disappeared into an elevator. When he saw lights go on in a second floor apartment, and then remain on, Dulworth cut the motor. "Dang," he twanged. He reached into his glove compartment and extracted a small leather case.

Chief Carter had told him to wait until all the lights went out and not to fall asleep. No matter. He'd come prepared. He unzipped the case, which contained a cuticle scissors, nail file and assorted other personal care accessories. He selected a moon depressor and settled in.

Upstairs, Toby listened, enthralled, as Cap told him all about the murders and the fire, and how Blackjack was in danger. When Cap told Toby about the Monkey Demon, he shuddered. Toby had his own Monkey Demons, and in his mind such a fiend was at least as logical a suspect as Blackjack. And when Cap talked about Serene,

and then about what the Blade had done to him, Toby was both shocked and titillated.

Toby went to the bathroom as Cap stood in the center of the cluttered room and finished his story. "The way I figure, the Monkey Demon killed Blade like I tole it to, but then it got out of control, and maybe it killed Serene by mistake. Then it come after me because it know'd I tried to kill it, and it tried to burn me up. And now, now I think it's after Boss, but I ain't sure why. Boss says there ain't no Monkey Demon, but I dunno."

Toby was quiet for a moment. "How'd you try to kill the Monkey Demon?" he asked.

"I tried a spell that Tabby give me. Up at my place, the night The Blackjack burned. I mixed me up some more dandelions and onions and took a hunk a my own hair, cuz I'm the one that set the Monkey Demon loose, and I burned 'em with lighter fluid, then I guess I fell asleep. The next thing I knowed the whole place was on fire."

Toby returned from the bathroom and tried to get Cap to think logically. "You dummy. You mean you used the same exact ingredients in your spell except for using *your* hair?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't you see, you done put the same hex on yourself as you put on the Blade. That's why the Monkey Demon came for you. I'll bet you did the same thing with Serene, didn't ja?"

"Well, not at first," Cap said in surprise. "First I made a love potion. But when that didn't work, I tried a spell on her, only in a good way. To make her like me."

Then it hit him. "You mean I might a killed Serene, too?" he wailed.

"No way Cap, it was an accident. And Blade deserved what he got. What he did to you was really yucky. That's like self defense. Besides, nobody else will believe it's the Monkey Demon until it's too late. It's up to us to save the mayor."

"How we gonna do that?"

"We're gonna do another spell, only this time we'll do the opposite, get it?"

"You think that will work?"

"Sure."

"OK. So what do we do?"

Toby went over to an old trunk that had been left by a previous tenant and took out an even older Bible. Inside the Bible was a crushed rose, which he took out lovingly. "Here," he said, "it's one of my favorite things. A rose out of the Bible. You can't get much different from a dandelion than that."

Cap looked at the pressed rose and was impressed. "OK. What else?"

Toby poked around the kitchen. "What's the opposite of onion? I know. Water. Cause if you eat too many onions it makes you want to drink water."

"How you gonna burn water, Toby?"

Toby thought for a minute. "We're not. We're gonna freeze it, since tha'd be the opposite of burning it. Now we just need one more thing. Something of the mayor's. Something that he's touched."

Cap thought for a moment and started to cry. "Everything I had of his got burned up in the fire. I ain't got nuthin."

"Well, do you know where we could get something?"

"There's lots of stuff in his office, but it's locked. Ain't no way to get in."

Toby was quiet for a long time, and when he began to speak it was in a whisper. "Cap, if I tole you a big secret, I mean a really big secret, could you promise never to tell nobody until you die? Swear to God"

"You know's I wouldn't, just like you wouldn't tell no one what I tole you, right?"

Toby nodded. "Right. But you gotta swear to me you will never tell no one."

"OK. I swear if you swear."

"How should we do it?"

"Let's shake on it."

"I swore, didn't I?" Cap said, getting tired of the melodrama. "Tell me already."

"OK," Toby said. "But we need to go for a walk."

Dulworth's head snapped up from his nails as Toby snapped off his apartment light. "Lights out, that's it," he muttered and gunned the engine to life. He was busy putting away his cuticle set when Toby and Cap rode down the elevator, and he pulled away from the curb just before Toby and Cap stepped back out into the night.

## Chapter 21

Cloaked in the invisibility of insignificance, Cap and Toby sauntered back up Main Street to City Hall, then dipped into the underground parking garage. Using his janitor's key, Toby opened the rear door and they clambered up the back stairwell to the second floor, where he instructed Cap to close his eyes.

When Cap obeyed, Toby used his key to open a utility closet off the hallway where he stored the buffer. "Keep your eyes closed," Toby whispered as he guided Cap through the closet, which smelled of wax and Clorox. "Keep 'em closed," Toby nervously reminded Cap, who was sniffing the air.

He walked to the other end of the closet and with his foot he pressed on what appeared to be a knot in the baseboard. The knot receded, releasing a latch that allowed a wall panel to silently pivot inward, revealing a large, moonlit room. With growing excitement, Toby ushered Cap into the room and closed the panel, which looked like a regular dressing mirror encased in an ornate wooden frame. He walked Cap around a desk, and deposited him in a the mayor's new executive chair. "You can open your eyes now," Toby beamed.

As Cap's eyes adjusted to the darkness, his mouth dropped open. "It's Boss' office," he exclaimed, causing Toby to put his finger to his lips and hiss "shush."

"How'd you do that?" Cap whispered excitedly.

Toby always enjoyed impressing Cap with his knowledge, but this was the most fun he'd ever had. He knew his secret would come in handy someday. "Look Cap, you promised me you'd keep this a secret, right?"

"Sure," Cap said. "But how'd we get in here?"

Toby showed Cap another hidden button below the mirror in the Mayor's Office that unlatched the wall panel, then reluctantly took Cap back into the closet and closed the mirrored panel. "Cool, huh?" Toby boasted.

Cap stared in amazement. "How'd you figure that out?"

"One day I was putting the buffer away and it banged against the wall in just the right place and it opened up, just like that. At first I thought I broke the wall. But when I saw the Mayor's Office on the other side, I knew it was a secret passage."



“Now watch this,” Toby said. He pulled aside an opaque curtain on the panel, exposing a window into the Mayor’s Office.

“A one-way mirror!” Cap whispered excitedly as he peered through it. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone wanted to spy on the mayor,” Toby suggested.

Cap suddenly forgot about the mirror. “Holy moly. You think this is how the Monkey Demon got inside and killed the Blade?”

“Exactly.”

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” Cap said and laughed at his own joke. Then he grew serious. “Toby, don’t you think we should tell somebody about this? This could be important.”

“You promised,” Toby protested. “You swore. We even shook on it.”

“I know, but what’s the difference?”

“Don’t you see, Cap? If they find out I know how to get into the Mayor’s Office, they’ll think I did it.”

“Nobody’d think that.”

“Yeah they would. They’d think crazy ole Toby done freaked out again. Just like before. Only worse.”

Cap was torn. He knew the secret passage was important to Willy’s case, but he could also see how Toby knowing about it could get him in trouble. He’d just have to figure out something on his own.

Toby opened the secret door again. “So what do you want to take?” he asked, referring to the final ingredient for the spell.

Cap shrugged, not believing it would work. He picked up the crystal paperweight on Willy’s desk. “How ‘bout this?” he said as he stuffed it in a pocket. “Hey, let’s get out of here. I’m gettin’ the willies.”

## Day 3: Wednesday

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### Chapter 22

Willy is floating on a cottony cloud high above Carbonboro. Below, he can see his childhood home, Serene's house, the playground, the school and Kelly's grocery store. The cloud is luminous and yielding; as Willy looks over the edge, he feels as if he might fall. He tries to wrap the cloud around him, but as he reaches out it dissipates into mist, and he finds himself enveloped in its wispy foam. He gently sinks to the bottom of the cloud until the last misty tendrils give way, and he sees himself falling cartoonishly like Wily Coyote, becoming smaller and smaller until he sees a puff of smoke as he smashes into the ground. Only the ground isn't Carbonboro anymore, but a barren bleached-out landscape. Willy floats down until he merges with the Willy embedded in the ground, face up. He watches helplessly as a big furry bear approaches.

The bear raises its head, picks up Willy's scent, and playfully ambles over to him. The bear rolls on its back and shakes its paws in the air, and then it rolls on top of Willy. The bear licks at Willy's face and nudges him with its snout, and as the bear continues to squirm, its warm underbelly begins to rub against Willy's organ, giving him an erection. The bear squirms until Willy's dick is inside it. The bear begins to bounce on Willy's organ, up and down, gaining pace and rhythmically bobbing higher and faster until Butler can hear the bed-springs in his Murdale condo squeaking in protest. Half opening his eyes, Willy sees his wife's profuse mammaries flapping up and down as she bounces on his cock, and rivulets of sweat seep from the corners of her tightly closed eyes. She cradles her breasts and makes a guttural growling noise.

Willy leaves his dick on autopilot and dispassionately feels the pressure build inside him. As LaDonna's growling becomes a high pitched squeal, and her hips began to roll and grind instead of bounce, Willy lets go. His face contorts into a grimace of excruciating pain, then melts into total calm. Blackjack Willy greets another day.

Outside the condo, clouds were looming on the horizon, making for a spectacular sunrise, had he looked. LaDonna rolled off of him and pretended to fall back to sleep, as did he. Why, Blackjack wondered, hadn't the town and media already staged an old-fashioned lynching. He knew people were talking and the media barking, but no one had tossed a rock through his window or burned a cross on the lawn. Even more perplexing, why hadn't Chief Carter arrested him yet? And why had the Blade told him to call Carter if he ever got in serious trouble? None of it made any sense. Either he did it, or someone was out to get him. But who?

LaDonna was also only pretending to be sleeping, but she was also dreaming. Dreaming about life without Willy. She imagined ways to spend the fire insurance settlement, and how she'd make better choices than after her first husband was killed in the line, and she'd chosen Blackjack, both the man and the club. LaDonna and her first husband, Bobby Freeman, were both from the Chicago area, but met in Murdale at a black fraternity mixer at Murdale State University. She was studying to be a social worker, he a cop. A perfect match of attractive features, medium skin tones, and buppie aspirations, they married and planned on starting a family. They decided to stay in Murdale after she got into grad school and he got a job at the Murdale Police Department, giving out parking tickets on a three wheeler before working his way up to patrol officer.

Everything was going to plan until Freeman got partnered with Blackjack, who insinuated himself into their lives, then systematically debauched them with partying, pot, coke, and Long Island Iced Teas. Behind his back, they laughed about his Podunk ways and garbled relationship with the English language. But he was good company, always cracking jokes and flirting with the cops' wives, tap-dancing the line between teasing and tempting.

Then came the loud and raucous cop party at Sgt. Emmett Peters' home, where everyone had a little too much to drink, and LaDonna's husband was distracted by another woman. LaDonna was high, tipsy and a little jealous when she wandered into the backyard to get some air, where Blackjack pounced, grabbing her playfully but firmly by the wrist and saying he wanted to show her something. "I needa go back 'slide," she slurred. But when he tugged on her wrist, she was

suddenly aflame and let him pull her, stumbling and laughing, behind a brick barbecue pit.

“So what do you want to show me?” she asked and giggled nervously.

“You know,” he said as he turned her around and hiked up her skirt. “I know you’s trying to baby up, so I won’t mess with that,” he said, as if it were a joke.

“Don’t, I’ll scream,” she gasped as she braced herself against the rough bricks. But the scream she let out was stifled, as he roughly violated her anally for the first time. She was too afraid to resist, but at some point her fear turned to lust, and when it was over, she sagged against the bricks, overcome with self-loathing. She hadn’t just let him defile her, she had enjoyed it.

“Pull yourself together,” he said. “We need to get back to the party.”

She swore she would never allow Blackjack to ravish her again, but she did. Six weeks later, her husband was dead, and a miscarriage followed. She was bereft, and when Willy came sniffing around her life insurance settlement, she let him marry her. She knew it was a mistake. Just how big a mistake became obvious after he persuaded her to invest in a “bistro” that turned out to be a dive bar, where he reconnected with his homies and rendezvoused with his hos. She let herself go and ballooned to 200 pounds. She was about to leave him when out of the blue, he ran for mayor. She figured it was a midlife crisis, and she’d stick around long enough to see him fail, and hopefully leave him when he was at rock bottom. But then he won, and overnight she went from neglected, beaten-down wife to the first lady of Murdale. Suddenly she was being feted and mingling with the country club set, and Blackjack had become dependent on her to guide him through the social graces.

It was during the campaign that she got to know the Blade, who immediately set off her gaydar. But he made a point of flattering her and including her in the campaign, and he was someone she could bring her problems to, especially regarding her husband. Being the spouse of a public official was heady, flattering, and stultifying. She had as much interest in politics as her husband did, and she longed for a way out, so her attitude toward Blackjack’s current predicament was, complicated.

Willy stared at the ceiling, thinking about another fucked day. The Blade's funeral was early, which meant he wouldn't have time to get drunk before putting in an appearance. As for Serene's last rites, he doubted he'd be able to get away from his ball and chain. He'd have to pay his last respects some other way. After that ... nothing. He'd proclaimed a day of mourning, and now he was stuck with it. But he had to come up with something, or sometime mid-afternoon the bear would drag him shopping.

"Wake up, baby," Willy said reluctantly. "Get your ass in gear. We got a big day today. We gots to go to a funeral, an' then ... I gots to do some 'vestigating. That damn police chief ain't got a clue."

LaDonna was blasé. She was good at funerals. And she was pretty sure the only thing Willy would investigate this afternoon was a bottle of whiskey. Which meant she could go shopping.

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## Chapter 23

Wedge incongruously between a machine shop, and more ominously, a bait shop, on Murdale's east side, sits the pre-Civil War-vintage Woodland Cemetery. Among the ancient oaks shading the hillside are planted members of some of the city's oldest and most esteemed families. One of several cemeteries laying claim to the first Memorial Day observance, a number of Union soldiers are interred there. There is also an above-ground vault which, lore has it, contains the remains of a Southern sympathizer whose dying wish was to "never be buried in Yankee soil."

Beyond a wrought iron fence that surrounds the original cemetery is the new section, a reclaimed flood plain that if not for the tombstones might be mistaken for a cow pasture. At the eastern edge where the two sections meet, abutting a drainage ditch and a recycling plant, is the Taylor family plot. After Dr. Taylor succumbed to congestive heart failure in 1975, Marques had made it his personal mission to fulfill his father's dying wish, which was to integrate the city's oldest cemetery. Two years later, Marques broke another barrier when he buried his Jewish mother beside his black father. In short and sudden order, his overdosed brother and suicidal sister joined

them, and now the Blade was completing the set. Marques was the end of the line.

Murdale Police Chief Hank Carter got out of his car and stretched in the parking lot of the Murdale Recycling Center. He watched as a small group of dark men in drab suits, and women in crinkly black dresses, gathered for the graveside service. To Carter it looked like family and friends of the family, but not friends of the Blade -- he couldn't discern any homosexuals. Nor many city officials, except for the one black councilman, and not an ofay in sight. Except when Carter glanced over his shoulder at the restive collection of press people he was keeping from entering the cemetery.

As the service began, Mayor Butler's private car pulled into the parking lot, causing the media to stop their wise-cracking and grab their cameras and notebooks. The commotion interrupted the service, and when the pastor recognized Butler, he stopped talking and wearily looked toward the heavens.

When the reporters started to approach the mayor, Carter set a pick and put his index finger to his lips. Willy and LaDonna took their time walking across the short drainage ditch bridge into the cemetery -- LaDonna had to on account of her long black gown and spiked heels, which clicked on the bridge, then sank in the sod, slowing their progress even more, and worse for Blackjack, forcing him to take LaDonna's arm.

As the reporters settled back down, waiting for the return trip, Carter debated whether to follow after the mayor. He looked back at the all-white reporters, and then beyond Butler to the all-black mourners. He waited until he didn't think the reporters would notice, and somberly stood in the back of the service.

There was sadness but little weeping as the Rev. Ebenezer Vinecour conducted the funeral rites. When he got to the part where he had to talk about Marques, he stumbled over Taylor's resume, but dwelled on his memories of the child Marques, who with his parents had split their Sundays between the A.M.E. Church on the east side, and Beth David Synagogue on the west side. The reverend recalled Marques as a "sensitive and idealistic young man" whose untimely demise "cut short the good works he could have done here. Now Marques Taylor is serving a higher purpose."

The congregation murmured “amen” and stood silently for a long moment, before Rev. Vinecour brought the service to a close. The mourners glanced warily at the reporters, who were looking hungrily back at them, and took the long way around to their cars. Rev. Vinecour looked curiously over at Carter, then silently walked over and shook his hand. Next he shook hands briefly with the mayor, and then held LaDonna’s hand for just a moment longer, before shuffling off to rejoin his flock.

Hank looked at Willy, who was glowering at Marques’ grave. Instead, it was LaDonna who glared back at Carter. Just as she started to say something, Willy yanked on her arm, but did not look up. LaDonna looked at her husband, then at the grave, then back at her husband, and then shrugged. Blackjack continued to stare at the grave, composing himself.

Chief Carter silently accompanied the couple back to their car. “Shh, day of mourning,” Mayor Butler whispered and waved off the reporters. Carter looked over at the assembled media and gently mocked the mayor. “Shh,” he echoed. “Day of mourning.”

The Carbonboro City Cemetery, though newer than Woodland, was more decrepit, and the care was more spasmodic than perpetual. Just like the town, the northeast quadrant of the cemetery contained mostly black people, and the rest mostly whites. It was nearly noon before the Rev. Vinecour arrived at the cemetery chapel, which marked the line of demarcation.

Parked outside the cemetery, Carter watched as what appeared to be the same set of mourners arrive for Serene’s funeral. A cab pulled up and Cap got out. Looking tearful, he made his way to Serene’s casket. Carter waited until the service began, then headed back to headquarters. He found funerals to be less revealing than autopsies, and those who attended them to be less suspicious than those who did not.

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## Chapter 24

As Carter drove to headquarters from Serene’s funeral, he turned the case over in his mind. No matter how you sliced it, the only thing

Marques, Serene and The Blackjack Lounge had in common was the mayor. Everything might not fit perfectly, but well enough to make a case. In other cases he had made charges stick with a lot less evidence. So why did a nagging voice keep telling him he was missing something? Maybe, Carter reflected, that voice wasn't his at all, but some bleeding heart he thought that police life had taken from him, along with his wife and kids. Perhaps it was time to stop listening to voices and stick with the facts. Perhaps it was time to nail the bastard.

In similar situations he would question Willy in one room and Cap in another, and use their inconsistencies to trap them. But in this case one -- make that both -- were pathological liars. One might have been too drunk and stoned to remember, and the other too feeble-minded, perhaps even criminally insane. It made Carter grind his teeth just to think about it.

By the time he arrived at the cop shop, he was in a sour mood. And as he parked his car in in his reserved spot, he noticed the coroner lurking nearby.

"What's up, doc?" Carter Bugs Bunnied as he got out of his car.

"I can't believe I missed it," Dr. Edelman sputtered and beckoned the chief to come closer.

"Missed what?"

"Serene Fountain," he said. "She died of hypoglycemia -- low blood sugar. Showed up on her blood work, plain as day, but I almost overlooked it."

"Natural causes." Carter brightened. "Case closed, right? So why the cloak-and-dagger?"

Edelman looked forlorn. "The problem is she wasn't diabetic. Her hypoglycemia was probably caused by an injection of insulin, causing her to go into insulin shock. Now why would a woman who doesn't have diabetes inject herself with insulin?"

Carter grunted.

"And that's not all," the coroner continued. After noticing Fountain's blood sugar, I checked Marques Taylor, and he had hypoglycemia, too. So I can't say for certain whether he died from a gunshot wound or low blood sugar. It's a real cluster fuck."

"What about AIDS?"

"Still waiting for the lab results," Edelman replied.



Carter didn't say anything for a long time. "Would insulin shock be an agonizing death?" he asked.

"Actually, it would be relatively painless," Edelman said. "You'd feel lightheaded for awhile, listless, eventually you'd pass out, and then, unless someone fed you a jelly bean, you'd just not wake up."

When Carter didn't say anything, he went on. "Insulin could be used to commit suicide. But it could also be used to commit murder. Either way, I'm stuck with two unnatural deaths, and Mayor Butler says he was with Miss Fountain and Mr. Taylor around the time they expired. I mean, even if he didn't give them a hot shot, it takes hours to die from a diabetic coma, so paramedics might have been able to save Miss Fountain at least if the mayor had called an ambulance. That's negligent homicide for starters. And then there's the gunshot, of course."

"Mr. Butler is certainly at the center of everything," Carter agreed. "Have you shared your information with Carbonboro police yet? You know Fountain died there, outside my jurisdiction."

"I know," Dr. Edelman responded. "But Mayor Butler is your jurisdiction. What do you think I should do?"

"Since the cause of death falls into the category of information only the killer would know, if there is a killer, maybe you could keep that under your hat for another day, and let me see if this leads anywhere."

"I'll do that," Edelman said, then scratched his head. "Hank, I need to tell you one more thing on the QT. I poked around, and found out the mayor isn't diabetic, but his wife is."

"You poked around?"

"Yeah, I know, I should mind my own business. But I was curious." When Carter said nothing, he finished. "It's just a gut feeling, but I think Mayor Butler killed 'em both. Motive, means and opportunity. Occam's razor, right?"

Carter smiled. "Thanks, doc. By the way, how come you released the bodies so quickly? I just got back from their funerals."

Edelman shrugged. "I figured I had all the blood and tissue samples I needed, and if we needed more, we could always dig 'em up," he said with a wink.

"*Oy*," Carter said, employing the only Yiddish word he knew. "Let's not."

“I guess it was a religious thing,” Edelman added. “At least that’s what their lawyer told me.”

Carter’s ears perked up. “*Their* lawyer?”

“Eddie Winks,” Edelman said.

“*Oy*,” Carter said again.

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## Chapter 25

Instead of heading to the police station, Carter crossed the street and entered the seedy law office of Eddie Winks, Esq., former assistant public defender and current defender of small-time drug peddlers, deadbeat dads and alleged victims of police brutality and harassment, including Isabel Garcia before she became a detective. Short, dapper, and loquacious, he was known for playing the race card. As the only black attorney in town, he also handled a lot of civil matters for the black community, including probate work. Although he did a brisk business, his bad debt ratio was precariously high. Despite everything, he was a true believer.

The secretary was at lunch, and Carter could see into Winks’ office, where the barrister was munching on a ham sandwich. He beckoned the chief to enter the room by waving his sandwich in the air. “What’s crackin’?” he asked as Carter settled into a chair. “Before you say anything, I have to tell you I’m not Blackjack’s attorney, at least not yet. Any idea who he has retained? Nobody seems to know.”

“That’s right, Mr. Winks, nobody.”

Winks looked puzzled. “Nobody knows?” he asked.

“Nope, nobody. Nobody is representing the mayor,” Carter said.

Curiosity turned to indignation. “You ain’t arrested that nigga yet?” Winks scoffed.

Having submitted to Winks’ sarcastic cross examinations in court many times, Carter was unperturbed. “Not yet,” he conceded. “But the mayor has repeatedly rejected my advice that he lawyer up. Can you imagine that?”

Winks stared at his sandwich. “I gotta have a talk with that nigga,” he mused. “So if you’re not here about Blackjack, what *are* you here for?”

“Marques Taylor and Serene Fountain.”

Winks continued to stare at his sandwich. “What about them?”

“I heard you did their wills.”

“True that,” Winks replied. “Since they are both recently deceased, I don’t suppose I’d be violating their confidentiality, too much. They came in together about three months ago. He wanted to update the will he’d made after his father died, and she wanted to do her first. At least that’s what he said. She didn’t say much at all. I just assumed they were...” Winks lifted his pelvis off his chair a couple of times.

“Anything unusual about the wills?”

Winks smiled. “Well, she didn’t have much. The homestead went to nieces and nephews who are scattered all over. The Blade didn’t have a whole lot either. Less than you would have thought. But what he did have, well, that half-Hebe, half-Christian gave it all to some Muslim trust fund in Indiana, on the condition that it be used to build a mosque in Murdale.” Winks winked. “I think it was his parting shot at the establishment.”

“Did they specify anything about funeral arrangements?” Carter asked.

Winks shrugged. “The Blade said he was half Jewish and she was half Muslim, so they both wanted a quick turn-around on interment. But in light of recent developments...” He shrugged again. “I’d appreciate it if you would keep our little talk confidential, as a lot of my clients wouldn’t like me confiding in the cops, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll keep it on the low-down,” Carter said.

“Down-low, but thanks for playing,” Winks chuckled.

As Carter left the office, he heard Winks yell behind him.

“Have that nigga call me, ya hear?”

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## Chapter 26

When Carter arrived at his office, Dulworth and Garcia were waiting. Dulworth went first. “There’s a bunch of media calls,” he began.

“I want you to handle the media on this,” Carter interrupted. “I’ll write a statement with your name on it. Give it to the dispatcher to give to the media, and if anyone gets past the dispatcher, you take the call.”

“But I don’t know what’s going on,” Dulworth complained.

“Exactly,” Carter replied. “That’s why you’re perfect for the job. Just tell them what you know for sure, which is nothing.”

“I do know one thing,” Dulworth brightened. “We got the preliminary fire marshal report on The Blackjack Lounge fire, and they think it started with the deep fryer. Something sparked a grease fire, but not sure what.”

Carter frowned. “So once again, we don’t know if it was a crime or an accident. Jesus H. Christ. Did Cap behave himself last night?”

“No problemo,” Dulworth said. “I tailed Cap and his friend Toby back to Toby’s apartment, waited for about a half-hour, until the light went off, and then I took off.”

“Good,” Carter said. “I want you to keep tabs on him again tonight.”

Dulworth shrugged, paused and pursed his lips. “Chief,” he began gently. “You are always lecturing me about Hokum’s Laser...”

“That’s Occam’s Razor, Roger.”

“Whatever. The point is, in this case you keep overlooking the obvious. It’s not like you.”

Carter sighed. Occam’s razor was a maxim he lived by, yet in this case he had resisted its elegant logic, because his instincts kept telling him that the simplest explanation was too simple.

He also wanted to rule out all other possibilities before arresting a black mayor and/or his mentally challenged chauffeur. He wanted to be sure he wasn’t being influenced by animus, whether it be personal, racial or both. Maybe that’s what Blackjack had been counting on. But he had checked out every half-assed alibi and conspiracy theory Butler had spewed, and they had all blown up like so many exploding cigars. Time to get back to basics.

“You’re right, Rog, it’s not like me,” Carter said. “But suppose you tell me one obvious thing about this case.”

“It’s obvious to me -- to practically everyone except you, if you’ll excuse me for saying so — that the mayor did it. Did it, did it, did it.”

“It’s one thing to have a hunch and quite another to make a case,” Carter replied. “Make me a case Lt. Dulworth.”

“OK,” Dulworth said. “Sunday night, the mayor and his aide meet in his office. They get intoxicated, have a fight, and the mayor plugs him in the head with his own gun. He locks the office when he leaves because he’s drunk and stupid. Next, he goes to his girlfriend’s home, they also have a fight, and he smothers her with a pillow. Then, he gets Cap to burn down his bar for the insurance money. You know Cap was at the fire when it broke out. You saved him.”

Carter frowned again. He could see Blackjack killing his fixer and his girlfriend. He could also see Blackjack using Cap to murder the Blade, and possibly Serene. After all, Cap would do anything Willy told him to do. But Blackjack burning down his own bar seemed about as likely as Punk torching the Pulaski County Country Club. Then again, maybe Cap did it all on his own — the Monkey Demon theory: Blade humiliating Cap at the gay bar, Serene rejecting his advances, and he goes berserk.

“Now Roger, this isn’t for the media,” Carter paused. “But the coroner says Miss Fountain died of low blood sugar.”

Dulworth and Garcia looked stunned.

“In fact, Mr. Taylor also had low blood sugar when he died. Not only is that quite a coincidence, but neither of them were diabetic. Here’s another coincidence, the mayor’s wife has diabetes.”

Dulworth processed the new information. “Well, then Blackjack would have had access to his wife’s insulin,” he said excitedly.

“That’s known as confirmation bias,” Carter replied. “The mayor’s wife also had access to insulin.”

Dulworth thought for a moment. “I can see her killing his girlfriend, but why would she want to kill the mayor’s assistant? And what about the bar?”

“She’d burn down the bar for the insurance money,” Garcia interjected. “And she’d kill Serene out of jealousy. But, I agree, why would she want to kill Mr. Taylor?” Garcia went on. “Maybe the mayor, his wife and Cap are all in cahoots. Between the three of them, they have plenty of MMOs.”

“Yeah, like in that Agatha Christie story, ‘Murder on the Oriental Express,’” Dulworth chimed in. The mayor, his wife and his best bud, they all did this to ...” he trailed off.

"Maybe," Carter conceded. "But here's something else. We know Blackjack isn't the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, but does it make any sense that he would pose Marques Taylor in his chair, legs on his desk, in his locked office, his gun nearby? It's all so, theatrical. Like someone was sending a message."

"Like who?" Garcia asked.

"How about Mr. Taylor?"

Garcia had had enough. "Oh, now you've really gone off the deep end, Chief," she scoffed. "What evidence do you have that Mr. Taylor wanted to kill himself?"

"Off the record, they are testing Greene for AIDS," Carter revealed. "If I got AIDS, that would be among the options I'd consider."

"Greene was gay?" Dulworth asked, surprised, while Garcia was not. They both digested this new information. "Even if that were true," Garcia noted, "to pull off a double homicide and arson, all while being dead, he'd have to have help."

Carter thought for a moment. "You know Isabel, this case is like one of those Rubic's Cubes -- every time you fit a piece, another piece goes out of whack. By the way, did you check out the mayor's secretary like I asked you to? Did you come up with anything unusual, like witchcraft perhaps?"

Garcia squinted as she pulled out her notepad. "I did a background check and she came up clean, or maybe I should say empty," she said.

"How empty?" Carter persisted.

"Her name is Tabatha Johnson. She's 25, from Eugene, Oregon, and she came to town a few years ago, where she attended Pulaski College and waitressed at the Blackjack Lounge until six months ago, when she started working at the Mayor's Office. She told me she noticed nothing unusual at the Mayor's Office when she went home Friday or came to work Monday, until you showed up and all hell broke loose. She said she spent the previous night alone at home. No tickets, no arrests, no bad debts, and no evidence of witchcraft, since you asked. Well, except for one thing."

Carter raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"It's nothing, really," Garcia grinned. "She happens to live at Devil's Den."

“Really?” Carter responded. “How come? And why would someone from Oregon come to the Midwest to go to a college nobody’s ever heard of?”

Garcia leafed through her notes and shrugged. “You’d have to ask her, I guess.”

“Why don’t we do that?”

“*Que?*”

“C’mon, let’s go take a ride out to the boonies.”

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## Chapter 27

With a bemused Garcia in tow, Carter returned to his car and they headed south of the city into the rolling countryside, where the land had yet to be ravaged by cornfields, strip mines or strip malls. Left behind by the prehistoric glaciers that had prairied much of the Midwest, a snarl of creeks wound through bluffs and canyons south of Murdale, where wetlands provided habitat for wildlife, but were less hospitable to people or commerce.

During the Depression, the federal government bought up a lot of the unproductive marshland to create parks and recreation areas, and put foreclosed farmers and laid-off miners to work damming the creeks and draining the lowlands into a triangle of lakes — Little Crab, Grassy Orchard, and the most isolated, Devil’s Den. The lakes never attracted the industry or tourism they were meant for, and the reclaimed wetlands turned out to be sandy clay hardly more farmable than when they were swamp. Nature still ruled the boonies, and its few human inhabitants included hippie artists, pot growers, inbred Baptists, survivalists and migrant workers, whose least common denominator was a desire for privacy.

Carter could have sent Garcia on what she would have considered a fool’s errand, but he loved the hilly forests and rocky canyons of southern Illinois, and he needed to air out his brain. He didn’t expect the witch Tabatha theory to pan out, but perhaps it would lead to something else. Carter gave Tabatha credit for living in the country, but wondered whether it made her suspect. Was she into hokus pokus or just another of Blackjack’s misdirections?

Carter drove down the Little Crab Wildlife Refuge blacktop road past the Grassy Orchard Spillway, where he'd often cast for bass. He slowed down and looked at Garcia as he came to a section where the trees formed a canopy over the roadway. The leaves had turned, giving the tunnel effect a colorful mosaic overlay. Back in the day, he had taken girls to make-out spots in the area, and this was where he usually tried to put his arm around them. He had never gotten high, but as the sun splashed through the gold and crimson leaves, he imagined that must be what pot is like.

Garcia didn't seem to be appreciating the scenery, or his company. "What's on your mind?" he asked her to break the ice.

She paused so as not to be too blunt. "Occam's fucking razor," she said finally. "I don't often say this, but Roger is right. When there are multiple possible solutions to a puzzle, the simplest is most likely correct. *Si?*"

"*Si,*" Carter responded. "But you know what else they say -- if it seems too good to be true."

"Two can play that game," she parried. "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..."

"So you think Mr. Butler injected Mr. Taylor with insulin, then shot him in the head, went to his girlfriend's house, injected her, and then went to sleep beside her?" Carter asked. "If he meant to kill her, why would he sleep with her?"

"Maybe he was drunk as a skunk and passed out," Garcia countered.

Carter couldn't help smiling. "Isabel, can you imagine Blackjack or Cap wielding a syringe? It doesn't read. Guns, knives, fists, sure. Strangulation, or suffocation with a pillow, possibly. But a syringe? I just don't buy it. Poison is a female weapon, don't you think?"

"That's sexist," Garcia said. "Not that I disagree."

"Do you suppose Mrs. Butler knew her husband was straying?"

"A woman always knows," Garcia said.

"*Touche,*" Carter conceded. "He was silent for a moment, then continued. "There's two ways to investigate a case. Either you try to tie the evidence to a suspect, or by process of elimination, you rule out everybody else. Most of the time, the first method is quicker and just as effective, and even if the suspect didn't do it, you know he did something else, so in the long run, justice is served."



Garcia allowed herself a small smile, as Carter was talking out of school. "Well, if ever there was a case of even if he didn't do this..."

It was Carter's turn to smile. "True enough, but what if someone else really did do it? I mean, c'mon. Blackjack kills his assistant and his girlfriend, then burns down his bar for good measure? You could build a case for all three separately, but taken together, it seems like somebody is going to a lot of trouble to ruin Blackjack's life."

"Sounds more like a public service," Garcia couldn't help herself.

"There's too many loose ends," Carter continued. He proceeded to fill her in on what he'd learned about Cap's big date and Tabatha's spells.

"So you think Cap did it?" Garcia asked.

"Maybe," Carter said. "But there's something so ... elegant ... about the frame, that the only person sophisticated enough to pull it off is dead."

Garcia looked annoyed. "Not again," she said. "You're not saying you think Marques Taylor orchestrated this whole thing, including his own death? You're not suggesting that no one should be held accountable for two deaths and a fire? That you're going to let Blackjack walk and blame it all on a victim who can't even defend himself?"

"When Blackjack found Taylor's body, what do you suppose he did first?" Carter asked.

"Destroyed evidence?"

Carter didn't smile. "He called me. Why do you suppose he did that?"

Garcia thought for a moment. "He knew you?"

"He knew I despised him, yet he called me first. And when I asked him why, he said Taylor told him to. And why do you suppose that was?"

Garcia was out of guesses.

"He said Taylor told him I was the only 'cracker' he could trust. But I think the real reason was that Taylor was hoping I'd follow his breadcrumbs and nail Blackjack."

Garcia felt deflated. "Maybe that's what Blackjack wants you to think," she said. "Occam's Razor, *comprende*. Besides, if you think Marques is our man, why are we going to talk to Tabatha Johnson again?"

“Like you said, a criminal mastermind would have to have accomplices.”

Garcia rolled her eyes and shrugged. “*Como quieras.*” When Carter looked puzzled, she added, “Whatever.”

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## Chapter 28

It took a couple of wrong turns before Carter found the correct “all weather” gravel and rutty road leading into the Dogwood Creek “subdivision,” an eclectic assembly of trailers, A-frames and leaky geodesic domes curled around a scraggly hill that drained into Devil’s Den. It was a utopian ghetto, inhabited by the dregs of the ’60’s generation, long-haired, glassy-eyed misfits who looked like they hadn’t taken a bath since Woodstock. Starving artists, eccentric professors, gun nuts and crabby, tree-hugging misanthropes. But mostly law-abiding, except, Carter presumed, for their cultivation of hemp patches in the nearby national forest.

As Carter drove up to Tabatha’s dilapidated trailer, a mangy retriever bounded out of the weeds and announced his arrival with a ferocious bark. Before Carter could roll up his window, the dog jumped up and licked the chief right in the face. Laughing with surprise as much as relief, Carter let the dog have its way for a moment before establishing order. “Down boy,” he said and opened the door. “Let’s see if your mom’s home.”

Parked near the trailer was a dusty GMC pickup truck half loaded with bags and boxes. The trailer door was propped open with a chair, and standing in the doorway, Carter could see Tabatha. Only unlike the smartly dressed secretary he was used to seeing at City Hall, this Tabatha was wearing a black leotard and wrap-around skirt, with a patterned bandanna over her hair. Tabatha looked wary, surprised, fearful, and in general the way most people look when the police show up at their door.

Carter casually moved his hand closer to his sidearm when he saw Tabatha look into the trailer and seem to whisper something without moving her lips. A moment later he eased up as he saw a sheepish Hal Anderson, the Blackjack Lounge busboy, appear at the doorway,

lighting a cigarette with that “I hope he doesn’t smell my marijuana breath” look in his bloodshot eyes.

“Great watchdog, Rhapsody,” Tabatha said as the dog trotted up to her, with Carter and Garcia trailing behind. “You’re supposed to guard the place.”

“Hi ya, Miss Johnson,” Carter began.

“Chief, call me Tabatha.”

“And isn’t that you, Hal Anderson? Didn’t I meet you down at the Blackjack?”

Hal wanly waved but did not speak.

“Mind if we come in?” Carter asked.

Hal looked like he was going to faint.

“Uh, the trailer is really kind of a mess, and there’s no place to sit.” It was Tabatha talking. “As you can see, I’m moving. I don’t mind talking to you out here, but unless you got a search warrant or something, then I don’t have to invite you in my trailer, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Carter said easily. “It’s such a nice day, let’s just chat outside. So where are you moving on such short notice?”

Tabatha paused. “Back to where I come from. Oregon,” she said.

“You and Hal live together?”

“Hardly,” Tabatha winced. “Hal’s helping me move because he’s such a nice guy and I offered him twenty bucks. Look, Chief, I’d really like to get loaded before dark, no pun intended, so what can I do for you? I assume this is about the mayor?”

There was an uneasy silence, but Carter didn’t feel like getting to the point. “Rhapsody. That’s an odd name for a pooch,” he said and gave the dog an affectionate rub, then regretted it when he felt the thistles and tics embedded in its fur.

“Odd dog,” Tabatha responded without humor. “Not mine really, more like the neighborhood dog.”

Carter noticed a freaky looking paper mâché mask adorned with feathers, beads and paint poking out of a box in the pickup truck. “What’s that, a voodoo mask?” he asked.

Tabatha frowned. “Hardly. It was a design class project to make a work of art out of all-organic materials. I made a triptych of decorative masks loosely based on African tribal masks. They really aren’t for wearing. More like wall hangings.”

“Did Cap ever see your masks?”

“I don’t think so, why?”

Carter couldn’t believe he was having this conversation.

“Well, Cap seems to think you’re like a sorceress who unloosed some sort of monster he calls the Monkey Demon. Mean anything to you?”

“Monkey Demon?” Tabatha was flummoxed. “Monkey Demon? I have no idea where that’s coming from. That’s just crazy talk.”

“Well, Tabatha,” Carter began and paused. “I really don’t quite know how to say this, but did you, uh, give Cap a love potion?”

Tabatha gave him a disgusted look. “A *luv* potion?! *Luv* potion? Why I never...” Her neck stopped in mid bob. “Oh, wait a minute. I did talk to him once about his love life, or lack thereof. But it was like a feather for Dumbo.”

“A feather for Dumbo?”

Tabatha glanced at Hal, who having first given the chief a double take, now did the same to Tabatha. “I was just trying to give Cap a little confidence,” Tabatha began. “Cap had a thing for Serene, and wanted me to talk to her for him. I told him he needed to speak for himself, but he was too shy.”

Tabatha’s voice dropped and slowed. “I was just trying to give him some confidence. Cap saw me dressed like this down at the club, and I guess he thought I was a gypsy or something. He wanted me to get Serene to like him, so maybe, one time, just to get him off my back, I made up the ingredients for well, I guess you could call it a love potion. But I told him it would only work if he went up to her and told her how he felt. Nothing ever happened and I just forgot about it.”

Carter wasn’t sure what to ask next. “So what was in this love potion?”

“Well, let me see. I mean, it wasn’t exact ingredients. I think I said something like he had to get something of hers and something of his, put them in a shoebox or something and hide it in a special place. And then, he had to go up to her and tap on her forehead three times, and then she would do anything he wanted. I think that was it. I figured he’d never get the courage to get close enough to Serene to touch her forehead, but if he did, believing in the potion might give him the confidence to fly, like a feather for Dumbo.”

“So why’d you take such an interest in Cap’s love life?” Carter asked, grasping for straws.

“Just to see Blackjack get cuckolded,” Hal interrupted, a smirk on his face.

Tabatha shot a dark glance at Hal.

Carter was confused. “Cuckolded? You from the Middle Ages?”

Hal reddened. “I just mean Cap woulda been cutting in on Blackjack’s action,” he said. “Fat chance. You want to talk about a spell. That’s what Blackjack has on half the chicks in town,” Hal said as Serene continued to glare at him.

“That wasn’t it at all,” Tabatha said as much to Hal as to Carter. “Cap has a good heart. He’s just a couple of stitches short of a quilt.”

“Sure is beautiful out here,” Carter said, deciding to change the subject. “You’re from Oregon, aren’t you? How’d you find your way to southern Illinois?”

Tabatha paused. “What’s that got to do with anything?” she replied.

“I haven’t a clue,” he conceded, but waited for an answer.

It looked like it might turn into a standoff, but Tabatha eventually relented. “Eugene, Oregon. After high school some friends told me about this party school in the Midwest with a cool design program. I got in, and to put myself through school, I started working at the Blackjack. Then Blackjack became Mayor, and I moved on up to get my piece of the pie.”

“Isn’t the University of Oregon in Eugene?” Carter asked. “Why not go to school there and save a lot of money?”

Tabatha paused and looked pensive. “I wanted to get away from home,” she said.

Garcia had felt Hal’s eyes flicking between the chief and her breasts from the moment he’d peeked out of the trailer, and she decided to put him on the spot. “How about you?” she asked Hal. “How’d you end up in Murdale?”

Hal looked startled, like he couldn’t believe a foxy lady he was mentally undressing was suddenly addressing him. “Through my mommy’s vagina,” he said crudely. “I’m a townie.”

“Oh yeah? Your parents live here?”

“Yeah, they own Anderson’s Pharmacy downtown.”

“Speaking of drugs, you wouldn’t happen to know if Serene was into drugs?” Carter asked.

Tabatha scowled, liked he had insulted the dead. “You want to dig up a dead person’s drug habits? Why?”

“Well, we’re still figuring out exactly how she died, and one theory is a possible overdose.”

Tabatha shook her head sadly. “I didn’t really know Serene, but sometimes she acted like she was on downers, so it’s possible I guess.”

“And what about Marques Taylor?”

“The Blade was shot,” Tabatha replied. “What do his drug habits have to do with anything?”

Hal couldn’t contain himself. “They called him Captain Q, for Quaaludes,” he said. “He loved handing out ludes, especially to the ladies. He called downers the great equalizer.”

Tabatha rolled her eyes. “Although I worked for Mr. Taylor at the Mayor’s Office, I didn’t really know him, and I seriously doubt Hal did either.”

Hal retreated. “Well, I know they sometimes called him Captain Q, but that’s about it. We didn’t hang in the same circles.”

“Let me ask you something else,” Garcia said to Hal. “At the Blackjack Lounge, who was responsible for turning off the deep fryer at the end of the night?”

Hal looked frightened for a moment, then caught himself. “Is that how the fire started?” he asked. When Garcia shrugged, he finished. “Look, you can’t pin that on me,” he said. “I bussed tables and mopped floors, but the only people allowed to mess with that deep fryer were Blackjack or Cap.”

“Nobody’s accusing you of anything,” Carter said. “We’re still not sure how the fire started.”

Tabatha turned to the chief. “Look, I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here just to talk about deep fryers, Monkey Demons and love potions. And frankly, I don’t get it. Has Blackjack got a spell on you, too?”

Carter glared but inside he winced. “What do you mean?” he asked, even though he knew.

Tabatha's neck began to bob again. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think they call it Occam's razor. Not to mention motive, means and opportunity. What else do you need, a bow and some red ribbon?"

Carter fumed as he turned around and headed back to his car. God he was beginning to hate this case.

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## Chapter 29

"Seems everybody knows about Occam's razor," Carter said to Garcia after they got back in the car. "A simple explanation makes more sense than a convoluted one." He turned the key in the ignition and backed down the steep gravel driveway to the potholed road on which they would unwind their way out of Devil's Den.

Isabel didn't know what to think. Why had the police chief taken her out to the country to talk about love potions with what turned out to be a couple of harmless hippies? If he was really trying to avoid the media, why had he dragged her along? Was he mentoring her, testing her or dating her? Because that's what it felt like, a date. A not unpleasant date that so far had included stimulating conversation, rustic scenery and a chat with the locals, Isabel conceded to herself, and then questioned why she was thinking that way. Despite the age and other cultural divides between herself and Hank, was she feeling a tingle? Or was she just dazzled by his authority and being allowed to hang out with the boss? Maybe she was just lightheaded from the country air.

She'd been ambivalent about Carter from the time he'd hired her as a patrol officer. Old, white, and cantankerous, with a cutting sense of humor, he had been a grouchy boss, lavish in his criticism and faint in his praise. But he hadn't held it against her when she went public with her fight against the excessive hazing she had received from her fellow cops, and in fact he seemed to respect her for it. Which was why she had decided to drop her lawsuit and remain with the department. Even though she hadn't liked him, he had earned her trust. But now she wasn't sure she wasn't starting to like the old coot as well. Whatever she was feeling, she knew it wasn't the kind of topic to bring up on a first date, much less a murder investigation.

“Isabel?”

Garcia realized she'd been lost in thought. “Occam's razor, right,” she said. “So how come you dragged me out here?”

“Why do you think?” Carter started to ask, then caught himself. He didn't want to be cagey or flirtatious. In fact, he had asked himself the same question, and had to admit not all of his intentions were entirely honorable. “I wanted to get a female perspective on a female witness, and having a female there I thought might put her more at ease. Also, it never hurts to get a second opinion, someone to bounce things off ... and aw shucks, you're not bad company.”

Garcia didn't know whether he was being sarcastic, but knew she should take it as sarcasm. “You're not bad company yourself,” she said, and before she knew what she was doing, she playfully slugged him on his arm.

Carter didn't respond right away, allowing himself to feast on that brief moment of physical contact. He felt the blood flowing into his face and groin, and then he laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all. He had about as much chance of getting intimate with Isabel as Hal did.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Nothing,” he said, letting the moment pass. “So what did you think of George and Gracie?”

“Who?”

“Burns and Allen. Never mind. What did you think of Tabatha and Hal?”

“Coupla harmless hippies.”

“You think?”

“Sure I do, don't you?”

Carter paused, and Garcia started to get annoyed again. “I don't know,” he said. “I'm thinking you should keep an eye on her. Let's just make sure she gets out of town safely.”

“Why her?” Isabel shot back. “Tabatha gave a perfectly reasonable, if loco, explanation for the love potion, and why she came here.”

“It wasn't so much what she said as how she said it,” Carter said. “Did you notice how she paused when I asked her why she left Oregon?”

“Yeah, she came across as a private person who didn't want to drag any of her Oregon friends into your little fishing expedition. If



anything, I thought that guy Hal was more suspect. He seems a little off kilter to me.”

Carter smiled. “See, that’s why I brought you along — to get a woman’s perspective. I thought he was just interested in your tits.”

“That, too,” Garcia agreed. “But if anyone was acting sketchy, it was Hal.”

“My gut is telling me Miss Johnson is hiding something, while your gut says Mr. Anderson is suspicious,” Carter mused aloud. “So what does that tell us about gut instincts?”

“That we both got lousy ones.”

“Or maybe we’re both right.” Carter smiled. Garcia rolled her eyes. “That’s loco.”

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## Chapter 30

Back at Tabatha’s trailer, Hal fired up another doobie and sat on the mildewed couch she was leaving behind. “Can you believe that?” he said while holding his breath and passing the joint to Tabatha. “I about shit when the heat showed up.”

Tabatha took the joint and slumped into a chair. She took a big hit and held her breath as long as she could, then slowly and deeply let it all out, trying to drain her stress away. “You were way too fresh,” she finally said. “That was the chief of the fucking police and a police detective. Don’t be tugging on Superman’s cape ... or staring at Superwoman’s boobs.”

Hal laughed. “Man, she had some bazoombas. I couldn’t help myself.”

“And how about keeping your sexist and racist comments to yourself? We are this close to being free and clear, so don’t fuck it up now.”

Tabatha passed the joint back to Hal, who flicked the ash on the floor before taking a toke. “So where you really going?”

“Timbuktu,” she said.

Hal chuckled. “Cool.”

Tabatha looked wearily and warily at Hal, who was bogarting the joint. “It’s time to blow this pop stand,” she said.

“Not me,” Hal said, flashing his bloodshot eyes. “Sooner or later they’re going to send Blackjack to the slammer, maybe even the electric chair. Don’t you want to be around for that?”

“Not really,” Tabatha said and looked away. “Tell you what,” she said, changing the subject. “I’ll buy if you’ll fly into town and pick us up something from Spudnuts. That’s about the only thing I’ll miss about this place — doughnuts from the Spud.”

“Sure thing.”

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## Chapter 31

Although Blackjack had proclaimed a Day of Mourning, meaning City Hall was closed, he had nowhere else to go. So after the funeral, he took LaDonna to lunch in her pink Cadillac, then had her drop him off behind City Hall, where he snuck in through the garage and made his way to his office. As LaDonna headed to the mall, he dug into another bottle of Southern Comfort.

For the umpteenth time he tried to come up with an alibi that Chief Carter might swallow. He didn’t know an Occam from a Schick, but it didn’t take Virgil Tibbs to figure out he was the prime suspect, even in his own mind. He could easily imagine getting drunk and stoned, blacking out, feuding with the Blade, shooting him, and killing Serene by accident, if not on purpose. Maybe he really did fuck her to death. But his bar? No way. He grimaced. The last thing he could remember was joking with the Blade about Cap’s big date. After that, a blank until he groggily awoke at Serene’s. He assumed Cap drove him there, but he had no recollection of that, either.

His attempt to pin everything on the former mayor had been desperate and clumsy. Sensing a trap, he’d impulsively defended his wife from the chief’s accusations, although he had to admit, she was no fan of his bar and would benefit from its demise, as her name was on the insurance policy. She also had a motive for killing Serene, but the Blade didn’t fit. That left just one scapegoat. Cap had been at City Hall. He’d been at Serene’s and he’d been at the Blackjack when it burned. He certainly had a motive for offing the Blade, and perhaps a reason to kill Serene — unrequited love. Willy had held back on serv-

ing up Cap, hoping a real culprit might be found, other than himself, but he could feel the walls closing in. So it was back to his old standby, Cap, his ace in the hole, who'd taken the rap for a lot of the crap he'd pulled, but nothing as serious as a double murder and arson. He knew he had to make a move, and soon. Instead, he fell asleep.

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## Chapter 32

Blackjack was awakened by a tap tap tapping at the glass outer door. Groggily, he opened his inner office door a crack and saw Chief Carter with a key, rapping on the pane. Willy got out his own keys and found the one to let Carter in. They glared at each other until the mayor finally broke the ice. "How'd you find me?" he asked and moved aside to let the chief enter.

"I figured you'd be at your bar, your girlfriend's, or here, so you might say it was a process of elimination," Carter said dryly as he followed Butler into his private office. Carter sniffed the disinfectant still in the air and watched as Willy settled into his new chair. "I see you've been redecorating. Enjoy it while you can. Meantime, how's the missus?"

Willy was caught off guard. "LaDonna? She doing fine. Why?"

"Well, she took quite a fall the other day, and I was kind of disrespectful at the fire, so I was just asking how she's holding up."

"She bumped her head, but her head is pretty hard. Out shopping now, so she's well enough to run up our credit cards."

"So the stress hasn't thrown her diabetes out of whack? That can be dangerous."

"Diebeedees? How you know about that?"

"From when she was married to Officer Freeman," Carter lied. "Does she still take insulin for that?"

"I guess so," Willy said.

"You guess?"

"Yeah, I guess she takes them shots once or twice a day, but she don't usually do it in front of me." Blackjack's eyes narrowed. "Why you be asking me about LaDonna?"

Carter shrugged. "Just checking on her welfare. You know, a lot of people have gotten caught in your crossfire, especially lately."

"So she's not a suspect at this time?"

"Why, should she be?" Carter responded.

Blackjack paused. "Well, thinking strictly as a cop and not a husband, the club is in her name, so she's getting the insurance money. And now that I think about it, she probably knew about Serene."

"What about Marques? She have any reason to kill Marques?"

Blackjack was stumped. "Yeah, she had no reason to kill the Blade, that I know of, so she shouldn't be no suspect," he said, masking his disappointment.

"So what do you really know about Hal Anderson?"

Willy poured another shot of whiskey and offered one to the chief.

"Not when I'm on duty," Carter demurred.

Willy downed his shot, leaned back and crossed his legs on his desk. "You remember that Jamaican ganj that showed up in town some years ago?"

Carter nodded.

"You had me detailed to the regional narc squad, and we were trying to track down the source. The trail led to a math professor's split-level home in a subdivision on the west side, where his teenage daughter and her friends had gone in on a kilo. At the time it was the best shit in town, and her friends had all come over to pick up their share. One of them was a pothead we had turned, and we pretended we were with him. The connection showed up, the buy went down, and we could easily have busted them all. Would have made a big splash, arresting a bunch of middle class white kids, whose parents were among the pillars of the community. Instead, we followed the connection back to a house outside Carbonboro, where we caught the smugglers, and the Jamaican ganj craze was over. Anyway, Hal was one of the kids getting his share, which I think was a nickel bag. The smallest of small fish. After he started working at the Blackjack, and I caught him smoking a joint in the parking lot, we had quite a laugh about that." Blackjack paused. "I don't know," he continued. "I just thought he was a loser pothead, which is why I hired him."

"What about Tabatha Johnson?" Carter pressed on.

"Tabby?" Blackjack smiled. "Hot bod, cold heart. She had an attitude, but I didn't mess with her that much. She mostly worked with

the Blade, who handled city business. My job was to show up at places, say stuff and sign things.”

Blackjack paused, steadying himself before taking the plunge. “You know, I been thinking about Cap’s monkey devil or whatever he calls it...”

Oh goodie, Carter thought, story time. But he met Butler’s gaze as if he was taking him seriously. “OK, Mr. Mayor, what have you been thinking about the Monkey Demon?”

“I’m thinking Cap may *be* the Monkey Demon.”

Carter let the sentence hang in the air. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Cap. Sometimes he do things he don’t remember. But I think he do remember things, but only through this, um, alter eggo thingamajig.”

“You mean split personality?” Carter asked helpfully.

“Yeah, spilt personality.” As Carter expected, Butler had taken the bait. “You know he wanted to kill the Blade on account of that she-male thing. And he always had a thing for Serene. So maybe on Monday he overheard me and Blade jiving about his big date, and it musta set em off.”

“But where were you during the Monkey Demon’s rampage?” Carter asked.

Blackjack’s mind raced. “That mofa Blade. He musta slipped me a mickey,” he said.

“*Slipped* you a mickey?” Carter asked incredulously.

“OK, so maybe he gave me a lude.” Blackjack’s face scrunched up as he strained to remember the Blade handing him a pill. “Wait a minute, it’s coming back to me. He said he had some new pill from Swizzerlin’ that was better than ludes, and I should try it. I think he called it rohippo something or other. Said it had hypnotic effects. I don’t know if it hypnotized me, but it sure gave me amneza.”

“So let me get this straight,” Carter interrupted. “After Marques hypnotizes you with a pill from Switzerland, he and you switch places so he’s sitting at your desk, then Cap goes nuts and shoots Marques with your gun. Then he snaps back into Cap long enough to lug you and your hypnotized ass over to Serene’s, where he turns into the monkey man again, kills Serene, puts you to bed with her, goes home, doesn’t remember a thing, and the next night he turns into a

monster yet a third time to beat the crap out of a couple of cross dressers and torch your bar? And now, neither of you remember anything. How convenient. Are we looking at temporary insanity or demonic possession?"

"Well, here's something else," Butler said. "When Cap picked me up Monday, he brought some flowers for Serene, as if he knew something had happened to her. I didn't think much of it at the time, but he'd never brung her flowers before."

"And what about the fucking?"

"Well, we don't know whose cum that was."

Carter scoffed. "Willy, why don't you just come clean? You know this Monkey Demon shit ain't gonna fly. Every place you say Cap was, you was. When Cap talks about the Monkey Demon, maybe he means you. Maybe he saw you kill Marques Taylor and your girlfriend Serene Fountain. The fire may have been a coincidence. It looks like somebody left the deep fryer on."

"The fire started with the deep fryer?" Willy seemed genuinely surprised.

Carter stared at Blackjack in disbelief. Either Willy was the consummate actor, or he really knew nothing about insulin shots or kitchen fires. "It's looking that way."

"Accident or on purpose?"

"You know how these arson cases go. Hard to prove, but we're on it. So who turns off the grill at the end of the night?"

Blackjack looked frustrated. "I don't let nobody mess with my griddle."

"What about the white kid, Anderson?"

Blackjack's eyes narrowed. "Hal? You're kidding. The busboy did it? I guess he coulda seen me do it and learned how." His mood brightened. "You seriously looking at Hal? I figgered he was just another dumb cracker."

"Well, which one of you turned off the fryer last night?"

Long pause. "I did, I think."

"Willy."

"OK, I turned it off." Blackjack went silent. Finally he spoke. "Chief, let me talk to Cap. Tonight. Here. We be soul brothers. And I think I can get him to fess up to being the Monkey Demon, and what he done."

“You mean you want me to let you coach Cap on how to take the rap? I don’t think so.”

“No, Chief, really. You know you’d never get the truth outa him. But I can if I can get him alone. I’ll get him to confess, and turn him over to you. You solve the case.”

“Will you wear a wire?”

“No wire. Cap’s like family, so maybe I overlooked some things. But he never murdered nobody before. So this is going to be hard for me. I don’t want to be getting evidence against him. I just wanna find out what happened that night. I think he knows and I think he will tell me, but no one else.”

Carter just sat back and marveled at Blackjack’s mendacity. “No wire, no deal,” he said.

“I ain’t gonna wear no wire. I’ll put a tape recorder in my desk, but that’s all.”

Carter shrugged. A tape of the two prime suspects colluding could only help the case against both of them. Plus, he’d know where to find them when it came time to take them into custody. But the ease with which Butler was serving up his wing man to save his own ass made the chief want to arrest him for cowardice.

Blackjack seemed to read his mind. “Chief, how come you ain’t arrested me yet?”

Carter paused. “If someone really is trying to get you, they might give up if you were behind bars,” he said.

“In other words, I’m bait.”

“Sort of. But you are also the fish. By the way, Danny Winks wants you to call.”

“Winks stinks,” Willy chortled. “If you bust me, I’ll hire me a Hebe.”

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## Chapter 33

After Cap visited Serene’s gravesite, he met up with Toby at Papa Spudnuts. Lt. Dulworth also went to Spudnuts for lunch, where he bumped into Cap, which was convenient, since he was supposed to be following him. By late afternoon, Cap was still sitting at the end of

the counter, sucking down vanilla Cokes, and Dulworth was nursing yet another cup of coffee and doughnut in a nearby booth. The phone rang and the manager stretched the cord to where Cap was sitting. "Got a phone call," he said. "Somebody calling himself the mayor."

Cap cupped the receiver between his bandaged hands. "Sup Boss?" Cap said into the phone, loud enough for Dulworth to hear.

"Sup big homie," Blackjack responded. "How's those mitts?"

"OK," Cap lied. "Sup?"

"Nothing's up," Blackjack lied. "Just checking in. I was wondering if you could come by here. Just don't tell nobody, OK?"

"Sure, you at your office?" Cap replied. "What should I tell Toby?"

"Tell em you can't tell em," Blackjack sputtered. "It's top secret." He hung up.

"What you got to tell me?" Toby, who had been cleaning nearby, asked.

"I can't tell you," Cap replied sadly. "Boss says it's top secret."

"What's that mean?" Toby asked.

Cap looked glum. "I think it means he wants me to do something else for him."

Dulworth was listening as he studiously stared at the coffee swirling in his cup. "The plot thickens," he muttered to himself.

Hal Anderson happened to be standing at the counter to pick up burgers and doughnuts to take back to Tabatha's trailer, and he was also listening. As he eavesdropped, he could barely conceal a smirk from crossing his face. While Dulworth was emptying his coffee-engorged bladder, Hal strolled out of Spudnuts, got in his Gremlin and headed back to Tabby's to help her finish loading up her shit.

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## Chapter 34

Julio Xerxes chopped up some cocaine on a hand mirror and offered a line to Sammy Louis, who was sitting in a barber chair at the Unicorn Salon. "How's that shiner feeling?" Sammy asked after they'd both snorted a couple lines.

Julio rolled his eyes.



“Will you just fix my hair?” came a voice from a rinse sink. “And pass me a toot.”

Julio handed the mirror to LaDonna, who snorted the coke and shivered, “Now straighten out those kinks. When I leave here I want to look like Diana Ross.”

Julio and Sammy smiled. “Sure, Sugar,” said Xerxes. “It’s the least we could do.”

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## Chapter 35

When Hal arrived back at Tabatha’s trailer, Det. Garcia slumped down in the unmarked car she had parked on the shoulder just down the road. She grumpily radioed headquarters to report that all seemed quiet in the “hippie love nest.”

Hal and Tabatha scarfed down a last meal of hamburgers, and they split the doughnuts for the road. “Looks like you got things packed up pretty good,” he said.

“Yep. Help me put the cover on the pickup and I’ll be ready to split.”

“Well, I guess this is *c’est la vie*, then,” Hal said after they secured the cover on the pickup.

Tabby shrugged. “All right, look,” she began. “We did a bad thing.”

“A bunch of bad things,” Hal said sanguinely. “I can’t believe we did that. I was scared as shit, but I never felt more alive. It was like the ultimate high.”

“Well, don’t get hooked on the adrenaline,” she chided him. “We had a specific goal, and now it’s over. Mission accomplished. Now all we have to do is nothing. Just keep our mouths shut and we are home free. With our little nest eggs.”

Hal looked frustrated. “I just feel like it’s mission *unaccomplished*,” he said. “Like there’s more we coulda done. Blackjack was supposed to be locked up. But he’s still out there, free as a bird. You know, I ran into Cap at Spudnuts,” he added. “I overheard Blackjack asking him to go to his office. I think Blackjack wants him to take the

rap. Can you believe that? I keep imagining ways to finish the job, if you know what I mean.”

Tabatha was silent for a moment. “We had a contract,” she reminded him. “A contract with three simple rules. Remind me what they were.”

Anderson looked forlorn. “One, we take away everything he loved. Two, we leave him alive to feel his loss. And three, we never see each other again. But I didn’t make those rules.”

“No, but you agreed to them, and you got paid a hundred grand to stick to them. Which is a lot of money for what we actually did, if you think about it, so let’s keep our part of the bargain, OK?”

She knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut, and what she ought to do was off him, but he wasn’t part of the mission, so she would just disappear. She tried to let him down easy. “I’ll miss you Hal, I really will,” she said. “But to protect you, I need to go away, permanently.”

Hal nodded, but he knew what she meant. And he couldn’t deny that he was the weak link. But if he was going to go down, why not in a blaze of glory?

She tried to close the sale with a deep, warm, hug. He hugged her back, more confidently than she expected, and less needy. “So, you gonna hang around to see me off?” she asked, hoping he wouldn’t.

Hal suddenly looked smug. To her surprise, he said, “Nah, an opportunity has presented itself that I just can’t pass up,” he said.

He got in his Gremlin, coaxed the engine to life and rolled down the window. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took something to remember you by,” he said.

“What’s that?” Tabby asked, alarmed.

“No biggie. When you figure it out, you’ll understand.”

She shrugged and quoted the American Bard: “Good bye’s too good a word babe, so I’ll just say fare thee well.”

From her stakeout position down the road, Garcia watched as Hal drove off into a crimson sunset. The chief had told her to stay with Tabatha until she hit the interstate, but of the two, Isabel thought Hal was more felonious. Besides, her instincts told her she was out of position. When they should be closing in on busting the mayor, she was stuck out in the boonies again. It didn’t make sense, unless for some sexist bullcrap reason the chief was trying to protect her. Well,

screw that. So she made an executive decision and trailed Hal back to town.

Tabatha didn't notice. She had returned to the mostly empty trailer, where she tried to imagine what Hal had taken. Probably lingerie, she decided. She gathered the last of her things and loaded them into the pickup. As she closed the tailgate, she noticed one of her decorative masks was missing. She smiled. Not a bad trophy for Hal to take. She could live with that. Then her mood darkened. As Rhapsody trotted alongside, she jogged behind the trailer into some shrubs and brush, until she came upon a pile of dirt. "God damnit," she yelled, startling the dog.

Dusk was settling over Devil's Den, and the wind began to howl.

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## Chapter 36

There was hardly any traffic in the boonies, so it would not have been hard for Hal to have spotted Det. Garcia tailing him in a clunky Chevy Caprice. But he was on a manic high, replaying the whole crazy scene, and his own improbable role in it. Hal Anderson, early-20s, middle class upbringing, college bound, dreams of becoming a writer. Then he got into drugs, dropped out of school, ditched his girlfriend, rejected his parents, tried freelance writing, and flamed out. Busboy was actually a step up from his previous job of ditch digger at a trailer court. He was sleeping, alone, in a converted garage, and hanging out in bars, binge drinking, listening to bands, leering at women, and drowning his dreams in his sorrows.

He had surprised himself by accepting a job at the Blackjack, because he was afrophobic, with a visceral fear of blacks. Scared of getting mugged, guilty about the slavery thing, intimidated by the jive. To deal with his paranoia, Hal used a variety of defense mechanisms, starting with avoidance. He did not consider himself to be a racist, because he held no grudge, carried no bias, and displayed no malice. Just an uncontrollable skittishness around black people, especially virile, dark-skinned, males, whom he both feared and admired for the size of their schlongs, both figuratively and literally.

At the Blackjack Lounge, watching big-boned, bleached blondes getting picked up by big-boned black bucks was practically part of the job description. But Hal needed the money and nobody else would hire him. He also felt that turning down the job just because it was a black joint would not only have been racist, but cowardly. He could give in to his fears and insecurities, or confront and perhaps overcome them. He hadn't sought out a black experience, but once it presented itself, he couldn't turn it down without feeling like a pussy.

With its black owner, leotarded waitresses, tiny translucent dance floor embedded with flashing, colored lights, and a mini mirror ball dangling from the low ceiling, Blackjack's club attracted a mixed bag of races, classes, ethnicities and proclivities, giving it a lounge lizard, if not cosmopolitan, ambiance. As Hal passively observed the feverish patrons, he began to realize how seductively easy it was to transfer fear into resentment. He certainly resented the white chicks who came into the Blackjack for interracial flings, and upon whom he projected another kind of afrophobia. What one is most afraid of can also become an object of awe and fascination. Rather than compatibility or love, he thought some white woman were attracted to black men out of masochism or guilt. They didn't just want to be ravished, but punished, dominated, degraded, and victimized, as well as raped.

Then again, he would remind himself, he was a horny bastard himself, so he could hardly begrudge normally uptight white chicks for pursuing their forbidden passions in the sleazy confines of the Blackjack. Or black men for hooking up with them. For as bitter as Hal was about white women throwing themselves at black men, he was far more bitter that they weren't throwing themselves at him. And what he hated yet envied the most about black men like Blackjack was his pimp mentality, and how natural it came to him to take advantage of a beautiful woman's insecurities and vulnerabilities, and use them for his own lascivious ends.

Race aside, Hal was not exactly a cocksman, and recognizing his limitations, he seldom made more than a desultory effort to bed any of the patrons or coworkers. He knew his place. He was the busboy, cleaning tables, carting dishes, tossing salads and taking out the garbage.

And then there was Blackjack Willy himself, the menacing, maddening, mesmerizing, brutish, alpha male ex-cop turned barkeep,

who a few months after Hal began bussing tables inexplicably became the mayor of Murdale. Hal was used to seeing him in an apron hunched over a deep fryer, or in a shiny shirt chatting up women with a lecherous grin on his face. So it was hard — and infuriating — for Hal to imagine Blackjack being elected mayor, as it shattered whatever illusions he still had about democracy, humanity, karma, and God.

When Blackjack wasn't barking out orders or belittling Hal in front of customers, he could be congenial and gregarious. But proximity did little to cure Hal of his afrophobia, and he dealt with his nervousness by becoming cool and aloof. A calm, cynical veneer pasted over the turmoil beneath. Despite his best efforts, the job was taking a toll on his psyche; black studs began invading his masturbation fantasies, spoiling his orgasms and leaving him quivering in anguish. Sometimes the only way he could stop from freaking out was to pretend he was gathering material for a novel. And so he just watched. The impassive, implacable, observer.

That was how he came to the attention of the Blade, who sidled up to him as he was getting off work one particularly ribald night and cryptically observed, "You know what I like about you? You never get shook. Let me buy you a beer."

Used to being invisible, Hal was flattered to be recognized by a player, even if he thought the Blade was a seedy twat of undetermined sexuality. But Marques could see through Hal's facade and accepted him for what he was, which was horny and neurotic. Marques had his own set of hangups, and his own issues with Blackjack, so he encouraged Hal's racist, Freudian rants, adding his own kinky twists. He told Hal he understood his afrophobia because he had the opposite condition — he sometimes froze around white people — which he called "honkypophobia." But Hal never saw Marques for what he was, which was the chess player, not one of the pieces. Even when Taylor talked about City Hall, Hal thought he was just Blackjack's lackey.

It was through the Blade that Hal met Tabatha, who by then had left the lounge and begun working in the Mayor's Office. She seemed like a chameleon to him, crisp at work, chill at home, circumspect and mysterious. He thought she was sexy — he thought all women were sexy — but he never got to make a run at her before she stuck him firmly in the friend zone. But he liked that she also kept Black-

jack at arm's length, and could keep up with him and Marques when it came to sexist, racist, sick humor. Blackjack was about the only thing they had in common, so bitching about their boss became a recurring theme. As their grievances and frustrations mounted, their fantasies became more hard-edged and reality based, closer to snuff flicks.

Looking back, Hal wondered whether things naturally evolved, or if the Blade, or the Blade and Tabatha both, had manipulated him into becoming part of some pre-existing plan. Not that it mattered anymore. For the first time in his life, he felt totally alive. Unbound. Feral. The Blade had been the first to dub the trio "The Blackjack Willy Hate Club." To avoid Blackjack's wrath and preserve their jobs, Blade said rule number one was to keep their club a secret. As a result, they seldom fraternized at the bar, and sometimes rendezvoused at Tabby's rural trailer, all cloak and dagger like.

Tabatha had added a second rule. She said she was tired of Blackjack snuff flicks and would stop playing unless they changed the game to more creative ways of getting back at Willy short of killing him. And then the Blade came up with his grotesque masterplan, which the three of them had executed to near perfection. And Hal had played a starring role. He had put a gun to Marques Taylor's head and blown his brains out. What a trip! It had uncorked something in him, something psychopathic, that had given him the hyperconfidence to lie through his teeth to the chief of police, twice. But the club had disbanded, and Blackjack was still free. Hal was exhilarated, yet unsated. He felt there was unfinished business, and he knew just how to finish it.

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## Chapter 37

Tabatha leaped into her pickup truck and pulled onto the all-weather road, spitting gravel and seething in anger. Hal had dug up the "bat kit," their nickname for the toolbox the Blade had given them to pull off their little caper, if that macabre scheme could be called a caper. The items Taylor had collected included guns, drug paraphernalia, and promotional samples of the latest law enforce-

ment gadgets, such as zip ties, Tasers and Mace. Also fake IDs and credit cards, a set of which Tabatha was using to make her getaway. They'd buried the rest of the evidence, but now Hal had deviated from the plan. She knew she should run while she still could, except she also knew he was going to try the one thing she couldn't let him do. Which meant she also knew where to find him.

Tabatha Johnson. Mid 20s, mixed race, born and raised by her mother on a new age religious commune in Oregon. Home schooled, orphaned at 14, emancipated at 16, Portland street urchin, arts and crafts, Renaissance faires, then an impulsive move to Murdale and design school, on a mission to find herself. It was a mission she'd shared with just one other person, and now that person was dead, so her secret was safe.

Tabatha had not been sexually abused, at least no more so than most females. But her white mother had been raped by a black man. It was why Tabatha existed. It was also why her mother was so fragile, guilt-racked, and eventually suicidal that she abandoned her precocious daughter to fend for herself at 14. Tabatha had passed for white on the commune, but once she escaped, she began passing for black, and it toughened her up. She grew into a street smart, independent sprite who took lovers from a variety of genders and races, except for the kind of male chauvinist pigs she blamed for ruining her mother's life.

She had despised Blackjack from the moment he laid his covetous eyes on her at a perfunctory job interview for barmaid — her caramel curves, form-fitting cocktail dress, and fishnet stockings had passed his eye candy test within the first five seconds. The rest of the interview was him continuing to ogle her and make suggestive comments, he said, to see how prepared she was to deal with rowdy customers. From day one he tried to get in her pants, but her erudite sarcasm kept him off balance, and he eventually gave up.

She and Marques pretended not to notice they shared a mocha identity until she accidentally spilled coffee on him at the bar. They soon struck up a symbiotic relationship, kindred spirits who didn't complete so much as reflect each other's feelings of being stuck between worlds. She did see Marques for what he was — an idealistic, ambitious, cunning, spiteful, sleazy, sneaky little bastard. But he knew everyone, and everything about everyone, and it was through

his machinations that she went from B-girl to mayor's administrative assistant.

They confided in each other, and over time they conspired with each other. It began innocently enough. After noticing that she noticed how shabbily Blackjack treated his night manager, Serene Fountain, Marques whispered in her ear. "And, they're fucking."

Tabatha had been working at the club long enough to know Blackjack fooled around on his wife. She just hadn't realized he was also fooling around on the night manager, his bottom bitch, who was working nights so he could go fuck someone else not his wife.

"Impressive," she'd said dryly. "As much sex as he's been having, he'll probably get AIDS."

"Funny you should mention that," Marques had said. Only later, after they had exchanged other intimacies, did he reveal that through his far less robust exploits, he was the one who had been exposed to the gay plague. He also knew that Serene was depressed and had serious health issues of her own. And he knew that Blackjack's wife LaDonna would not be crushed if something insurable happened to happen to the Blackjack Lounge.

One night, after a few too many, he told Tabatha another secret that he'd never told anyone else, but it almost cost him her friendship. He offered to show her a secret room at City Hall where he sometimes spied on Blackjack having sex. She declined.

More than anyone, she got to see the degree to which Marques orchestrated Blackjack's political rise, and how much he loathed doing it. And then, on the verge of his crowning achievement, becoming city manager, he became convinced that he had AIDS, a literal death sentence. He was asymptomatic, but nothing seemed to matter to him anymore, except his conviction that Blackjack had somehow stolen his mojo, and he wanted it back.

Tabatha seconded his emotion. She had her own reasons for wanting to eviscerate Willy, but she told Marques that killing him was letting him off too easy. She wanted Blackjack to suffer so much he'd want to kill himself. Like her mother had.

Marques encouraged Tabby to cozy up to Serene and get her to vent about Willy, as well as her breast cancer. Tabatha gently cultivated her suicidal tendencies until the Blade swooped in to close the sale, explaining how an insulin and Quaalude cocktail would be a



painless, even pleasant, way to go. In fact, he planned to do the same thing. They even made a pact, and wills, and he procured the insulin from LaDonna, the mayor's unsuspecting wife.

Marques told Tabatha they needed a third wheel, a patsy who could execute the more unsavory aspects of their evolving plan, and take the fall if it fell apart. Specifically, Marques needed someone to shoot him in the head. He told Tabatha that not just anyone could do that sort of thing, and he knew because he had tried. No matter how stoned he got, he could never pull the trigger before he passed out.

Hal also snuck Marques in the back door of the lounge so the Blade could conceal a crude time bomb behind the deep fryer. The Blade set the device to go off the day after his death because he thought it would be more devastating to Blackjack if he suffered a double whammy. Cap was supposed to die in the fire. His humiliation at the Deja Vu was not part of the plan; the Blade wanted to settle some very old scores on his way out. They agreed to let LaDonna survive, figuring she would make Blackjack more miserable alive than dead.

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## Chapter 38

Chief Carter left Mayor Butler to his Southern Comfort and headed to Papa Spudnuts, where he had a hankering for liver and onions. As he walked up the street, he saw Cap trudging in the opposite direction, and Lt. Dulworth trying unsuccessfully to stay a discreet distance behind. "Hello Cap," Carter said as they passed each other. Cap grunted, lost in his thoughts. Seconds later, Carter pulled Dulworth aside. "Cap is headed to see the mayor," he said.

"I know," Dulworth said.

Carter was impressed, but didn't show it. "Stay back, but keep an eye out," he said. "And let me know immediately if the mayor tries to go anywhere."

"Roger," Roger said, causing Carter to cringe.

By the musty warmth and faint whiff of Aqua Velva, Hank could tell he was ensconced in the same booth previously occupied by Dulworth. He picked at his liver and onions, but his mind was elsewhere.

He figured he had until tomorrow morning at the latest to arrest the mayor before the media, district attorney, and possibly a mob with pitchforks came crashing down on him. The whole town was holding its breath. Yet even though everyone expected and, in most cases, wanted him to arrest Blackjack, Carter knew that as soon as he did, people like Eddie Winks would get involved, and the story would become the white power structure putting another uppity nigger in his place. Besides, there was the nagging inconvenience that despite the evidence, despite his bias, and despite the white power structure, he didn't think Blackjack had killed anybody, this time, much less set fire to his own bar.

To muffle the inevitable media shitstorm, he'd decided to let Blackjack have his chat with Cap and then arrest one or both of them later in the evening, after most of the local news outlets had shut down. After that, he would give what evidence he had to the state's attorney, and it would be out of his hands. He would let the justice system run its course, and the racial dominoes fall where they may.

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## Chapter 39

As Cap walked the short distance from the Spud to City Hall, his mind was a volatile muddle of emotions. Grieving for Serene, enraged at the Blade, freaked out about the fire. Afraid that he, or Blackjack, or both were in trouble with the law. And terrified that the Monkey Demon, or some other apparition, was not done with them yet. And then there was the secret door. He was torn between his oath of silence to Toby, and his loyalty to Willy.

Despite his mental maelstrom, he broke into a big smile when he saw Willy waiting for him at the Mayor's Office. Blackjack tried not to appear nervous as he locked the glass doors behind them and ushered Cap into his recently defiled inner sanctum.

"Wasup?" they said in unison.

Cap looked around the hastily refurbished office. "Still gives me the willies," he said as he settled fitfully into a side chair.

"That's sort of what I wanted to talk to you about," Willy said, then changed the subject. "Got any of that weed?"

Cap didn't smoke much pot because it made him paranoid. But he was seldom without it. He gingerly retrieved a joint and Willy started to pour a couple of shots of Southern Comfort, but Cap waved him off, saying he'd rather have a beer. "No prob," Willy said and swung around to open a mini bar/fridge concealed in a credenza. He brought out a Colt 45 malt liquor, but Cap waved him off again, saying he preferred a Pabst. Willy shrugged and popped open a PBR for Cap and another for himself, in preparation for a boilermaker.

"Well Cap, here's to better days ahead," Willy said as a toast.

"Can't get no worse, Boss," Cap replied as they clinked bottles.

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## Chapter 40

Hal drove past City Hall as the fading rays of sunset stabbed the stormy skies blood red. He saw Cap at the top of the steps and Dulworth at the bottom, and giggled manically, delighted at his good timing. Just as impending drops of rain began splattering on his windshield, he turned down a dead-end side street and reached into the bat kit for a key card that gave him access to the underground parking garage. Parking in an alcove near the back stairwell, he grabbed the bat kit and Tabatha's mask and headed up the back stairs to the Mayor's Office.

At first, Garcia had been relieved that Hal was leading her out of the labyrinthine backroads of Devil's Den, and she let her mind wander to the bittersweet rays of the dying sun, tumescent clouds, pregnant with rain, and butterflies. But the nearer they got to town, the more she began to suspect Hal had made her, and was arrogantly driving to where he thought she was going, which was the police station. She slowed down to give Hal more room, but as she rounded the corner at City Hall and looked down Main Street, Hal's car had disappeared.

"Damn," she hissed and screeched to a halt in front of City Hall. She trotted up the steps and looked through the rain for Hal or his car. Instead, she saw Lt. Dulworth loitering in the lobby. "What are you doing here?" she asked after he let her in the door.

“Chief had me following Cap, which I thought was pretty stupid, but now he and the mayor have returned to the scene of the crime, so I guess he isn’t so stupid after all. What about you?”

“Chief wanted me to stay with Tabatha, but when Hal showed up at her trailer, I decided to follow him, and he led me here before disappearing,” she said, annoyed. “I wonder if he got in the garage. I’d better check. You stay here and if you see Hal Anderson, let me know right away.”

“Need backup?” Roger offered.

“Not for this *loco*, I don’t think so,” Garcia scoffed. “Hold your position, but keep your guard up.”

Roger nodded.

When Garcia walked out of City Hall, the wind and rain had intensified. She peered into the parking garage until a streak of lightning lit up Hal’s car, tucked in a corner. This did not look good at all, she thought as a thunder burst rumbled across the sky. She noticed the door to the back stairway had not closed all the way. At this point, procedure would have been to call for backup. Instead, she unstrapped her gun and crept up the stairs, the Lone Ranger in hot pursuit.

Tabatha knew where Hal was headed, but when she drove past City Hall, she hadn’t expected to see Det. Garcia poking around the parking garage. “Damn,” she hissed, and parked down the street. She grabbed a stun gun from her purse and stealthily followed Garcia up the stairs.

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## Chapter 41

Blackjack and Cap got their buzz on, temporarily forgetting their troubles. They laughed yet again at the same old stories about bitches, brawls and barfs. But when they began chortling about stealing baseball cards from old man Kelly, they suddenly went silent, as memories of the Blade yanked them back to the present.

“Cap, here’s the thing. I don’t remember what the fuck happened the night the Blade and Serene died. For all I know, I killed them.

The only person who knows for sure is the real killer or you. Or both. So can you help me out here?"

"How?" Cap asked.

"Well, the last thing I remember, the Blade was sitting where you's at, and I was here, and we was just talking shit. Then he gives me this pill, and next thing I know, it's morning and I'm at Serene's. So what happened between me blacking out and waking up?"

There was a long silence, but Blackjack wasn't going to let Cap off the hook. Finally, Cap spoke. "Look boss, I didn't see nothing. I closed up the club like you asked me to, and I hooked up with you here. But I never seen no Blade. Just you passed out in your chair. And once I got you up, you seemed aight. You said you was too fucked up to go home, so I took you to Serene's. Next morning I picked you up as usual. When you weren't outside, I picked some flowers to give to Serene. I wonder if she ever saw my flowers."

It was Blackjack's turn to be silent. And when he spoke, it was to change the subject. "So when you came to my office, you didn't see the Blade doing stuff to me while I was passed out, maybe taking pictures or some bullshit, and maybe you stopped him, permanently?"

Cap looked surprised, and then began to laugh, thinking Blackjack was making a joke. "Like I told you, by the time I got here, the Blade musta split."

Blackjack adjusted his package. "OK, so did you go anywhere after dropping me at Serene's?"

"Just home."

"So you didn't run into the Blade after that?"

"I told you no. Because if I did see the Blade, I might have killed him myself, and you know why."

"That's what I mean," Blackjack persisted. "What if you bumped into the Blade and he got you so mad you turned into the Monkey Demon? And maybe you didn't even know it at the time. Maybe we both blacked out that night."

Cap tried to figure out what Blackjack wanted. "You want me to be the Monkey Demon?" he asked.

"Are you?"

The silence was broken by a bolt of lightning and crack of thunder.

“I thought you didn’t believe in no Monkey Demon,” Cap said sullenly.

“I don’t, but there’s evil in everyone that can come out,” Blackjack said.

When Cap was silent, it suddenly occurred to Willy that it was his own evil that was coming out. He looked at Cap and felt an unfamiliar feeling adjacent to empathy. He’d lost just about everything he had, and here he was grooming his last friend to take the fall for crimes he most likely committed himself. The thought triggered memories of other times he’d used others, and especially Cap, to get over on the man. And then he felt an even more uncharted emotion, which was shame. But he still couldn’t help himself.

“OK, so let me ask you this,” he said. “You show up here and I’m passed out, right here in this chair, and no sign of the Blade, right? You get me up and we leave.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, here’s my problem. I don’t remember locking the door. So maybe I gave you the key to lock the door, and before you gave it back to me, you and the Blade went back here, and you went all Monkey Demon on him. You see what I’m getting at? Temporary insanity or something. Because when I came in the next morning, the door was locked. So how did the Blade get back in my office, when I got the only key? Unless I gave the key to you?”

The only sound was the gathering storm outside the mayor’s window. Finally, Cap spoke. “There’s something I needs to tell ya, Boss.”

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## Chapter 42

Out of the corner of his eye, Carter saw someone approaching, and assumed it would be the waitress to give him his check. Instead, it was the half-witted sweeper Toby, who slid into the booth across from him, looking distressed. “Mr. Chief sir, there’s something I need to tell you, but first you gotta promise not to arrest me or nothing.”

“Well, uh, Toby, that would depend on what you told me. I mean, I am the police chief.”

“Yes, sir Mr. Police Chief,” Toby responded. “But I didn’t do it, so just because I told you something I knew, it doesn’t mean I did it, right?”

Hank straightened himself. He was trying to be solicitous to the feeble minded, but he didn’t have a lot of patience at the moment. “What didn’t you do, Toby? Spit it out.”

“It’s about Blackjack, I mean the mayor.”

“What about the mayor?”

“I know who killed his friend the Blade.”

Carter took a deep breath. “You do?” he said and arched an eyebrow. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense, Toby. Who done it?”

“Do you know about the Monkey Demon?”

Carter brushed his hand across his face to hide his irritation. “Matter of fact, I have heard something about that. What have you heard?”

“Well, Cap and me, we figured it out. The Monkey Demon killed the Blade, and maybe that lady, too.”

“I see,” Carter said, and frowned. “Well, how did the Monkey Demon do it?”

“You know the Mayor’s Office?” Toby asked.

It took a moment for Carter to realize the question wasn’t meant to be rhetorical. “Yes,” he said. “I know the Mayor’s Office.”

“Well, I know something you don’t know about the Mayor’s Office.”

“OK, I’ll play,” the chief said. “What do you know that I don’t know?”

“There’s a secret passageway.”

“A secret what?”

“A secret way to get into the Mayor’s Office. That’s how the Monkey Demon got in and killed the Blade without a key.”

A waitress approached, but Carter waved her off. “What in the Sam Hill are you talking about, Toby?”

“You know the janitor’s closet outside the Mayor’s Office?”

This time Carter had to admit he didn’t. “Not really, Toby.”

“Well, one night I was putting the buffer away in the janitor’s closet and accidentally hit the bottom of the wall, which caused it to open up like a door into the Mayor’s Office. I was scared, so I closed it back up and never told nobody about it.” Toby looked like he was

about to cry. “Because if I told you I knew how to get into the Mayor’s Office without a key, you might think I was the Monkey Demon.”

Carter didn’t say anything for a moment as he tried to process whether this unsolicited information from an unlikely source had any validity, and if so, what it meant. Toby’s knowledge, if true, did indeed make him a suspect, albeit one without a motive. But maybe the former mayor, Punk Gray, also knew about this alleged door. And who else might know about it, if it existed?

“OK, Toby, where exactly is this broom closet?” he asked. “No, show me.”

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## Chapter 43

Hal snuck up the back stairway to the second floor, where he used the Blade’s passkey to the janitor’s closet. Not for the first time, he pushed aside the curtain, and peered through the one-way mirror into the Mayor’s Office. During the recent remodeling project, the secret door had been Punk Gray’s idea, as a way to sneak out of the office, or sneak women in. But when he was upset in the election, he never got to see, much less use, the secret door, and had forgotten all about it.

The Blade found out about the hidden door while having the locks changed, and altered its function from an escape hatch for the mayor to a way to spy on Blackjack. During final construction, Marques modified the door by adding a one-way mirror and a faux vent, enabling someone in the utility closet to hear as well as see what was going on in the Mayor’s Office.

From the closet, Marques sometimes watched the mayor having sex, or listened in on Blackjack and his friends trading gossip. On occasion, he used the door to enter Blackjack’s private office and jack off in his plush executive chair. Other than that, the secret passage had served little purpose, until he decided to frame Blackjack for his murder.

The first time the Blade told Hal about the secret door, Hal thought he was kidding. It happened at an especially intense session of the Blackjack Willy Hate Club at Tabatha’s trailer. After they’d all



gotten loaded, Marques laid out a new scenario that was less farcical and more strategic.

He said they could take all the ideas they'd talked about and combine them into one grand masterplan to take away everything Blackjack wanted or needed — his bottom bitch, best friend, and disco bar — and make it look like Blackjack had done it all, sending him to prison for the rest of his worthless existence. The Blade added one more twist. He also wanted to take away Blackjack's brain, meaning Marques himself. He wanted to make it look like Blackjack had literally blown the Blade's brains out. The way Greene saw it, Blackjack had driven him out of his mind, and turn-about was fair play.

"They're gonna find me sitting in the mayor's locked office, shot in the head with Blackjack's service revolver, and it's going to look like he shot me in anger and then clumsily tried to make it look like a suicide," he said. "When actually, it will be a suicide made to look like a murder."

"Far out," was Hal's initial response. "So you're gonna blow your brains out and make it look like Blackjack killed you?"

"Sort of," Marques had replied. "Except you're going to blow my brains out."

"Far, fucking out," Hal said. "Wait. For real?"

And that's when Marques told Hal about the secret door. Hal did take up the Blade on his offer to let him watch the mayor "in action." Afterwards, whatever qualms Hal had about turning their evolving plan into a grisly reality were gone.

So it came to pass that after the Blade gave Blackjack a roofie in the Mayor's Office, and Cap took him away, the Blade and Hal used the hidden passage to re-enter the room and find Blackjack's gun. Marques eased into the mayor's cushy chair and propped his legs on the mayor's oversized desk before popping a lude and injecting himself with a lethal dose of insulin. Then he and Hal waited.

Marques had told Hal it didn't matter if he chickened out, because Blackjack would still be a suspect on account of his wife's diabetes. He had showed Hal how to feel for a pulse, and warned him that if he went for the gold, he should make absolutely sure the Blade was dead before pulling the trigger, as that would be the difference between murder and malicious mischief if he got caught.

Hal didn't think he'd have the guts to shoot another human being, even a dead one. But as he watched the life drain out of the Blade, a feeling of anticipation grew in him like an erection. He put on the disposable scrubs, mask and latex gloves Marques had provided and pointed Blackjack's gun at Marques, imagining pulling the trigger. After the Blade stopped breathing, and Hal couldn't find a pulse, he took the safety off the pistol and with two hands pointed it at the Blade's temple. He took a deep breath, and when his hands stopped shaking, he fired. The sound was louder, the kickback stronger, and the blood gushier than he had imagined, almost causing him to retch.

But he didn't. Instead, he felt truly alive for the first time in his life. Free from the constraints of conscience and propriety. As if he had unlocked his full potential, for what, he wasn't sure. But as Hal stood in the closet again, preparing for what he figured would be his final performance in his brief career as a psychopath, he could hear Blackjack trying to coax Cap into taking the rap, giving him all the motivation he needed.

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## Chapter 44

When the electronic chimes in City Hall's clocktower rang six bells, Taylor's energy conservation policy kicked in and the florescent lights throughout the building flickered off, as Hal knew they would. He popped open the hidden door and silently stepped into the darkness. Willy grumbled as he groped for the chain to switch on the banker's light on his desk. When he flicked on the light, the greenish tinge of the lampshade illuminated a horrid gnome with an elongated face, growling and advancing toward them in an apelike amble.

"What the..." Blackjack began, but Cap cut him off.

"It's the Monkey Demon!" he shrieked.

Behind Tabatha's ooga booga mask, Hal was becoming tumescent as he approached Blackjack and Cap, with a Taser in each hand. When he got to within easy range, he stopped and took careful aim at them both, then cackled while firing both Tasers, which streaked across the room like lightning bolts. Cap was already on his way to fainting from sheer fright before being shocked unconscious by the

stun gun. In the instant before being zapped, Blackjack recognized Hal's sardonic laugh, and had to give the cracker busboy his props. Then he also had a seizure and blacked out.

Garcia's Oxford shoes echoed through the empty stairwell as she followed Hal's muddy footprints up to the second floor. She looked through the door, and seeing no one, stepped out, then walked down the hallway to the front of the glassed-in outer Mayor's Office. She assumed the mayor and Cap were in his inner office, but she could see no sign of Hal. She retraced her steps to where the shoe prints stopped, in front of a utility closet she had passed right by. Upon closer inspection, she could see that the door was unlatched. Then she heard a shriek. She drew her gun and entered the closet.

Toby and the chief had stepped into the rain and were jaywalking to City Hall when the clocktower began clanging. They glanced up at the clock just in time to see the interior of the Mayor's Office light up like the Fourth of July. "Oh my gosh, it's the Monkey Demon," Toby gasped.

"Well, it sure ain't the Avon lady," Carter conceded and stepped up the pace.

Wearing latex gloves in the dimly lit room, Hal removed the Taser wires and stuffed them in a paper sack. Then he took out one of Willy's guns that Marques had stolen, and aimed it at Cap's head.

"Freeze, Monkey Man," Garcia barked at Hal, who froze. "Step away from the Halloween mask and get those hands up," she said, just before getting zapped unconscious by Tabatha, who had crept through the hidden door behind her.

Tabby closed the panel, as Hal looked at her with astonishment. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" she retorted. "And take off that silly mask. You look ridiculous."

Hal gestured at the immobile bodies of Cap and Willy. "*They* didn't think so," he said proudly, leaving the mask in place.

Tabatha looked at the three bodies. "Look what a mess you've made," she said. "Look what you made me do. We were about to get away scot-free. Now we're fucked."

"Hey," Hal said defensively. "You should be miles away by now. This has nothing to do with you."

"Yes it does," Tabatha said.

## Chapter 45

Lt. Dulworth saw Chief Carter and Toby trotting up the steps to City Hall and rushed to let them in.

“What’s going on?” Carter asked.

“All quiet,” Dulworth said. “I reckon Blackjack and his friend are still in the Mayor’s Office.”

“Nothing else?” Carter asked.

“Oh, yeah, Det. Garcia is around here somewhere. She said she was looking for that Hal Anderson guy.”

Carter frowned. “OK, Roger, Toby here says there’s a secret entrance to the Mayor’s Office, and he’s going to show me where. Just hold your position and be ready to back up my play.”

“A hidden entrance? Wow!”

Carter turned to Toby. “Lead on, Macduff.”

Toby looked confused, but took the chief up the stairs and down the side corridor to the broom closet, where he put a finger to his lips. “Shhh,” he said dramatically and slipped into the closet. Then he backed out and was so shaken he could hardly speak. “I can see him,” he told Carter breathlessly. “I can see the Monkey Demon.”

Carter nudged Toby aside and entered the closet, then instinctively reached for his sidearm when he looked through the one-way mirror and saw three bodies, and Tabatha and someone he presumed was Hal, concealed behind what could credibly be called a monkey mask, holding a gun.

Through the vent, he heard Hal say, “This can still work. But we have to do it now, before they come around.”

“Do what?” Tabatha replied. “What possessed you to return to the scene of the crime?”

“I wanted to make the perfect crime even more perfect,” Hal said. “Run the table. Shoot the moon. Make it look like a murder-suicide, only this time, Blackjack shoots Cap and kills himself because they figured they were about to get busted. This wouldn’t be necessary if the cops hadn’t just arrested Blackjack in the first place. Instead, they’re chasing after Monkey Demons. Gimme a break.”

Hal then removed the mask, looked at Tabatha, and shrugged. “I have to finish the job because the cops are too stupid to follow our breadcrumbs.”

“What about the lady detective?” Tabatha interjected. “She managed to follow you here.”

“She does complicate matters,” Hal conceded. “Well, maybe Blackjack thought she was coming to arrest him and shot her. Because that’s what he does. Then we waltz out of the locked room through the secret door, and nobody’s the wiser. I’m telling you, this can still work.”

“There’s just one thing, or three things,” Tabatha said. “These aren’t corpses. This time you’ll have to shoot living, breathing, human beings. Yeah, I stupidly zapped the cop. Please God I hope she’s all right. But shooting someone? That’s cold-blooded murder. Are you ready for that?”

Hal’s expression changed from manic to steely. “Oh, I’m ready,” he said as he looked at the two strapping black men and a Chicana who would never fuck him in a million years. “You have no idea how ready I am.”

“Well, I’m not ready to have anything to do with a triple homicide,” Tabatha said as she picked up Garcia’s gun and leveled it at Hal.

“Oh, but you’re ready to shoot me?” Hal laughed. “I don’t think so. Look, I can see why you wouldn’t want me to shoot Cap; he’s not such a bad dude. And the detective, well, I admit, being a cop murderer is not exactly a smart thing to do. But Blackjack? I could never figure out why you and the Blade didn’t want to whack him. So I’ll compromise. Let me plug him now and we can be on our merry way.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Tabatha said.

“Why not?”

“If I told you I’d have to kill you,” she said.

Hal snickered. “That’s not good enough, Tabby,” he said as he swung his gun in Blackjack’s direction.”

“He’s my father,” Tabatha said flatly.

The gun in Hal’s hand drooped, as did his jaw. He turned back to Tabatha. “What?” he said. “You’re fucking shitting me.”

“I came here to find out who my father was,” Tabatha said. “I found out all right. A complete fucking asshole. But he’s my father, and I’m not going to go all Oedipus on him.”

Hal didn’t understand the reference, but he got the message. “Un-fucking-believable,” he said. “OK, so we let Blackjack live, just like

the original plan. But I shoot Cap and the detective with Blackjack's gun, and they'll think he killed them both."

"Please," Tabatha pleaded. "Legally, we haven't done anything really bad, yet. But if you start shooting people, it's all over. So what do you say we just walk out of here now, and you go your way, I'll go mine."

"And Blackjack escapes yet again?" Hal resisted. Cap began to stir, causing Hal to panic. "If I don't shoot them now, they'll be able to identify us," he said.

While Tabatha was still pointing her gun at Hal, he swung around to shoot Cap in the chest. Tabby couldn't pull the trigger. But as Hal pulled his, Blackjack staggered up from his chair and lunged in front of Cap. At the same time, the one-way mirror exploded into a million shards as Chief Carter fired through it, striking Hal square in the back.

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## Chapter 46

Emotionally spent, Tabby dropped her gun, sagged to the floor, and wept.

Carter stepped through the broken mirror and checked on Det. Garcia, who was groggy but OK. Next, he checked on Hal, who had spun around and was lying on his back, blood leaking from his mouth. Hal stared at Carter with a crooked smile on his face and rasped, "Did I get him?" Then he expired.

Carter kicked Garcia's gun away from Tabatha and thought about cuffing her, but he figured she wasn't going anywhere, and some things still needed to be sorted out.

"What the hell you do that for?" the chief asked the mayor, who was groaning on the floor. "You just took a bullet for Cap."

Blackjack looked bewildered. "I don't, I dunno know what came over me," he stammered. "I never did anything like that before. I wouldn't even set a screen in basketball."

"Lucky bastard," Carter said as he examined Willy's wound. "Looks like a flesh wound on your shoulder, a through-and-through, as they say. We'll get you an ambulance, but I think you're going to

be all right.” He paused. “It also looks like I won’t be reading you your rights. In fact, the media will probably turn you into a fucking hero again.” He went silent, deciding not to be the first to bring up the paternity issue.

Blackjack was far from all right. Had Tabatha said she was his daughter? He wasn’t sure. Carter gave Willy a handkerchief to press on his wound. The mayor got off the floor and looked around at everyone in the room. “What is this, Grand Fucking Central Station?” he sputtered. “How the hell did you all get in here?”

“They come in through the mirror.” It was Cap, who was crying. “You saved my life, Boss.”

“No Cap, in some ways you saved mine,” Willy answered. “You gave me a chance to do the right thing for once.” He looked at the broken mirror and could see the closet behind it. He shook his head, realizing he was the only person in the room who didn’t know about the secret door.

“Miss Johnson, I need you to go sit in the mayor’s chair,” Carter said.

Det. Garcia had figured out that Tabatha had been the one who had attacked her, but she helped Tabatha to her feet and gently led her to the chair. “I’ll get you some water,” she said.

“I’ll get it,” Willy said, and grabbed a Perrier off his minibar. After gingerly opening the bottle and handing it to Tabatha, he backed away and sat in a side chair.

“Thanks,” Tabatha said uneasily.

Waving his gun, Lt. Dulworth stumbled as he stepped through the broken mirror door. Toby, who had shown Roger where the passageway was, stayed behind, mutely staring at Hal and the mask he had been wearing. “I left my post,” Dulworth told Carter. “Toby showed me how to get in. What happened?”

“*Toby* knew about the secret door?” Blackjack snorted.

Carter cleared his throat. “Suspect Anderson is deceased. He allegedly tried to shoot Mr. Capman, but His Honor the Mayor got in the way, and then I had to take the suspect, uh, down. The other suspect, Tabatha Johnson, apparently used a non-lethal stun gun on Det. Garcia, who seems to be OK as well.”

Carter had to stop to compose himself. It was only his second officer-involved shooting, and his first kill. “So. So, Lt. Dulworth, I need

you to ... to secure the perimeter. I guess we'll need an ambulance and OIS investigators, but no lights or sirens. And don't call it in. Walk it in and give me about 10 minutes to, uh, investigate the scene. After that, you'll be in charge of, well, pretty much everything, since I'll be sidelined for awhile. Take Toby with you, and lock down City Hall."

"Yes sir," Dulworth said and slowly withdrew.

Carter turned his attention to Tabatha. "Well, Ms. Johnson, it looks like you have some explaining to do, although you do have the right to remain silent and get a lawyer. I can read you your rights if you'd like."

"I'm sorry I stunned you," Tabatha said to Garcia. "I'm glad you're OK. But other than that, I don't think I've done anything wrong, legally."

"You are part of a conspiracy to commit murder and arson," Carter said. "Somebody has to pay, and your co-conspirators are dead, unless there are others involved. Are there others?"

Tabatha thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Well, since you are the only one left who can tell us what happened, you may be able to negotiate a plea, although immunity isn't in the cards. You'll be going away for awhile, no matter what."

"Look, it was all the Blade's idea," Tabatha began. "Hal and I went along for the ride, but he made sure we never broke the law. The Blade killed himself. He and Hal used the secret door to get in here. He injected himself with insulin, and he had Hal shoot him after he died to try and set up Blackjack. Serene also killed herself. Marques gave her the insulin and ludes, but she did it herself. And the Blade hid a time bomb behind the deep fryer."

"Why'd Marques do all that?"

"I guess he hated the mayor so much he just couldn't take it anymore."

"Any other reason?"

"He thought he might have AIDS."

"AIDS?" Carter and Willy both said at the same time. Carter waved at Willy to shut up. "How long has Mr. Taylor had AIDS?" Carter asked.



“I don’t know if he had AIDS or not because he refused to get tested,” Tabatha said. “He wasn’t sick that I could see, but it made him want to get back at everyone he felt had ever crossed him.”

“Well then why didn’t he just kill Blackjack?”

“He didn’t think he’d be successful. He thought Blackjack was too lucky.”

“Any other reason?”

Tabatha stared at her feet. “I told him I wouldn’t allow it, because that sack of shit was my father. He was the only one who knew, until now.”

Carter paused. “Well, how’d that happen?”

“Twenty-five years ago, my mom was a rookie teacher at Carbonboro High School. Willy Butler was a student, and he raped her. I was the result. Mom was fired and never taught again. She ended up on a commune in Oregon.”

“I didn’t know nothing about having a kid,” Willy said, in shock from more than his wound.

“She never wanted you to know, because she was afraid you might molest me as well,” Tabatha said. “When I was 15, she killed herself. A few years later, I decided to come to Murdale to find out who my father really was. And when I did, I understood why my mom didn’t want you to know about me.”

“I didn’t rape your mama,” Willy said defensively. “It was, moot-wal. I mean, she started it.”

“But you finished it, didn’t you?” Tabatha retorted. “She just wanted to make you a better person. And in return, you ruined her life.”

Willy let his mouth do his thinking, because he didn’t know what to think. “Well, her life wasn’t a total waste,” he said gently. “She had you, didn’t she?”

Father and daughter looked at each for the first time, but then the moment passed.

“I’m done talking,” Tabatha turned her attention to Carter. “Get me out of here. And I want to call my attorney, Danny Winks.”

“Det. Garcia, would you take Ms. Johnson into custody and escort her to jail, please? Book her for assaulting a police officer. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

## Chapter 47

Carter went over to Cap and helped him up. “You are free to go, Cap,” he said.

Cap rubbed his eyes, but looked uncertain. “I don’t know where to go,” he said. “I guess I could stay with Toby again.”

“No Cap, you’ll be staying with me tonight,” Willy said. “For as long as you need.”

“What about LaDonna?”

“We’ll work it out. Wait for me downstairs.”

Alone in the Mayor’s Office, the police chief and the mayor stared at Hal’s inert body. “Can you believe that? The busboy *did* do it,” Blackjack said with a bitter laugh. “I didn’t think that mofo could tie his shoes.”

“Why do you think he did it?” Carter asked.

“Cause he hated niggers and he couldn’t get laid,” Blackjack answered. “Racial enemas.”

“Animus,” Carter corrected. “What about Marques Taylor?”

“Jealousy, plain and simple,” Butler replied. “I always know’d the Blade had a mean streak, but Jesus. I’ll bet that nigga tried to give me AIDS, what do you think?”

“Why?” Carter asked.

“Because that’s what I’d a done in his place.”

“Sweet,” Carter said. “So what are you going to do now?”

“You mean besides getting an AIDS test? Well, without the Blade, I can’t be mayor no more,” Willy mused. “Maybe I’ll appoint *you* city manager. Because the best piece of advice the Blade ever give me was to call you if I got in a jam and he wasn’t around. Maybe he expected you to arrest me, but he underestimated you.”

Out the window, they could see an ambulance and several police cars rolling up to City Hall. The cops and EMTs looked like ants as they swarmed up the steps.

“What about Tabatha?” Carter asked. “You going to get a paternity test?”

“No, I believe her. It’s weird. The Blade. Serene. The club. And now a daughter. I guess it’s true you don’t know what you got ’til it’s gone.”

Carter frowned. "From my perspective, it looks like Blackjack Willy got away yet again," he said. "And Tabatha's not gone. She may be getting out sooner than you think. Especially if you throw her bail."

"If she'd ever let me be her dad," Blackjack said wistfully. "She seems kind of pissed off at me now." Then something occurred to him. "No wonder," he said.

"No wonder what?" Carter asked.

"No wonder she wouldn't fuck me.""

THE END

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