

JEZEBEL

by Gordon A. Kessler

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Prologue

The firefighters were the first victims. As they responded to the call of a downtown high-rise fire, in their minds they pictured an inferno.

The windshield of the blood red hook-and-ladder truck, like a storefront window, made it easy to see the three of them in the front seat. The enormous fire engine was the pride of the Wichita Fire Department, the newest member of its fleet. When it came lumbering down the street, bystanders would dispense with all other distractions and watch. On this day, with its red lights pulsing, air horn blasting and siren keening through the brittle morning air, the citizens stopped and stared. Although the high horsepower Detroit Diesel motor pushed them at over fifty miles per hour, the sheer massiveness of the twenty-ton fire truck made it appear to be cruising along only half that fast.

Kellogg Avenue during morning rush hour in Wichita, Kansas, was not a pleasant place to drive on an ice-sheeted day in February. Though confident, Fire Captain Jill Sawyer was tense at the wheel, every muscle taut. She concentrated on some of the less attentive traffic in front of them and the corner they must make a mile ahead at Broadway.

Lieutenant George Chambers rode shotgun. His eyes scanned the roadway as he gave out cautions like, "To the right," and "Watch that blue Chevy."

The firehouse mascot, a seven-year-old Dalmatian named Burney, took his earned place on the seat in between. Even the dog was on edge, his neck rigid and eyes alert. He whined at unaware drivers who cut them off, sometimes letting out sharp *yips* in complaint.

Four more of the squad's firefighters were in the separate crew cab behind.

They were all heroes.

Although the last of a dying tradition of fire station mascots, even Burney had been honored three times for bravery. Most recently he'd vaulted through the window of a fire-engulfed mobile home and sniffed out a three-year-old hiding in a clothes hamper.

Burney was wired. He took his job seriously.

Jill glanced at him.

The Dalmatian's lips stretched in what looked like a smile. He growled at a white van getting a little close to their right front fender.

George Chambers said, "Tell 'im, Burney."

"Good boy, Burney," Jill said and just before she looked back to the road she saw the dog give her a quick glance and slap his tail once on the seat in acknowledgement.

Jill edged the truck to the left side of their lane to pass the van safely, knowing she'd have to get around the guy and back into the right turning lane soon.

The van matched their speed as if racing them.

"Dumb bastard," George Chambers said.

"What's he trying to do?" Jill said grimacing as she guided the big engine by a car on the left.

Burney barked and put his paws on the dash.

“Jeez,” George said, “the guy’s nuts.”

“I’ll have to slow down and let him have the road,” Jill said.

“No, wait, *he’s* slowing down,” George said and began rolling down his window.

“I think the asshole wants to talk.”

“Don’t bother, we’ll shoot on by.”

“It’s that guy—that foamer,” George said. “I’m going to tell him to get the hell out of the way.”

Burney shifted over to George’s lap and looked down through the window.

“What, foamer?” Jill asked.

There were always guys hanging around the fire station. The firefighters called them foamers because they seemed to nearly foam at the mouth with enthusiasm at even the mention or sight of a fire truck. They were like little boys who always wanted to be firemen when they grew up—turn on the siren, brave the fires—but they’d never made it. Many of them were doctors and lawyers, but the majority of them were average Joes. To Jill, they were all nuts but harmless except when their fanaticism got in the way.

Burney growled.

Jill glanced over once more and saw the dog’s toothy grin and thought it was for the guy in the white van.

A car changed lanes in front of them and Jill had to tap the brake to avoid it. When she looked back, she could see through the side-view mirror that the van had stayed constant alongside.

“What the hell, Burney?” George said.

Burney was showing *George* his teeth, the dog’s eyes intense.

Jill raised her voice. “Burney! Sit, boy!” She was trading glances now between the busy roadway and the dog.

“Jesus, Burney. Wadid I do?” George said.

Jill demanded, “I said sit, Burney! No!”

It was a sudden move, like a trap being sprung. Burney swung around and grabbed Jill by her throat.

The pain was overwhelming. Jill tried to pull away. She inadvertently turned the wheel. The huge mass of steel responded violently, careening toward the median. She attempted to correct her mistake. The slick road was unforgiving.

She stomped for the brake. Disoriented, she punched the accelerator.

They crested the overpass above I-35 and crashed through two concrete barricades, leaping an eight-foot gap separating the opposing lanes. They fishtailed into the oncoming lane of traffic on the other side.

Warm blood streamed down Jill's chest—hot rivulets down her back and shoulder. Burney had ripped into her jugular.

“God, Burney,” she cried, her right hand around the dog’s blood-soaked snout. She slapped at the dog’s face. No response. Clamped on like a bulldog.

“Damn it!” George said reaching for the dog. Centrifugal force pushed him back into the door on his side before he could grab a hold.

Whipping to the right, the sixty-foot fire engine swatted a sand-spreader truck from the glazed pavement. The orange dump truck crashed onto its side on the shoulder.

For the next twenty yards, the fire truck skidded sideways on the eight-lane thoroughfare until its big tires found a small patch of dry roadway. Delicately balanced

on the driver's side wheels, it skated for another fifty feet like a daredevil stunt act.

When the tires blew out, the bottom side panel grated into the boulevard's surface with a tremendous screeching that could be heard throughout the downtown area.

Like an empty drum, it began a cumbersome roll.

Ladders broke away from the truck's sides and skittered across the lanes.

Four hoses slung out from the thing like tentacles of a tormented squid. Their heavy nozzles smacked the concrete in loud cracks as they bounced down the roadway. One found the windshield of a group of carpoolers in a Toyota SUV. It smashed through, crushing the driver's chest and hooked into the steering column. The SUV suddenly became a pull toy behind the tumbling apparatus, yanked and jerked along as it was forced to follow.

The ninety-five foot aerial-platform arm tore away from its turret on the back, telescoped out to its full length and flipped end over end, stabbing the highway and automobiles like a child sticking toads.

The cars and pickup trucks in front of the debacle slid on the frosted pavement, smashing into one another as they attempted to avoid the melee.

The fire engine demolished the vehicles in its path, crushing them like bugs into flattened hunks of iron. It was as if a maniacal auto-smashing machine had been set loose on the city.

Finally slapping down the guardrail, the behemoth tumbled over the edge of the highway and fell nose first. It slammed into the middle of Interstate 35's southbound lane forty feet below.

The conflagration that followed would burn beyond recognition the bodies of the three in the front seat. In the aftermath, five civilians would be found dead in their cars along with twenty-three other citizens that were seriously injured.

The four firefighters in the back compartment would make it through the devastation with only minor concussions and burns along a few cuts and scrapes. Sawyer and Chambers would never know the terrible irony: that they had been summoned to a false alarm—a prank.

Investigators would not be able to determine an obvious reason for the driver to lose control of Engine No. 97. They interviewed the witnesses. Some, in the opposing lanes, could see inside the cab as the fire engine highballed toward them. One man had seen something in a glance. From a distance of twenty-five yards during that brief moment just prior to the crash, he said it looked as though the dog had only reached over to give the driver a lick—a gesture of affection for his longtime friend and master. Still, that man's wife, sitting next to him on the passenger's side at the time, would recount the incredible fear and surprise she saw in the *rider's* face as he gaped over at the driver and the dog. The investigators thought nothing of it. How could the woman be sure of what she had seen at that speed and distance?

During the autopsy, the medical examiner would not find the jagged opening Burney had torn into Jill Sawyer's throat among the charred tissue. No one would consider linking this catastrophe to the ensuing slaughter six months later—except Tony Parker.

But, he'd never talk.

Wichita, Kansas, is a thriving oasis of commerce and technology located in the middle of the golden wheat fields and fertile plains of America's breadbasket. More than 300,000 people of every nationality and origin call the city home and flourish there. Known affectionately as "River City" by its citizens, it is the "Air Capital" to the rest of the world. Many of the premier influences in aviation history began in this town: pioneers such as Cessna, Beech, Stearman and Lear. It still hosts Boeing, Raytheon, Cessna, and Bombardier-Learjet and leads the world in the production of private aircraft.

In contrast, Wichita is no less proud of its "Old West" reputation for being a hub for rugged cowboys and gunslingers and is especially proud of its Native American heritage.

On a Friday morning, late in August, this letter appeared in the editorial section of the

Wichita Times newspaper:

Dear Editor,

I am amazed at the outcry of so many Wichita citizens concerned with the recent pit-bull attacks. Their ignorance is unimaginable. Pit bulls are not the problem in this city. It is those few pit-bull owners who have trained their dogs to be potential problems. Now, it seems that it is not only pit pulls that some groups are against but all dogs in general. It is my opinion, from experience, that few dogs are naturally bad or vicious. It takes abuse and unnecessary attack training to exacerbate a dog's pre-domesticated, natural aggression and make the dog dangerous. It's those people who teach these dogs to be harmful that should be put away, banned from our city.

For more than fifteen thousand years, man and dog have cohabited. Dogs have been trained to be our companions, our best friends, and they have done a very good job of it. They have helped to provide for our families, protected us, saved our lives, and some even have died defending us, their masters. Let's not blame the dog for the evil that is in man.

Tony Parker,

Animal Control Director

Sedgwick County

Chapter 1

Ringin....

The morning sunlight blasted through a big picture window, looking out onto a freshly cut, but browning, front yard. Inside, the living-room furniture was modern but not the least bit extravagant. Near the window, the blaring television was tuned to the usual *Tom and Jerry* show, and from another room, an infant screamed as loudly as its sixteen-month-old lungs would allow. A typical Friday morning.

Just as a bulldog bit Tom in the cartoon, the phone rang for the second time, and six-year-old Nicholas Parker raced into the room. He dropped to his knees and crawled behind a chair in a nearby corner. There he sat, motionless—waiting. Motionless except for his heaving chest and flaring nostrils, as he tried to quiet his oxygen-starved lungs. Grape juice from this morning's breakfast stained his otherwise bright white T-shirt. His blue jeans, just bought the week before at the local Wal Mart, already showed torturous wear on the knees.

Ringin....

With his bare feet tucked under his buttocks, he hunched over. A huge flurry of white and brown St. Bernard charged into the doorway and stopped and stood as a statue.

The boy checked his breathing, and his lungs held tight to the last breath, capturing every molecule of oxygen. A drop of sweat rolled from underneath the boy's blond hair, overhanging his forehead. It trickled down to his brow, paused there for a moment and then seeped into his wide-open left eye. It burned. The youngster winced and blinked to wash out the salt.

Ring...

The massive dog stomped farther into the room, its keen ears perked, ready to detect even the slightest disturbance. The Saint's large paws jolted its frame with every lumbering step, and its hide shifted loosely on its body like a large furry parka several sizes too big. The huge animal stopped sideways to the chair, close enough for the boy to reach out and touch it. It lifted its large head and sniffed the air. Its sensitive nose seemed to tell it the human child had been there recently, and probably was still. It moved its head around the room, sniffing, searching for any sign, any movement, any part of the boy.

The phone rang for the fifth time. Nicholas Parker's eyes shifted around the temporary refuge. His lungs pleaded for air. He had to breathe, his body insisted on it. He knew when he did the predator would hear him, yet he had to. He released the air in his lungs slowly from his bottom lip. His hot breath warmed his upper lip but cooled the sweat-covered skin above it. No sound came out, yet the dog snapped its head with ear cocked in reaction. Perhaps it'd heard it. Perhaps it'd smelled the boy's breath, saturated with grape juice.

"Raptor! Help, raptor attack!" the boy yelled frantically, gasping for air.

He shoved the chair out of the way with his forearm and scampered out from behind it, opposite the dog.

Running across the sofa, he leaped between the sofa back and a lamp on a stand beside it. The St. Bernard bolted across the room, barking in the excitement of the chase. It also bounded onto the sofa and brushed by the lamp, knocking it to the floor with a shattering crash.

*_*_*

“All right, you two, no more late night horror shows for you,” Tony Parker said sternly.

He walked through the living room doorway from the kitchen with a newspaper in his hand. After yanking the cord from the wall outlet, he picked the broken lamp up from the floor and wondered if there might still be enough Super Glue left in the kitchen drawer to fix the thing for a third time.

He set the lamp on a nearby chair then reached to the end table and picked up the phone. His wavy, dark-brown hair and tanned skin contrasted with the white T-shirt he also wore, minus the grape juice. His broad shoulders and muscular biceps stretched the tight knit fabric, and it hung loosely only at the waist, although, a bit of a paunch showed around his middle.

“Hello, hello—? I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. Can you hold on just a minute?”

Parker tucked the newspaper under his arm and cupped one hand over the phone.

“Honey, can you do something about all this noise? I’m on the phone!” he yelled out, hoping his wife Julie would come to his rescue.

With no answer, he quickly set the phone and paper down and took the matter into his own hands as the two primary offenders ran by. He snatched up his son and swung him

gently to his knees. Grabbing the collar of the St. Bernard at full locomotion proved a much more difficult task, but he managed with a strained grunt.

“That’s enough, Nick! Settle down, I’m on the phone!”

Nicholas glanced up solemnly, head bowed. The dog mimicked him with a similar, but much sadder, look. Parker released the two culprits and scanned the room for the TV remote. As usual, it was nowhere in sight. He picked up the phone, put a finger in one ear and raised the receiver to the other.

“Come on, Yankee,” Nicholas yelled, escaping through the doorway with the dog close behind. “Now, you can be Alien!”

“I’m sorry, go ahead.” Parker shook his head.

“Yeah, Mr. Parker?”

“Hi Chin.” Parker recognized the voice of Tommy Chin, a twenty-five-year-old Vietnamese immigrant and his second in command. “Excuse the noise. What’s up?”

“We just received a call from a woman out in Sand Creek. Skunk. I thought you might want to go since it’s closest to your end of town,” Chin said.

“Yeah sure, I’ll run out there first. I was just getting ready to hit the door. Got a name?”

“The caller is a Mrs. Bumfield, second house, south end of town.”

“Since there’re only about a dozen houses in that entire town, she shouldn’t be hard to find. I’ll take care of it and be in soon.” Parker hung up.

“Julie! Jooolee!” he called, looking up the stairs to the second floor bedrooms.

He turned to check the kitchen and bumped into her, the baby in her arms. Julie's beauty showed through her lightly wrinkled face, distressed dishwater-blonde hair, and food-splattered blouse. Laugh lines accentuated her polished-brown eyes.

"Whoa, I'm sorry, sweetheart. I've got to go," he said with his hands on her arms. "Hey, my letter made this morning's paper."

Julie's eyes rolled. "Oh boy, are you ready for the flak?"

"I wouldn't have sent it in if I wasn't."

"By the way," Julie said in a reprimanding tone, "you left the seat up on the toilet again this morning."

Parker chuckled. "Uh-oh, was the water cold? You didn't get stuck, did you?"

Julie frowned. "It's not funny, Tony Parker. I'll get even someday."

"Oooh, I'm shakin'." He kissed little Audrey on her baby food-smearred face and then his unprepared wife on the lips with a smack. "Mmm, bananas, my favorite."

Parker broke away and scooped up his truck keys along with a seldom-used pager from the kitchen counter. He hated pagers. To him, being tied down with telephones and radios was bad enough. After stepping into the adjoining laundry room, he picked a black name badge off a shelf over the dryer and then grabbed a freshly ironed, light blue uniform shirt from a hanger on a closet rod to the side. He put the shirt on quickly and pinned on the badge as he passed Julie and headed for the front door. The badge read *T. PARKER* in big white letters.

"You oughta be shaking," Julie scolded as he walked by. She kicked him in the butt softly. "Now get out of here."

"Tell Nick 'bye for me, will you?" he said, walking by the stairs.

“*Graaaa!* I’m going to eat you!” Nicholas yelled, jumping onto his father’s back, his arms wrapping around his neck.

“Why, you little booger.” Parker pulled his son around to his chest. “Where’d you come from?”

“I’m not a booger. I’m a *ill-a-jitmut alien*,” Nicholas exclaimed, “and I’m going to eat you!”

“Not if I eat you first!” Parker snarled back. He put his lips on his son’s neck and blew, making a loud, flatulent sound.

Nicholas erupted in ecstatic giggles.

“Besides, I think you mean an *illegal* alien, and they don’t eat people, you poor confused child.”

“Yeah, but *ill-a-jitmut* aliens do!”

“We’ll have to discuss this later. I’ve got to go, you vicious alien.” Parker flipped his son upside down and then set him gently on his feet. “I’ll finish eating you tonight.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Nicholas said cheerfully. “Then we can play a game. I know, *Dweebs, Geeks, and Weird-ooooos!*”

“I can’t wait.” Tony looked at Julie with a reluctant smile.

Julie returned an understanding grin. “Have a good day—and be careful, darling. Oh, and remind everyone at work about our anniversary picnic on Sunday. Find out how many might show up.”

Tony gave her his most charming smile, pursed his lips and then ducked out the door. He hustled out to the white, four-wheel-drive GMC Jimmy truck with a big *Sedgwick County Animal Control* sign on the side, and he drove off.

*_*_*

Julie Parker carried Audrey up the stairs to the master bathroom. She set her daughter on a fluffy, sky-blue bath mat and began drawing water in the tub.

“Time for your bath, young lady.” She started pulling the little girl’s pajamas off. Audrey gurgled a happy reply.

Julie’s mind drifted back to the many trying times she and Tony had seen. Things would be better soon. They had to be. They’d been through so much. Now their luck would change. They finally had control of their lives, and they seemed headed in the right direction.

Tony and Julie had been sweethearts since high school, with a long, three-year intermission when he joined the Marines. They’d decided a commitment during that time wouldn’t be fair to either of them. When he came home, they realized they had been miserable the whole time, and they married soon afterwards. Nicholas came along just after Tony finished college and was working for Sedgwick County as an animal control officer. Julie was teaching third grade at a local public school. When Nick was not quite a year old, Tony went back to school at Kansas State, a hundred and forty miles away, to get his doctor’s degree in veterinary medicine. It was a three-year, post-graduate program, and he could only come home on the weekends. It had been tough on both of them, but they hoped the sacrifice would be worthwhile someday.

Then, just two years ago, Julie found out she was pregnant, and there were complications. Tony quit school to be with the family and was fortunate enough to hook the Sedgwick County Animal Control Director’s job. He only had a year left of vet school, but they hoped he’d be able to go back within a couple of years.

They had spent many sleepless nights watching over little, three-pound Audrey, struggling for life in the terrible contraption that confined her. Julie remembered the many tears they'd shed. A clear-plastic-covered incubator was no place for an innocent, fragile baby girl.

Having a *preemie*, teetering on the edge of life and death, had been a terrible, anxious time. Not having adequate insurance to cover the huge medical expenses only added to the stress. Now, at sixteen months, Audrey grew strong and healthy and had been out of the hospital for nearly a year, but her parents were still overly protective. A sniffle, a cough, a slight fever, and they rushed to the emergency room in a race for life.

Tony landing the Director's job was the one lucky break they'd had for some time. Being the chief dogcatcher wasn't a terribly dangerous job. He'd been bitten a couple of times: once, by an overexcited Chihuahua, and another time by a frightened Siamese cat. Nothing even close to life threatening had happened, but still, Julie worried.

Chapter 2

“AC One to dispatch,” Tony Parker called over the microphone as he picked up speed and switched on his emergency lights.

“Dispatcher,” a female voice answered. “Go ahead, Mr. Parker.”

“Good morning, Janet. Just checking in. I’m proceeding to the call in Sand Creek.”

“Ten-four, AC One. Be advised AC Four is also proceeding to the scene and has requested you meet at Fifty-third and Meridian to ride together.”

Sarah! What’s that little vixen going to do to try to fluster me this time?

Parker grinned. “All right, Janet. Thanks. AC One out.”

Sarah Hill had become Tony Parker’s right hand over the last year and a half since she’d come on board as one of Sedgwick County’s fourteen animal control officers. Just out of college with a zoology degree, she was sharp and great with animals. She didn’t need to be told what to do. She and Tony worked well together and shared some sort of chemistry.

He loved Julie deeply and had since high school. He needed her. She was a solid place to go when he needed strength. He depended upon her to be there *always* to listen to his complaints about the world and to defend him blindly when he found himself against the

odds. But the passion seemed to be growing stale, withering. Their sex life had become too predictable, ordinary, expected, like the old weekly bath, taken every Saturday night whether needed or not.

Sarah was fresh and different, exciting and youthful. She made Parker feel young when she teased and flirted with him. To imagine he could have her at the snap of a finger excited him. Yet, he knew nothing would ever happen. It gave him a sense of security in his married life, a feeling he could never have if he were to have an affair. After all, he spent all of his off time with his family, and the only occasions he was with Sarah, they were busy working.

*_*_*

Sarah Hill sat parked and waiting in her baby blue Ford van at the convenience store on the corner of Fifty-third and Meridian Streets. Parker pulled in alongside, and Hill hopped out of her animal-control van, purse in hand, and trotted over to the Jimmy's passenger side.

Parker watched as she passed by the front of the Jimmy. He stared at her features: the long, soft, light-blonde hair tucked under the dark-blue Sedgwick County Animal Control cap; the tanned face, pudding smooth with delicate features; the large, vibrant-blue eyes; the generous breasts jiggling under the light-blue blouse as she trotted; the slim but nicely rounded butt poured into dark-blue slacks—the perfect definition of *tight ass*. She had a body that looked great, even hidden in the two-tone blue uniform that must have been tailor fit—none of the other women officers modeled theirs so well.

She jumped in.

“Hi, handsome,” Sarah Hill said in her perky voice. “How about giving a girl a ride?”

“Morning, Sarah.” *You’re as unbelievably beautiful as always.*

Parker pulled out onto the gravel road and headed north toward Sand Creek.

“Skunk, huh?” Hill wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather take on a bear. It takes forever to get rid of that nasty smell.”

“Yeah, and they’ve really been bad this season. Still better than dealing with the average human. Ninety-nine percent are assholes. But animals are different. They aren’t naturally corrupt like people. They’re kind of innocent.”

“That’s what I like about you, Tone.” Sarah Hill smiled. “You and I think a lot alike. We have the same passion for animals. Not so much of a passion for our *fellow man* though.”

Parker nodded. “It’s the masters who are the problem, not the pets. Most people don’t understand that about us *heartless* dogcatchers. They think we enjoy chasing and putting down their beloved but neglected pets. They let them run loose only to get run over or poisoned. They abandon them to become a nuisance and eventually starve. They train them to be vicious, causing people to misunderstand and fear them. They don’t get them the proper vaccinations, so their animals get infections and diseases. They don’t spay or neuter them, so their pets give birth to more deprived and unwanted animals. The average animal owner is as irresponsible with their pets as they are with themselves.”

Hill chuckled. “Wow, we’re getting deep. It’s too early in the morning to think this serious. But, by the way, I liked your letter to the editor.”

“Oh, you saw it? Thanks.” *At least someone appreciated it.*

Sarah Hill's attention went to her hands. "Ah man! My hands look like hell." She opened her purse and took out a tube of lotion. "The damned apartment manager still hasn't gotten anybody to fix my frickin' dishwasher." She popped the lid back, squirted out a generous amount and began rubbing her hands together.

She glanced over at Parker's hands on the steering wheel. "Damn, Tone, talk about lobster hands."

"What?" Parker said. "They're not so bad."

"Let me see." Hill pried his right hand from the wheel. "Relax, loosen up. I'm not going to bite you—yet."

Parker frowned at her.

"What you need is some of this organic hand lotion. It has aloe in it. Great stuff."

She began rubbing the lotion into his hand. It smelled sweet, like fresh, sliced peaches. It felt nice, sensual somehow. He liked it, but he shouldn't. He was a married man. Having his hand rubbed by a beautiful young woman seemed a little adulterous—maybe.

Hill grinned. "Nothing like a good, old fashion hand job, huh Tone?"

"Sarah!" Parker said in the same tone he used to tell Nicholas not to be naughty.

She paid no attention. "You have such big, strong hands. Big—long fingers." Sarah rubbed firmly. She rubbed and massaged his hand. Each finger, one at a time. Rubbing the slick warm lotion into his skin. Each finger, rubbing, massaging, squeezing. Rubbing back and forth, up and down, massaging, squeezing, milking each finger with both hands.

"Okay, I think that one's done." She helped to put his now limp hand back on the wheel as if it had become disabled.

“Sarah,” Parker started again, “I don’t think you ought to do this.”

“Sheesh, Tone, lighten up,” Hill said in her playful voice. “Does Julie have that short a leash on you? I mean, it’s not like you’re banging me on the hood of the truck or something.”

What an idea! Parker thought.

“Come on, hand it over,” She insisted. “You can’t go around with one soft hand and one like an armadillo paw.”

That was reasonable. Besides, it did feel very good. Parker frowned but brought his left hand across slowly. Hill squirted out more lotion and massaged it in.

“Mmmm,” she said. “Now tell the truth. Doesn’t that feel good?”

Parker shrugged. Admitting it would make him responsible for what was happening.

“This lotion is all natural, you know. You can use it on other parts of your body, too—anywhere. And it’s edible.” She smiled up at Parker, scooting closer while putting everything into rubbing the slick lotion into his hand.

“Sarah, I’m a happily married man,” Parker objected. “A wife and two kids. Hell, I’m old enough to be your father. Well, almost.”

Massaging, rubbing, squeezing. “Relax, sweetheart. All I’m doing is putting lotion on your hand,” she said softly. “You act like I’m getting to you. Like I’m trying to talk you into something you *want* to do.”

Parker sighed, frustrated for words.

“All right, Tony, I’ll confess. I am after you. But, if you didn’t like it, you could have stopped me a long time ago—months ago, couldn’t you? Come on now, tell the truth.” She grinned again.

“Why me, Sarah?”

“Like I said, we have the same passion for the underdog. Besides, I’m attracted to you. You aren’t a bad lookin’ man, Tony Parker. And that little bit of gray sprinkled on your sideburns doesn’t say ‘old man’ to me. It says ‘experienced.’”

Gray? Is it that noticeable? Old man?

She massaged, rubbed, squeezed, milked—masturbated every finger. Her touch was firm, yet tender, and she was very good with it.

“Such big, strong hands.” She smiled up at Parker and then drew her face near his hand with lips parted.

Parker’s jaw dropped and he stared. *No! She’s not going to...!*

Hill kissed the end of Parker’s middle finger. She licked it slowly up and down.

He couldn’t speak.

She took his finger into her warm, moist mouth, drawing it slowly up past the second knuckle. She began sucking and moving her tongue around it.

Lord! Can a man have an orgasm from having his finger sucked?

An air horn blasted.

Parker looked up to see the front grill of a Mack cement mixer. He’d crossed over into its path.

“Damn!” He slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel to the right as far as he could with his free but slick right hand.

Hill was thrown forward, and he felt a sharp pain on the end of his middle finger as he pulled his hand back to gain control of the steering wheel. The Jimmy swerved and

started down into the ditch as the big cement truck raced by. He pulled it back onto the road, and it bounced and slid to a stop sideways to the roadway, gravel flying.

Parker sat staring out blankly. Hill did the same momentarily but broke the silence with a giggle.

“Damn, Tone, was it good for you?”

“Please, don’t ever do that again while I’m driving.”

“Hmmm, maybe later—at my apartment?”

“Sarah, you know what I mean.”

“Uh-huh, and you know what I mean.”

It took a moment for Parker to regain his composure and resume driving. Within a couple of minutes, they could see the small grain elevator that was the landmark for Sand Creek.

“All right,” he said, “you get the net, and I’ll get the gunny sack. If I can, I’ll try to put the little critter in the sack first thing and avoid getting us sprayed too much.”

“Okay, Tone. You don’t want me to bring the rifle, just in case?”

“No, I doubt if we’ll need it.”

“Are you like *afraid* of guns or something? I mean, you keep one in the truck—I’m guessing because it’s mandatory—but I never see you get it out, no matter what’s going on. Like last week on that cougar call. I’ve never seen you even look at a gun.”

Parker was slow to answer. “I had a bad experience once. Vietnam. I shot someone.”

“You mean the enemy?”

“That’s what they told us.”

“That was war, Tony. From what I heard, there was a lot of shooting going on.”

“War? They told us it was a *police action*.”

“Did you kill him?”

Parker gazed out the windshield. “Yeah.”

Chapter 3

“Over here, over here!” An excited man in overalls did jumping jacks sideways around the corner of the white, two-story farmhouse. His left cheek bulged, full of chewing tobacco. His bare, meaty shoulders and back were bronzed from the sun, and they shone with perspiration.

“Oh, relax Eldon, that varmint ain’t goin’ nowhere,” a tall, big boned woman in blue jeans and a crisp, white short-sleeved blouse said, waving him down. “You always get so darned excited.” She turned to Parker and Hill as they parked. “We’re the Bumfields—the ones that called. That’s Eldon,” she said nodding to the animated man. “I’m Pearl.”

Parker jogged around to the back of the truck, grinned at Pearl Bumfield and yanked open the back window and tailgate. “Tony Parker, ma’am. That’s Sarah Hill.” He pulled out the five-foot-long aluminum-handled net and tossed it to Hill.

“Don’t get too close, Mr. Bumfield,” Parker said, trotting over to the man. He carried a gunnysack in his left hand and wore a thick, padded-leather glove on the other. Hill followed two steps back, holding the net with both hands.

“He’s in the garage,” Bumfield said, hanging onto his straw hat with a green visor built into the brim. “I trapped him in there when he came at me. Scared the hell out of me. He’s the biggest, meanest one I ever seen!”

“You folks stay back,” Parker said, approaching the weathered-gray, single-car garage. His blue, short-sleeved uniform shirt showed evidence of the already sizzling morning temperature by the large dark spots under each arm. His brown leather cowboy boots kicked up a gray dust as he hustled up the dirt driveway, and the gusty wind blew the dust cloud away as soon as it rose.

Parker stepped to the double, side-hinged doors, taking care not to make any noise that might alert the animal. Hill stayed just behind and to his side, watching close for signals. The old wood frame creaked in the gusty north wind that had already forced it to lean precariously after decades of resisting its constant attack. Parker tried to peek into the unlit garage through the crack between the doors but could see nothing. He turned his head to the side and tried to hear the thing he stalked, but still there was nothing.

Parker fumbled with the large bolt fit tightly into the rusty hasp on the doors. His gloved right hand made it doubly difficult, but the bolt finally pulled free, rasping loudly against the steel latch. He let it drop to the ground and slowly pulled the left door open by the hasp.

The cool air was welcome on his face as he looked the dark room over. A greasy, dusty smell filled the dilapidated shack. Then a different scent hit him, a rank odor invading his nostrils, pungent and strong. Parker held his breath and gulped.

The garage was small and had an earth floor. Buckets full of rusted metal pieces cluttered the ground. Broken shelves hung along the walls, laden with fruit jars filled with

nuts and bolts and other miscellaneous parts. A half-assembled, antique tractor engine sat in the far corner.

“Are you sure he didn’t get away?” Parker asked, with some disappointment.

“Naw, he’s in there,” Bumfield answered and then spat out some of the brown juice.

“*Grak-ak-ak-ak!*” came a strange snarl from behind the tractor engine, and suddenly, a gym-bag-sized blur of black and white torpedoed toward the doorway.

Hill stepped up and swatted the net down on the angry creature, catching it ineffectively by its hindquarters. She attempted to pin it, but it slipped loose and darted to Parker.

He reached down with his leather glove and snatched it up before it had a chance to do harm. The skunk struggled frantically, clawing and biting at the glove, drooling saliva as he held it by its neck.

“It’s okay, I got him,” Parker called out, holding the skunk up high with the gunnysack underneath.

“Get him in the bag!” Hill said, dropping the net and grabbing the gunnysack with both hands.

Loud, vicious barking erupted, and a large yellow and gray dog appeared from nowhere and jumped at the skunk.

Parker stepped back, startled. His grip loosened, and the skunk took advantage of the opportunity. It struggled free and dropped to Parker’s side then scampered like a squirrel up his chest to the side of his throat. Its sharp, omnivorous teeth punctured deep into the base of his neck just under his collar, and it shook its head savagely, setting a firm grip.

“Jeez-huss!” Parker cried out.

“Dawg, get back!” Bumfield yelled, running at the dog with a garden rake raised above his head. “Damn fool dog, get out of here!”

Parker pulled the skunk loose, its teeth tearing away from deep into his flesh, leaving a half-inch hole. Blood immediately leaked from his neck and under his shirt, seeping through the fabric. He dropped the furious beast into the sack, and Hill hurried to tie it shut as Parker applied pressure to the wound with his gloved hand.

“Oh, for goodness sake! Are you all right?” Mrs. Bumfield cried, running to Parker.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he said, still wincing.

“Damn Dawg! Sometimes, I just think we oughta get rid of him,” she said. “Come on in the house, and we’ll get that cleaned up.” Then, insistently, she said, “Come on, now.”

“All right, sure,” Tony said and began to follow the woman, who was scurrying in front of him. Eldon Bumfield threw his rake down, missing the big dog by a couple of feet. He kicked at the air in front of the animal’s snout. Dawg briefly romped as if in play and then trotted around the corner of the house as Bumfield took Parker by the arm to assist him.

Sarah Hill sprinted across the yard and yelled back, “I’ll put this little bastard in the truck and be right in, Tony.”

Oh, great, Parker thought. Now there’ll be an ER visit and lots of paperwork.

*_*_*

Tony Parker sat in an overstuffed, forest-green corduroy chair in the Bumfields’ living room with a wet washcloth pressed against his neck. He leaned over a wash pan half full of pink water on the coffee table in front of him. Sarah Hill stooped at his right side with her hands on her knees and concern in her face.

Parker looked around the room. It reminded him of his long deceased grandmother's house from when he used to visit her as a young boy. Garage-sale-type items, cookie jars, colored glass and pottery pieces filled the lamp stands and shelves along the walls. Newspapers and magazines cluttered the corners in loose stacks. A tapestry depicting a bunch of dogs playing poker hung crooked on the far wall. One dog was passing an ace to another under the table with his toes.

Mrs. Bumfield reached over and gently pulled the washcloth and Parker's hand away from the wound.

"I think it's quit bleeding enough to put the bandage on now," she said. "You'd better go straight to the emergency room. Just send us the bill."

"Oh, it's all right. Don't worry about it," Parker assured her.

"Don't worry about it?" Mr. Bumfield blurted. "Son, that critter was mad as a hatter."

"No, I'm okay. The state requires all the animal control officers to be vaccinated for just about everything. But *you* need to be careful. Keep a good eye out for any animals acting strange—that's including your dog. If the skunk was diseased, it could have infected others."

As Mrs. Bumfield applied a gauze patch with white tape to Parker's neck, a girl about four years old peeked around the doorway. She clutched a small, homemade Raggedy Ann-type doll. The little girl's large dark eyes gazed up from her bowed face. Stubby pigtails made from dark brown hair stuck out high on her head, and she wore a brick-red dress noticeably similar to that of the doll's. Her wide smile stretched her lips thin and

caused deep dimples on her chubby, freckled cheeks as she twisted her body back and forth nervously.

“Well, hi there, cutie,” Tony Parker said, smiling back.

“Tony, this is our granddaughter, Tricia,” Mr. Bumfield said. “She’s staying with us until her mama gets settled in with a new job out in Denver. Her mama’s just divorced—you know how it is. But—ain’t she a doll?”

Tricia leaned back against her grandfather and took forced, choppy steps as he coaxed her closer.

“Hi, Tricia. I’m Tony.”

Her thin-lipped smile stayed as she squeaked, “Did the skunk bite you?”

Parker grinned. “Just a little scratch, sweetheart.”

Hill chuckled. “I think you’ve got yourself a girlfriend, Tone.”

“You’ve got a pretty doll, Tricia,” Parker said.

Tricia raised the doll up under her chin. “Grammy made it for me. Her name’s Raggedy A-yun.”

Mrs. Bumfield smoothed down a last strip of white tape. She finished up the dressing by kissing her hand and patting it lightly on the bandage. “There, good as new, Tony.”

Parker took one of the doll’s small hands and shook it. “Glad to meet you, Raggedy Ann. And it’s been a real privilege meeting you, Tricia.” He gently brushed her pretty little cheek with the back of his index finger and then looked up at her grandmother. “Thanks, Mrs. Bumfield. You’re good folks.”

He stood and pulled a business card from his pocket. He placed it next to the phone on a small table.

“Be sure to call me if you need anything. My home number’s written on the card below the office number.”

The Bumfields accompanied Parker and Hill out the door and down the porch steps.

“Oh no, not again,” Mrs. Bumfield said, as they walked to the truck.

Parker and Hill turned and Parker feared the worst.

“Can I ask you to help with one more thing, Tony?” she said, looking up into a large elm tree in the front yard.

“Sure, if I can,” Parker said, stepping back, trying to trace her sight.

“Little Pussy’s stuck up in the tree—poor little thing. Dawg probably scared her up there again. This time, she’s way high.”

Parker looked up to a branch more than twenty feet above. He saw the little gray kitten looking down at them with big, round eyes.

It pleaded, mewling softly.

Mrs. Bumfield stood looking into the elm with her hands on her hips. “I can’t climb trees none too good, and Eldon, he’s too darned fat.”

Mr. Bumfield chuckled. “Hey, watch it there, woman.”

“Shush, Eldon. This is serious. Tricia’s grown real attached to that kitten.”

“No problem, Mrs. Bumfield. I’ll get her.”

Parker hadn’t climbed a tree in years but managed without incident. As they left Sand Creek, a report came in of a buck deer trapped in an east Wichita backyard. They responded, and it took more than two hours to deal with the animal, sedate it and haul it

back out to the county to be released. The rest of the day was a jumble of paperwork, stray cats and the rescue of a squirrel that had fallen down a sewer vent pipe and then climbed out of a newlywed couple's toilet. There seemed no time to visit the emergency room about a simple little bite. Besides, he was confident in his inoculation, and he'd hardly noticed the injury since the morning.

Completely exhausted, Parker got ready for bed early that night with something Sarah Hill had asked on his mind. "Have you had your serum level checked lately?" she'd asked during the drive back to town. He had, three months ago. It was good. Rabies antibody count had been high, as it was supposed to be.

Parker looked over to Julie as he walked into the bedroom from the bath. She lay in the king-sized waterbed, studying a *Good Housekeeping* magazine. She'd probably found a new dessert recipe she would try out soon, or maybe she was reading some clever gardening tips. *God, she's a great wife.* He sighed and nodded in affirmation of his thoughts. Julie glanced to him with a grin, but soon a look of concern came over her face.

She asked, "How's the bite, sweetheart?"

"Except for the bandage," he said, touching the wound lightly, "I wouldn't even know it was there."

"The ER doctor didn't think you'd have any problems—didn't give you a prescription?"

Parker lied. "Nope. Said it'd be as good as new in a couple of days." Julie worried way too much. He wouldn't tell her he hadn't gone to the emergency room. Why have her bothered by such a little thing, now?

"You go to Via Christi? Who was the doctor? Maybe I know him."

“Uh, new guy,” he said. “Some kid, really. But he seemed sharp. I can’t even remember his name.”

“Hmm,” Julie said.

Parker couldn’t tell if she was acknowledging what he’d said or she was skeptical. She went back to her magazine.

Parker went to a roll-top desk opposite the bed. He shuffled through various manila folders in the file drawer, pulled out a jacketed, typed report and rolled into bed beside her.

Rabies in Humans was typed on the cover. He opened the old thesis he’d written in his veterinary school days and began leafing through. One sentence stuck out. *Only around forty percent of those bitten by rabid animals actually develop rabies when left untreated, if they were not previously inoculated.* Sure, there was a risk, but he’d had the pre-exposure vaccine, even though it was thought to be only eighty percent effective. Figuring it in his head, he came up with the probability: he had a six in one hundred chance of getting rabies even if the animal was rabid. It was so slim, minute, extremely unlikely. Those were like lottery odds. He’d never won the lottery. He wouldn’t get rabies.

Parker read on silently. *Rabies in humans is considered one hundred percent fatal, since once symptoms appear, there is no known cure and death is inevitable. Even treatment administered after exposure and before the onset of symptoms is not completely reliable and neither is pre-exposure inoculation. However, there has been one known survivor in hundreds of thousands of confirmed cases. A twelve-year-old boy in Indiana, bitten on the hand by a rabid bat, survived after months of intensive hospital treatment.*

Transmission of the virus to humans may occur from any warm-blooded animal, including birds, cattle, and horses, but especially from raccoons, skunks, wolves, coyotes,

bats, wildcats, domestic cats, dogs and even other humans. The virus may enter the body from any open wound or scratch or mucous membrane, from the bite or even the lick of an infected animal. In one instance, the virus was transmitted to a couple of spelunkers in aerosol fashion from bat urine in a cave.

Human rabies symptoms usually appear within five to fifteen days. However, in unconfirmed cases, the onset of symptoms has been reported to have occurred in as much as a year after infection or in as little as four days. In a few rare and questionable cases, the onset of symptoms was claimed to have occurred within twenty-four hours. It is thought the amount of infection and the proximity of the bite to the brain of the patient are the biggest factors determining the length of time before symptoms occur. Parker frowned, thinking of his neck wound.

Symptoms generally occur in three stages, but they are not always clearly defined. Initially, there may be fever and swelling around the wound. Soon after, there may be times of body fever, headaches, and nausea. A loud and irritating ringing of the ears may occur. The patient may attack others and tear clothing in fits of anger. The male patient sometimes experiences a painful erection. All human patients seem to have a fear of water, or hydrophobia, and experience excruciatingly painful convulsions of the throat at the sight or even the thought of it (unlike popular belief, this symptom is rare in canines). The tongue might swell, and the body's joints are likely to become extremely stiff and achy. Paralysis is followed shortly by death in the final stage.

Julie set her magazine on the nightstand on her side of the bed, switched off the light and rolled over to Parker. She snuggled her head on his shoulder. Her hair was soft and smelled fresh and clean. Her hand moved slowly and gently from his stomach to just

underneath the waistband of the boxer shorts he wore like pajamas. “How about putting that down and holding me instead?”

Parker smiled, dropped the thesis to the floor and turned off his light. After much tenderness and considerate love making, they fell asleep.

*_*_*

The dark figure crouched close to the five-foot chain-link fence that surrounded the Parkers’ backyard. He looked up at the unlit, second-story master bedroom window with his right eye, a black patch covering his left. Deep, jagged scars disfigured that side of the small Oriental man’s face. He was dressed all in black.

“Patience, my friend,” he whispered, his fingers squeezing the heavy wire fence.

Yankee stood, tail wagging, nuzzling the man’s fingers. He whined, chimpanzee-like, begging for a scratch behind the ear.

The man looked at the dog and smiled. He pushed away from the fence and trotted down the street, head and shoulders hunched over.

*_*_*

Tony Parker’s eyelids rolled back to brightness. White, white, everything was white. A sheet covered his face. *It must be morning.*

His neck throbbed, painful and deep. He felt of it gently without disturbing the sheet. The wound had swollen to enormous proportions. It throbbed hard, and he could feel it in his fingers. It was hot, burning.

Parker grimaced. His frown began to exaggerate over his face, wrinkling his nose and curling his lips, exposing large, inhuman teeth—carnivorous, long fangs. He could feel his face distorting, bones expanding, nose growing. It stretched out from his face into a

snout. Thick dark hair began to sprout over his face and hands. His eyes yellowed. His ears grew pointed. His fingernails curled into large dark claws.

He tried to speak but growled instead, confused, scared.

He felt mad, enraged, but didn't understand why. He had an overwhelming hunger. He wanted meat; fresh, raw meat—a fresh kill, bloody and raw.

Someone entered the room. They rustled beside the bed.

He could see shapes through the thin sheet. A woman stood holding a baby in one arm, smiling with her finger to her lips while looking at a young boy. They were familiar, yet he couldn't remember them. He was confused, disoriented. Julie, he remembered. Her name was Julie, his wife. His children, Audrey and Nicholas, were with her. It meant nothing.

“*Shhh,*” she whispered. “Let's surprise Daddy. We'll scare him.”

Parker's lip twitched as it curled. He licked his snout.

They moved closer to the bed. Nicholas giggled with excitement. They leaned their heads close to Parker's sheet-covered face.

He growled low without wanting to. *Come no closer. Get back. Run!*

Nicholas giggled again and reached for the top of the sheet.

Parker growled once more.

Nicholas yanked the sheet back, and the horrible monster that Tony Parker had become leapt out. It tore into the woman's throat, blood spraying, then ran the boy down at the doorway, tearing into his neck as the child cried, “No, Daddy, no!”

The boy lay lifeless on the floor, and the terrible thing returned for the infant.

Parker's body jolted as he gasped and his eyes snapped wide. He lay on his stomach, heaving through his open mouth. The bright-red eyes of the clock radio next to the bed looked back at him with an evil stare. It was eleven thirty. The bedroom was dark.

"Tony, are you all right? What's wrong?" Julie asked, lying with her back to him, still half asleep.

She rolled over slowly as he rose to his elbows and he looked to her. She was okay, alive. His beautiful wife, Julie, was all right. But it was so real—too damned real to be a dream.

He pushed out of bed and strode to the medicine cabinet mirror in the master bathroom, flipping on the light as he went in. He saw *himself*. The same face looked back as did any other time. Nothing different—no werewolf. It was a dream, so terrifying, yet so real. He peeled back the bandage on his neck and looked underneath. The wound wasn't swollen. It wasn't warm. It didn't throb.

He returned to the bedroom, going to the window. The street below was dark. It *was* the middle of the night.

A chill shot up his spine as he looked out. Something was wrong. He couldn't figure it for sure, but something was wrong out there. He looked down the dimly lit street. A car, a light-colored truck or van maybe, started its engine, turned on its lights and drove away. Tony watched the crimson glow of the taillights until they disappeared into the night.

"Sweetheart, you all right?" Julie asked, her voice groggy. She rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. Just a bad dream."

"Come on back to bed," she coaxed and patted the place beside her.

Parker didn't answer but obeyed. He sat down on the side of the bed and scratched his head.

"Come on and lie down," Julie said and reached over and touched his side. "What was the dream about?"

"Nothing."

Parker lay down. Julie rolled back over, and he moved in behind her. He put his arms around hers and pulled as close as he could without hurting her. Julie stroked his forearm and snuggled the back of her head underneath his chin and her hips against his groin.

"Nothing," he whispered.

Chapter 4

Silent darkness. Light filtered through a tear in Alvin MacGreggor's living room window shade from a bright, blue-white full moon. It cast eerie shadows and dark shapes throughout the room. The sheer curtains on the window flowed airily from the gentle breeze of a large box fan.

It was one of those hot, sticky, Kansas nights with both the temperature and the humidity more than ninety. It would be almost unsurvivable without a fan to cool the sweat-dampened skin, still nearly unbearable without air conditioning.

Eighty-five-year-old MacGreggor slept peacefully in his worn out La-Z-Boy. Overdressed for the heat, he wore light-blue pajamas, a red-plaid robe, brown slippers and had covered himself up to his chest with a tattered quilt—evidence of poor circulation.

Fluctuating lights from the graphic equalizers of a compact disc player in the corner made an intermittent soft green glow. After a lull between songs, Enya began singing *China Roses*, melodically, soft and inviting—of a *new world—heaven....*

Slowly, deliberately, a huge, jet-black form moved past the dining room table and into the living room directly toward the old man. The huge shape advanced fluidly, its back and hackles, sleek and stealthy, like that of a jungle cat.

It eased to a stop mere inches from the old man's face. A low, rumbling growl slowly erupted from the enormous animal's throat as it revealed tremendous, white fangs.

Enya's ethereal voice sings of China Roses....

"Jezebel? Is that you, Jezebel?" The old man wrenched his face to focus on the black image looming in front of him in the darkness.

The Great Dane gazed at him, motionless. A terrible battle raged inside her head as she remembered a human's voice say, *Man—enemy. Kill!*

MacGreggor reached out as if to a friend who had come to his sick bed. He stroked the shadow's neck just below her pointed ear with the back of his hand.

The dark animal bowed her head and licked her chops. With large dark eyes, she watched the arm extending out beside her.

Enya sings of following a new moon....

She looked over to a well-chewed, red-rubber dog bone near the door, glanced toward her water and food bowls in the kitchen and then looked back at MacGreggor's face. She whined softly, but then another low growl came involuntarily. *Man enemy. Kill—kill—kill!*

"Jazbo?"

The huge Great Dane's reply came swiftly as her fangs pierced deep into the old man's neck, tearing the right jugular vein and then struck again in a death grip over his throat.

Vertebrae crunched like cracking knuckles.

MacGreggor's face contorted with a frightened and frantic look as if searching into the darkness for help that would not come, salvation that would pass him by. The old man gurgled with deep red bubbles growing in his open mouth. He convulsed spastically, his life pumping from his body, gushing and squirting out into the mouth of the huge canine, overflowing and streaming down her neck. Blood, splashing off the old man's chin, splattered into the merciless animal's already red eyes as she held her grip until the old man convulsed and shook and shuddered no more.

Enya sings about seeing the sun...the stars.

Chapter 5

Lt. Jack Simpson parked the brown, unmarked Chevy police car in front of Thelma's Diner and gave a deep sigh. The bright, already steamy morning caused sweat beads on his dark-chocolate forehead, and his eyes were bloodshot. It had been a long night on the job.

The diner was small and made from concrete block, painted white, but neat and clean both outside and in. It was a local hangout for the city police and in the white gravel parking lot, Simpson noticed a patrol car along with an old green Ford pickup and a blue Volkswagen bug. He pushed out of the car and took slow, tired steps to the door of the diner. The smell of bacon lured strong and tempting, but he would settle for a cup of coffee. He'd unwind a bit in Thelma's and then have a bowl of Cheerios with his three young daughters when he got home. After that, he'd get a few hours sleep. He looked forward to a much-needed rest this weekend. The only thing going on was Tony and Julie Parker's picnic on Sunday. A nice peaceful weekend.

Simpson swung the door in without looking.

A young uniformed cop caught it with a Styrofoam cup, and coffee dumped down his front.

“Oh, damn. Sorry!” Simpson said.

The lanky, baby-faced cop said nothing but gaped down at his stained uniform.

“What do you think you’re doing to my partner, Simpson?” an officer of about fifty boomed.

“Well, *Big Jim* Morowsky. How the hell are you?” Simpson held his hand out with a big smile on his face. Morowsky was a tall man, well over six feet, with a belly that had been forced too many beers and late-night leftovers.

“I’m doing great,” Morowsky said, taking his hand, “but I can see you’re still causing trouble.”

“Yeah.” Simpson looked at the young cop. “Sorry about that, my man.”

“Cox, this is the orneriest detective you’ll ever care to meet, Jack Simpson. Simpson, meet Farley Cox, first day on the job.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Simpson said. “Hope you’re good at baby-sitting.”

“Aw, he’s not going to be so bad,” Morowsky replied. “He’s John Cox’s son.”

“Hell, Morowsky, I meant he was baby sitting you!”

They both laughed.

“Watch it Simpson. I’ve still got pull downtown. One call, and I could have you back in a squad car, right alongside me.”

“You know, that wouldn’t be so bad.” Simpson grinned. He and Morowsky had been teamed together twenty years earlier when it wasn’t so cool to have an African American as a partner. Simpson said to Cox, “So you’re John *The Man’s* son, huh? You’ve got some big shoes to fill, kid.”

The shy young officer smiled and nodded.

“Hey, we’ve got to go,” Morowsky said. “Have to check on an elderly resident that doesn’t answer his door. I’ll chew the fat with you later, Simpson.”

“From the looks of it, there’ll be plenty to chew.” Simpson patted Morowsky’s gut. “Take care of old man Morowsky, Cox. He’s kind of feeble without his cane.”

“Bite me, Simpson!” Morowsky said with his back turned and then exited.

Jack Simpson smiled and swung around to the first empty booth.

“The usual, Jack?” a heavysset, graying redhead in a white dress asked.

“Yeah, thanks, Thelma.”

Within a minute, she brought a cup of steaming coffee to his table along with a spoon and a glass of ice water.

“Rough night, Jack?”

“Uh-huh....” Simpson took a tentative sip of the scalding coffee, then winced as he set it down and spooned in two teaspoons of ice. “Dead kids and drugs.”

Thelma frowned and shook her head. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Well, you just sit here and relax. The coffee’s on the house.”

Simpson gave a thankful smile, and Thelma walked away.

He was halfway finished, taking small tastes, when a static squawk came from the seat across from him. Simpson rose to see a police walkie-talkie.

“Damn.” Simpson got up, reached over and picked up the radio. “Can you put my coffee in a take-out cup, Thelma?”

Thelma glanced over. “Sure, Jack.”

She poured fresh coffee into a Styrofoam cup, put a plastic lid on it and handed it to Simpson when he met her across the counter.

“Thanks, Thelma. You’re a sweetheart.”

Thelma winked, and Simpson went through the doorway.

“Six Adam Three to Sergeant Jim Morowsky. You read me Morowsky?” Simpson asked, sitting in his parked car.

“Five Adam Seven. Morowsky. Go ahead, Six Adam Three.”

Jack Simpson thought for a second. He didn’t want the dispatcher, or any of the other officers, to know about them leaving a radio. They could get written up for it.

“Uh, this is Simpson. I think I’ve got something you might want. If you give me your location, I’ll meet you there.”

*_*_*

Morowsky looked at Cox as they pulled up to the curb in their patrol car. Cox grabbed for the empty radio pouch on his belt. He was in deep shit now. Morowsky had given him the responsibility of carrying their only hand-held radio, and Cox had left it at the diner. He remembered getting all excited when their first call came in. Morowsky let him answer it. When he was done stuttering to the dispatcher, he’d laid it on the seat as he got out of the booth.

“Our twenty is eleven thirty-seven Whiteside,” Morowsky said into the microphone. “Appreciate it Jack.” He returned the mike to its hook.

Cox looked out his side window, away from Morowsky’s frown. This was it, Cox’s first call as a Wichita police officer. Now was his chance to prove to his father and the rest of the world he was a real man, that he could be a good cop, but he certainly started the day off wrong.

He'd had a lucky break, drawing Morowsky as a partner. When the shit hit the fan, Morowsky was known to be the guy to have at your back. He was a lot like Cox's father. John *the Man* Cox had retired just last year as one of the most decorated cops in Wichita history.

Although Big Jim's actions didn't always show it, he didn't appear to mind baby-sitting a rookie, especially a rookie whose father was a local hero.

Officer Cox looked at the small, white house as he opened the passenger's side door. It seemed out of place on the big corner lot. Paint was peeling, and a number of the old shake shingles were missing, unlike the other well-kept homes in the neighborhood. The lawn was a surprise, nice and neatly cut by a caring neighbor, no doubt, but looking close, it was only trimmed crab grass and dandelions.

An elderly woman came scurrying toward the two uniformed cops as they stepped onto the lawn. Deeply wrinkled, tired flesh hung from her cheekbones and sagged in jowls, adding to the worried look that filled her face. The skin of her arms drooped on her slight frame creating the look of a bony skeleton slipped into a body too big.

"Are you Mrs. Crane?" Sergeant Morowsky asked, while adjusting his baton and pulling up his pistol belt.

"Yes. I'm sorry to trouble you officers. It's just that Mr. MacGreggor always answers the door when I stop in on my morning walk. If I'd had a key, I would of went on in to see if he was okay, but he isn't a very trusting soul," the elderly woman said. "I check on him every morning. Then, every afternoon I bring him his mail and read it to him. And then I feed his...."

“All right, ma’am, no trouble at all,” the sergeant interrupted. “We’ll check it out. I’m sure he’s all right. Are you sure he’s even home?”

“The old fool had better be. I told him not to go anywhere without letting me know. He doesn’t get around that well anymore.”

The sergeant strode up and onto the wood porch. Cox followed directly behind, adjusting his baton and pulling up his pistol belt, mimicking the sergeant.

Officer Cox’s tan uniform was crisp and neatly pressed except for the wet coffee spot darkening a large area on his right side. It extended from just below his gun belt down to his knee.

The old woman eyed the spot then glanced up at the rookie’s face and back at the spot with a questioning look. The rookie rubbed it, hoping, somehow, that would make it vanish. His attention was too much on the coffee stain and not enough on the first step of the porch.

“Oh-ooph!” Cox grunted as his left toe kicked the first riser and his right toe followed, sprawling him out on the steps.

The sergeant looked over his shoulder at the embarrassed rookie. “Get on your feet, junior. We got work to do.” He rolled his eyes and pushed out an extended sigh.

Cox lifted himself and brushed off, wondering how he was going to make a good cop if he couldn’t even climb simple steps. He wanted to make it real bad. He may not become a great cop like his father, but he was going to try his hardest to be a good one.

Mrs. Crane hung back in the front yard, fretting. “Oh, I hope he’s all right. He *is* a pain in the butt most of the time, but I do hope he hasn’t passed. I wouldn’t know how to fill my days without taking care of the old crank.”

Cox's eyes widened when he heard the word *passed*. He didn't know if he could take seeing a corpse, a *dead man*, yet. He knew it would happen someday, but he prayed it would not be today.

The sergeant gave a few taps on the door and then called out, "Mr. MacGreggor. Mr. MacGreggor, are you in there?"

Not hearing a response, the sergeant stepped to the left and peered through the living-room window with his hands to the pane. Cox looked in over the sergeant's shoulder, but with the bright sun shining from behind, no lights on inside, all shades drawn and only a narrow space between the shade and the window frame, it was difficult to make out anything in the dark house. All he could see was his partner's strained face in the reflection of the glass.

"What the...?" The sergeant seemed stunned, his brows pulling to the middle of his forehead in a frown. He sidestepped back to the door, grabbed the doorknob and shook it.

"What's wrong, Sarge?" Cox demanded.

The sergeant didn't answer as he shouldered the door twice, finally breaking in. The junior man rushed in behind with his hand on the handle of his gun and heart racing.

Mr. MacGreggor lay in his La-Z-Boy as peaceful as could be—with his jugular vein ripped open. Dried blood stained the side of the chair. It made a dark spot the size of a couch cushion on the light green carpet beneath it.

"Ho-lee shit!" Cox exclaimed.

The two approached the dead man slowly, Cox taking care to keep Morowsky in between. This sight hadn't set too well with the jelly doughnut he'd had at Thelma's half an hour earlier. The pastry tasted sour the second time around as he tried to keep it down.

“Somebody cut his throat!” Cox blurted.

“No, this ain’t no cut,” Morowsky said, inspecting the gash. “This looks like—teeth marks. Some kind of animal.” His eyes widened, and he seized the grip of his holstered .40 caliber Glock 22 and scanned the room. “Get out! Get out and call for back up!” he shouted. “I don’t know what the hell did this!”

Cox bolted out the doorway and hurdled the porch steps. He held onto his hat with one hand and, in nervous confusion, pulled out his Glock semi-automatic with the other.

Mrs. Crane sidestepped out of his way and ran toward her porch steps next door.

As he landed on the sidewalk, Cox fumbled his gun. It flipped up, spinning. He slapped it to the concrete, trying to snatch it from midair. The gun bounced once. He met it with the toe of his right foot, kicking it across the yard and under the patrol car.

He went to his hands and knees and groped frantically under the car for the gun.

Hysterical screams came from inside the house. Then a plea, “Help!”

Cox jumped up, his search brief and unsuccessful. “Sarge?” he answered, his high-pitched voice cracking.

He ran toward the house to help his partner, nervously grabbed his empty holster, then ran back to the squad car to radio for help. The young man’s hands trembled out of control as he made the call. His face dripped sweat, and his uniform shirt, crisp and dry moments before, was dark and spotted from perspiration.

“F-f-five Adam Seven to dispatch.”

“This is dispatch,” a voice squawked the calm reply. “Go ahead, Five Adam Seven.”

“Uh, uh....” Cox knew there must be a number designation for what had happened here, but he couldn’t remember. “We’ve got a, uh, two-eleven, uh, no a five, uh—shit!

There's a dead man. Eleven thirty-seven Whiteside. His throat's all tore up. We need help, backup, right away!"

Cox threw the microphone back into the car. He needed a gun. He had to find *his* gun. He stammered like a chicken surrounded by coyotes, jockeying back and forth around the car in indecision.

The rookie took a last, brief look under the car. No luck. He must help his partner. He approached the house in slow stumbling steps. Perspiration spilled from Cox's pores, running from the sweatband of his cap, down his forehead and into his eyes. His jaw and lip trembled and he breathed from his open mouth. And then he froze. He froze like a statue out on MacGreggor's lawn, so solidly that he wasn't sure he'd be able to move even when backup arrived. They'd find him standing there, waiting for pigeons to crap on his shoulders with his partner in some sort of horrifying fix inside the house only thirty feet away. He couldn't move. Every joint was locked. He tried to force himself but it was like when his father held him down when he was little, covering young Farley's mouth, forcing him to stop crying. His father's hand had remained clamped over his mouth no matter how much Farley had gasped, blew mucous out his nose, struggled for air. *There aren't any damn monsters in your damn closet!*

Finally, something snapped inside his head, and once again, it was like his father's fingers, snapping in front of his face, trying to get Farley to move when his dad coached his little-league ball team, *Trying to get you to do something—anything, wakeup—Good gawd!* his father would say. Cox burst forward and with two leaping strides, he mounted the porch and flung himself flat against the front wall, just left of the door. The old wood-lap siding

gave slightly, and the wall shuddered. His lungs coughed out air from the force. He swallowed hard. It hurt, like swallowing a bone chip with sharp edges.

He shifted his eyes toward the door and slowly inched his head to the doorway. He peeked in, wide-eyed. The big sergeant lay motionless on his stomach, feet toward Cox in a narrow hallway leading to the kitchen.

“Sarge,” he whispered, cautious not to alert the sergeant’s attacker.

No response. He must have been knocked unconscious.

He had to help his partner; he just had to. Lt. Simpson was on the way, and backup would be there soon. But would it be soon enough for the sergeant? What would they say when they found out Cox had lost his gun? The guidebook hadn’t covered this. His classroom training left this out. He was alone, now, and unarmed.

Sergeant Morowsky’s gun lay a few inches from the Sarge’s extended hand. The time had come. This was Farley Cox’s chance to prove himself to his father. What he would do next, how he would handle this situation, would either make his father proud or kick the old man square in the balls with shame.

Cox scanned the room. The sergeant’s assailant wasn’t in view. If he could get to Morowsky’s gun, he’d be okay. Maybe it—whatever it was—had gone.

The young officer edged into the house, hands on both sides of the open doorway ready to push start a run in any direction necessary.

A long, crimson line of blood trailed from the sergeant’s body. He’d been dragged. Something like a rope ran along the length of the blood trail. No, it wasn’t a rope—it was a section of the sergeant’s intestines.

The jelly doughnut that had remained at the ready after the last time filled his mouth with the sour taste again, but he choked it back once more.

Cox dropped to all fours and scampered, beside a couch, opposite the old man in the recliner. He bumped hard into the CD player on a stand nearby. It jacked back and forth briefly. He held his panting to listen for any sounds from his adversary.

Seconds passed. No sound or movement. From his angle, he could only see the big sergeant's legs in the hallway. Morowsky's neatly pressed, light brown trousers soaked up the vermilion puddle they lay in. His black, spit-shined shoes were splattered in blood.

The CD player startled the young officer with Enya's rhythmic *Orinoco Flow*. *She sings of sailing....*"

Again he thought of the gun. He had to go for the gun. Gathering his courage, he crawled slowly out into the open toward the hallway and his partner's motionless body. The hall was six feet long. On the left side was a closed door—probably a closet—a dark open basement doorway on the right. The sergeant's legs and lower body lay only fifteen feet away, but he couldn't see his face, or head for that matter, to determine if there might be a sign of life.

"Sarge. Sarge, can you hear me?" Cox whispered. "It's okay, Sarge. I'm going to get you out of here. Hold on."

He crawled to the sergeant's feet and stopped, straining to see down the dark open stairway to the basement.

Enya wants to reach—and beach on Tripoli shores....

No movement, nothing, only darkness.

He looked back.

The gun was six feet in front of him. Then, he saw the reason he couldn't see the sergeant's head. It wasn't there.

His eyes bugged as he held himself back from making any noise. The jelly doughnut came up in full force, filled his cheeks, and flushed through his sinuses, causing them to burn. He gulped the sour cud back, but some escaped through his nose and dripped onto Sergeant Morowsky's right calf.

Unimaginable. He couldn't fathom the kind of beast that could have done this. It was the thing of nightmares and ghost stories.

Cox again recalled his father yelling at him when he'd had a nightmare as a young boy. *There's no such thing as monsters!* he'd shouted as he brutally tossed little Farley back into bed.

The gun.

He inched forward.

Another trail of blood. Smear. Large paw prints—very large. They led from the sergeant's upper torso, around the doorway, into the kitchen and under a metal table. He glanced to his right side and down the basement stairway once again and then back to the sergeant's gun.

He moved closer. His eyes followed the trail of blood around the corner. Surely, this thing was in the kitchen or already gone. He'd soon be able to reach the gun and use it if he needed—he guessed the need would come very quickly.

He inched more, close enough to see where the trail ended.

The sergeant's head looked back at Cox with a terror-stricken face in the middle of the floor.

“Oh, shit, shit, shit!” he said, unable to hold it back.

He lurched for the gun. He surprised himself by not fumbling it. He held it in his trembling right hand, pointing into the kitchen. His knees straddled the sergeant’s body, and he leaned on his left hand for support.

The Sergeant’s still warm blood soaked into the knees of Cox’s trousers, and he felt its stickiness on his hand near the sergeant’s shoulder. The sweet, salty smell of gore filled his lungs. His stomach churned.

Still no movement, no sound. He looked at the blood trail and noticed again how it was smeared. *Why is it so smeared, and why does it only go out to Sarge’s head, then stop?*

The answer came to him. It came fast and hit him like a bucket of ice water. The paw prints didn’t smear going into the kitchen, they smeared coming out. The prints led back to the right side of the body.

Too late.

A cool breeze pushed up the basement steps, wrapped around his neck and signaled a needling tingle to start from his tailbone and race up his spine. It widened as it raced and slammed into his brain, making his head shudder. Something had come up the basement steps beside him.

A low growl.

Enya wants to crash on your shores....

He rolled his eyes to the dark basement doorway.

The thing was two feet from his face.

Cox didn’t dare move.

It was a dog but not just any dog. Huge and black. Spindly legs. Terrifying dark eyes. Pointed, demon-like ears. Tremendous ivory fangs protruding from a hideous, curled and snarling snout.

John *the Man* Cox had been wrong. *There truly are monsters!*

The large black animal opened its mouth and growled again. Cox felt its hot breath on his face and smelled the rancid odor. Strings of saliva stretched from its lower to upper enormous, white fangs. One of the thing's lower fangs had been broken off. A small, bloody piece of flesh hung from the jagged edge.

Officer Farley Cox knew he'd have to move fast. He'd sit back quickly and shoot. In the next half second, time slowed in his mind, almost to a stop.