

**WAIVING MIRANDA**

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Waiving Miranda* is a nonfiction collection that explores my career in law enforcement with a special emphasis on how the day-to-day association with others can lure a person into self-observation. The essays include my experiences as a road-patrol deputy, sex-crimes detective, and homicide detective in one of the largest county law enforcement agencies in the nation. Instead of the TV version of law enforcement— anecdotes of police chases and shoot outs—this thesis examines people on both sides of the yellow crimes scene tape as they face their own mortality and the gruesome truth of people’s unabashed cruelty towards one another.

These essays wrestle with such issues as the following: confronting my own perceived inadequacies while encountering the expectations of those whose ideas of police work come from shows such as *SWAT*, *Law and Order*, and *NYPD Blue*; balancing career and parenting in the aftermath of divorce and a loss of purpose; pursuing a career in law enforcement with the idea of serving the community; discovering that policing in real life is a direct contradiction to the celluloid heroes I grew up watching on television; staging an internal war and ultimately resolving to move past resentment and move forward with a new purpose.

Unlike most true crime dramas, this collection does not promise a happily ever after. Instead, it’s a detailed account of the men and women in the law enforcement community today, and how, as much as they guard the public against criminals at large, so must they guard themselves against the emotional toll that this knowledge carries with it.

## WRITING LIFE

The first time I ever thought of putting pen to paper, I was sitting in a restaurant saying goodbye to friends. I was on the cusp of being discharged from the Army to start my new life as a college student. My lieutenant sat across the table from me laughing at a story I was telling everyone about a fateful trip I took to Yosemite National Park when I was nineteen. It was one of those trips where despite best intentions, everything went wrong; no room at the inn, two crashes with a motorcycle, and sleeping in the middle of a softball field trying to avoid sprinklers on a time schedule. It is, by far, one of my favorite personal anecdotes about being young and dumb and willing to let life take you where it will. When I was finished with the story, LT told me I was one of the best storytellers he had ever known personally.

Now, while I may exude confidence, to a fault, some would say, I was truly taken aback by his comment. I have always loved telling stories, mainly to make people laugh, but I never considered myself to be a Storyteller with a capital S. This small remark set about a train of thought that led me to enroll in a creative writing class at the University of Central Florida.

Back at school after eight years in the Army, I found that I was lost and out of place back in the “real world.” I was twenty-six years old, married with a child on the way, and totally out of touch with the incoming freshmen. Miraculously, with my first story, “Behind the Walls,” things started to change. I was getting feedback and interest about a war story from people I didn’t know and probably wouldn’t have known if not for the story. Somehow, my narrative about being alone in a foreign country, a world apart,

translated to these readers in their own world. It was my first realization that stories are not just about the thing happening, but about the response it creates in the reader as well. It is with this idea in mind that I have created my stories.

It is close to fifteen years since my first creative writing class. While my undergraduate stories centered around the Gulf War and the effect it had on me, I am now more focused on the world I presently inhabit: that of law enforcement and the toll it has taken on my life and my ever changing view of the “real world” that makes the nightly news. Everyone knows that there is nothing good on at six o’clock; the nightly news is so depressing and often difficult to bear. Now imagine living that half-hour of negativity for the other twenty-three and a half hours of the day. In the past five years, aside from two family vacations in Maine where the cell service is lacking, my phone has never been turned off. Currently, I am on call for any hostage negotiation that should arise in the county as well as being subject to a homicide call-out. Before that, I was subject to call-out for any sex crime. This is what being in law enforcement is like for me; spending every moment on guard, knowing that the wolf is out there ready to pounce. To balance this career against the backdrop of my loving wife and three children is no small task. My graduate thesis is plopped dead center in the middle of this quandary: how does one coexist between predator and prey without eventually becoming one or the other.

While I am currently writing creative nonfiction, my own particular brand of “craft” still leans heavily on the fiction style of writing. For this reason, I have chosen several fiction books from favorite artists because of their ability to pull me along a storyline. Particularly, Tobias Wolff, as I find his dialogue especially realistic. It doesn’t hurt that his nonfiction inspires me as well. In “Thanksgiving Special,” the first story

from *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff writes, "We did not die by the hundreds in pitched battles. We died a man at a time, at a pace almost casual." This ability to comment on the horrific as just matter-of-fact without the usual melodrama tacked on for effect is what I aspire to do with my work in writing about law enforcement.

In 2007, I went white water rafting in West Virginia with a couple of friends from work. I remember one of the guys I was traveling with wanted to make up different occupations when we introduced ourselves to the rest of the boat. Just to make it interesting, he said. Only what is more interesting than the horrific sex crimes detective? It is as close as most people get to be able to speak to a real deviant, a true life sexual predator, without feeling dirty or used up. What I want to do is examine the truth; that not all victims are true victims, but some amalgamation of what they think a victim is supposed to be. I want to create a true story that perhaps makes the reader evaluate how he or she sees sex crimes, and at the same time, not take anything away from the true victims.

Another author I've been inspired by is Andrew Vachss. His real life work with sexual crimes has infused his hardboiled Burke novels about a fictional detective dealing with gritty truths that modern society would rather ignore. Each fictional portrayal is grounded in a real-life truth. My aim, however, is to not be so hardboiled that the real-life characters become caricatures of what true law enforcement officers really are.

When Writing memoir, it is challenging to write about one's family and keep the details real without hurting the ones you love in the process. In Rick Bragg's *The Prince of Frogtown*, the author somehow unearthed his own difficult family trials without searing the people he cares for in the process. He speaks of true pain and desperation

without evoking a single feeling of pity from the reader. This trait is not easily come by in *The Glass Castle*, and her grandmother in *Half-Broke Horses*, incites me to want to write.

Few books on my list deal with detective work of any kind. The reason for this is simple; of the few “cop” memoirs I have read, somehow, they each left me feeling a little flat. “I was undercover doing this” or “I was in a shoot out doing that,” they claim. But these types of situations are only the tip of the iceberg when talking about police work. Where Ryan Smithson’s portrayal of a soldier in *Ghosts of War*, I too want to tear down of society’s idea of what a “cop” is supposed to be. So much of the time is spent waiting for something to happen and all that alleged action just isn’t there. Many cops go their whole careers without ever firing a shot. Ninety-seven percent of the time, police work deals in the everyday drama that has nothing to do with the stuff beamed into my living room from the television networks. I want to tell the real story; how this job can change people slowly, in fundamental ways that no matter how hard we try, can’t be undone. My main intention with this thesis is not just to tell a story as it happened, but to tell the story that doesn’t happen or to ponder on what will happen next.

At the same time, I want to show the humor in the mundane. For this reason, I have read David Sedaris’ books about his family life. His ability to bring humor to the painful drudgery we all face is near genius. In Tom Groneberg’s *The Secret Life of Cowboys*, I find satisfaction in telling the story behind the mythos of cowboys.

What I have ended up with is a collection of days culled from the past ten years. However, instead of the technical writing required by police reports that will end up in court, I have created stories that will hopefully end up on coffee tables.

For my wife and children.  
This is only the beginning.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my friends and co-workers for making some of this material so easy to write, and for letting me use their real names, my family for not disowning me, and my wife, Nikki, for pushing me into the computer room to sit alone and type.

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## ***PROLOGUE***

### 1. You have the right to remain silent.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, in fairly regular conversations with friends, I routinely expressed my thoughts about being interrogated by the police. This topic of discussion was up there with hypothetical conversations about what I would do if I won the lottery, or if I could choose to go back in time in my own life, when would I return and why? First, I would give each of my family members a cool million and then disappear from their lives for reasons that I have yet to be able to put into words. Second, I would go back to thirteen, just before puberty, where I could open up the deeply buried wall locker in my brain that carries my sense of insecurities, throw out all the candy and television, and replace it with a set of sit-ups, crunches, or push ups, so that I could look at myself in the mirror without a sense of loss and then perhaps to tell the ladies how I really felt when the moments presented themselves. And third, why not talk to the police. After all, I haven't anything to hide, right?

My wife says these are conversations that only men have.

### 2. Anything you say may be used against you in court.

When I was six, I told my sister Julie that I was sneaking into my father's den to look at his Playboy magazines. They were in the bottom drawer of his desk. A ruler, manila envelope, and a copy of the more benign Panama Spillway magazine rested on top of them, hiding them from view. I looked at them every chance I got. But when I failed to

do something requested by my sister, she quickly ran to my father to tell him my dirty secret. I stared him in the face, called her a liar, and started crying.

“It’s okay, bud,” he said as he hugged me. “It’s only natural to want to see those.” But I continued denying it. I was six, and I was a liar. My trust in my sisters waned and after a few more years and a few more broken promises, I learned to keep my mouth shut. It didn’t even matter if I wasn’t doing anything wrong; context is a magical thing when in the wrong hands.

3. You have a right to talk to a lawyer before and during questioning without charge.

When facing a true allegation, people experience a sense of fight or flight. If you did it, admit it. If you can’t do the time, run. I am a type-A personality, and with that dominating sensibility comes a little ego. Just a little. So, while it is unlikely to ever happen, I believed that if I were ever brought in for questioning and read my Miranda Warnings, my answers would be clear; of course I don’t need a lawyer. Only criminals need lawyers.

4. If you cannot afford a lawyer and want one, one can be provided for you before questioning without charge.

As I get older, I am still the good guy in the movie of my life, but there is a twinge of darkness. Given the right circumstance, say the rape or murder of a loved one, I could conceivably commit some crime of vengeance that, while justified in my own eyes, might not be seen as such by members of law enforcement. So, to that end, if I ever found myself as the subject of interrogation, I’d amend my previous conviction and state that if

I refused to talk to the police, then that would mean I was guilty. I would still talk if I was not connected to any crime, but it is stupid to think that I would be able to compete with my own lies. If innocent, cooperation. If guilty, a lawyer couldn't hurt.

5. Has anyone threatened you or promised you anything to get you to talk to me?

Now here I am today, a Major Crimes Detective, having over a thousand interviews under my belt in Sex Crimes, and presently working in Homicide, and my mind is changed once again. In my own experience as an interrogator—a word defense attorneys are eager to use when referring to me—I've discovered that when talking to the police about a crime, any suspect would be ill advised not to get a lawyer. Context is king. What was I doing with that girl in the first place? Why is she accusing me of such a heinous crime? What possible reason would a detective have to help me out? After all, he doesn't know me from Adam's house cat.

6. Do you understand what I just read to you?

## *OF MATCHES, MAIDS, AND MEMORY*

IN MY SECOND memory, I am on my knees under a bush, matches in my hand, making the scratch, scratch, scratch against red phosphorus, eager to burn the teepee of sticks and leaves I have built into a pile in front of me. My father will be home soon, either for lunch or the end of the day, I cannot remember which, and I keep looking from left to right, paranoid, scared of being caught by him, or the live-in maid cooking inside our kitchen. I am four-years-old and well aware of the wrong I am still trying to commit. Each match strikes fire and burns out under green bark. Each wisp of smoke forgotten in the light of a new match, the new scratch, and the small flames sparking to life in front of me. I have yet to face repercussions; too young to feel the sting of failure.

My father works less than a half-mile away as a new lieutenant for the Canal Zone Police. I have no idea what this means other than he is the police and by definition, the law of the land. If I am successful in starting the fire, he will surely put me out. I have no idea that by the time I came along, he was already out of patrol, past the detective phase of police work and now stuck firmly behind a desk in the fast track of a bureaucratic life.

At least this is what I can gather from old pictures and fading memories of his outside life and what I know a lieutenant's job to be in my own career: an observer of cops, telling old stories of things you did instead of things you are doing. No overtime, no stakeouts, just the organization of men and women still working for a living. While my father wore a uniform in parades and occasionally to work, he did not drive a marked car,

nor did he wear an active radio, or at least I never heard it squawk. If asked what he did during my childhood, I simply said he was a policeman. I had no idea what that meant. I was twelve when he retired, twenty-four when he died, and thirty-two when I decided to follow in his footsteps. Stepping off a small stage, newly appointed as the long arm of the law, ready to protect and serve, with a shiny silver star pinned to my chest and a factory fresh semi-automatic handgun, my split-second, twenty-year decision was already weighing heavy on my hip.

My earliest memories are recollections of my own capacity to destroy the things around me. Seven or eight years from the matches under that bush, I will set fire to the carpet of my living room while playing with the blue flame of nail polish remover. Around the same time, I will also burn down a vacant lot in the neighborhood near mine, hopping on my yellow and black BMX as the flames consume the tree and scrub bushes only feet from a shiny new home. The getaway pedaling of my bike marked a metronome beat as the sounds of sirens filled the quiet, suburban neighborhood, a neighborhood full of obedient children who listened to their parents when they told them not to play with fire.

An obsession with fire starting is one of three behavioral characteristics associated with sociopathic behavior in the MacDonald Triad. The second and third are bedwetting and cruelty to animals. While I almost pissed my pants riding home, I was able to hold it. And my best friend, a merle-colored mutt named Tiger, who trailed behind me, tongue panting in the wind, would have understood if I had.

But under that bush, it is still 1975, and I am unaware of my full potential to destroy. I am more concerned with seeing the sparks fly. Jimmy Carter is making a run

for the White House with his toothy Georgia grin, and we still have a few more years in Panama before he will sign his name to papers that will change my life forever, uprooting my family and sending us to Florida and the great United States, a land useful only for vacations and Fantasyland, not suitable for family living. Of course, no one knows this yet. We cannot see the future, and I cannot see my father walking up the road as I pull the last match from the paper book. I am only four, and consequences, though unseen, are coming.



## *INGRAINED*

“If you wanted people to like you, you should have become a firefighter.”

--Sex Crimes Corporal Michael Segreaves on dealing with victim complaints.

IN THE DRIVE-THRU of a local Kentucky Fried Chicken in Orlando, the clerk handing me my bucket of extra crispy put it best; “Cop, firefighter, or wrestler?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

He nodded his head at me. “You know, the bald head, the muscles, the goatee. You look like you’re either a cop, firefighter, or a pro-wrestler.”

I smiled and set the bucket of chicken on the passenger seat, wishing I had worn a set of tights and wrist cuffs to make my answer really sing. “Stone Cold Steve Austin,” I said. “That’s me in a nutshell.”

“Seriously?”

“No,” I said. “I’m a cop.”

“See,” he said to the other clerk standing next to him. “What did I say?”

I tried to be funny, adding, “You’re a regular detective.”

“I always thought I could have been a good detective,” he said handing me my drink with a rueful smile.

“Me too,” I said, taking it. But of course, that is what everybody says when I tell them what I do.

And when did this happen? When did the way I carry myself so easily betray what I did for a living? And how could this look be used against me? I have been asking myself this question for as long as I can remember.

\* \* \*

I spent the first quarter of my life running. Whether to school, or to play, or to the dentist to get a tooth pulled, I was a regular Forrest Gump. In the Canal Zone, between 1974 and 1982, I was free to do as I pleased. There was no nightly news of child molesters, or murderers, or psychopaths waiting to take children. My father was already well on his way up the food chain of the Canal Zone Police and in the landscape of the outside world, I feared nothing but the law that lived inside my own home. I lived free of any worry and somehow, between the ages of four through twelve, I knew it.

I roamed the neighborhood with friends, or with my sister, until five o'clock when we would go home and eat the dinner that was already prepared—maybe some sancocho de gallina, all full of stewed hen and starched yucca—and delivered to us by the Panamanian women who came to our house to cook, clean and care for us for twenty or thirty dollars a week, and then we left again to play outside until it was dark. I ran from my house to school. I ran from the store to the train station. I ran from the Balboa clubhouse to my father's police station, and from there I ran to the public pool. And if there ever came a time that I forgot this safety, in the form of some innocent hesitation, my father was there to protect me. When I hesitated to join the Boy Scouts, my father became the scoutmaster. When I faltered with trying out for baseball, even though I excelled in sports, my father signed on to manage the team. My father was perfect the way every father should be. Everything was taken care of for me, and I took everything for granted. That is, until Jimmy Carter was elected President. When he signed the Panama Canal Treaty ending U.S. operations in Panama, he put a bullet in the head of my father's dream of one day becoming Chief of Police, stamped an invisible expiration date

on my parents' marriage, and destroyed any semblance of my attempts at a normal childhood. Suffice it to say, that peanut farmer ruined everything.

\* \* \*

Thursday night. Heading home. Eastbound State Road 408; a congested mess of demolition derby tollbooths that routinely puts Central Florida in the top spots of worst driving in the country. My Nextel beeps, vibrating my hand.

"Go ahead," Giardiello says.

"Listen, I had court today on a DUI, been there since eleven this morning. I just now got out." I look at my watch. 18:10. If he makes me come in tonight, I'll kill someone. I swear.

"You want to come in late?"

"Honestly?" I shake my head, almost pleading. "I only got two hours of sleep today. I want to get out of this uniform."

"How'd you do?"

The guy blew a .177 and a .180, over twice the legal limit. Could hardly stand up when he got out of the car. All his lawyer wanted to talk about was which taillight was out on his car. I just pulled him over because I needed a DUI that night, right? Everyone trying to get off on technicalities. Doesn't matter that he was drunk. Doesn't matter that he could have killed someone. It's all about whether I had the probable cause to pull him over.

"Alright, I guess. You know the deal. Defense attorney calls me a liar. Prosecutor objects."

“Yeah, right,” Giardiello says. “No, I don’t see the problem with you skipping out tonight. Be safe. See you on Monday.”

The phone vibrates again. I look down at the blue glow. My sister Julie is calling.

“Hey. I was just about to call—”

“Someone just tried to take Brianna,” she says.

In moments like this, time doesn’t fly. It stops and drops to the earth with a dull thud like the first sandbag thrown in the middle of a hurricane, trying to shore up against the impending flood. Brianna is my seven-year-old niece. She lives with me and my sister while Julie figures out her life, her next move.

“What?”

“Just now, some guy tried to take her into his apartment.”

I press down on the gas pedal. “Where is she now?”

“She’s with me.”

And what about my own daughter? They are always together. Images of her broken body flash in my head; a vacant lot, overgrown scorched grass, her soft brown hair tangled, her mouth caked with dirt and silver duct tape, and her polka dot panties tied around her wrists, hands behind her back. “Where’s Keaton?” I ask.

“They’re both here. The guy tried to come in the house, Vance. Brianna’s freaking out. I’m going over there and—”

“Stop. Don’t. I’m two miles away. Just wait till I get there.”

These are the calls I hate. How to tell a father that someone tried to take his little girl? How to calm that rage? Keaton and Brianna are cousins. Only eight months apart. I flip on my lights and sirens. I’ll kill him.

\* \* \*

A year and a half after relocating to the States, I witnessed true anger from my father. I had seen glimpses of what I thought was his anger before when I hit my sisters, even after being warned a thousand times against it. It didn't matter that they were bigger than me. One day they wouldn't be, and then where does the anger go? Or when I had temper tantrums, crying at the drop of a hat over not getting my way, missing out on the pack of gum or comic book that I wanted. And when I skipped school on Halloween at the ripe age of four, hiding from the bus driver, standing behind the tree in my Casper costume; the white plastic jumpsuit that smelled like an empty kiddie pool, the permanent happy face of a tiny friendly ghost, the seemingly backless garment with plastic ties at the neck. My excuse falling on deaf ears as the spanking came. I just didn't want the girls to see my underwear. But it was on my thirteenth birthday when I saw the first glimpse at his true anger: an empty, rotten bucket heaved up a forgotten well, its waters too dark and murky to drink. This was the night my parents' marriage finally fell apart.

Sitting on the pool deck in the dark, the South Florida moonlight reflecting off the water, warping his grimacing features more than normal; the tip of his hawk nose missing, the cheeks inflated somehow. In this place so different from where we came from, where everyone was supposed to be happy in the wealth of United States wonderland, he covered his deep and mournful sobs with his catcher's mitt hands. I figured he would take his wedding ring off at any moment and hurl it into the deep end of the pool. Thirteen-years-old, and I watched my only real example of a man buckling under the pressure of a bad marriage and—or so I thought at the time—my mother's piss-poor judgment. My first day into manhood, and I no longer trusted women.

Before I left the nest, I blamed my mother for everything wrong with my life. She ruined my birthday. She and the strange man I saw leaving through the back door of our beach condo earlier that night. The condo we were all supposed to go to, together, as a family. I screamed for my dad and the man ran away down to the beach. I stared at my mother's face as my father ran past me in hot pursuit. "Go sit in the truck," he yelled. For an hour, I sat in the truck, flipping the blade open and shut on the new Swiss Army knife I had gotten that day, praying that the man of mystery would come knocking on my door to apologize.

Sitting by the pool back at our house, my father's shoulders shook in concert with his crying. Unlike moments before, inside the sliding glass doors, where our antique rocker lay in splinters; custom-made at the turn of some century, crushed with his bare hands like the Incredible Hulk on a murderous rage as soon as we walked in the door. He paced and muttered to himself while I swept the stained wood into a pile of kindling, my neck and shoulders only periodically flinching as he passed close to me on his way into the kitchen.

My mother's tears came differently. In the dark, like my father before her, yet in the privacy of her bed where she retreated. Alone now, my father gone to Orlando, to regroup, I sat on the floor near the door, leaning against the dresser, listening to her tell me about his faults. How hard it was. What he'd done to her over the years. Vague stories about newlyweds in Panama; picking her up and leaving her stranded on top of a refrigerator while he laughed at her. Or more recently in this very house, how he threatened suicide and promised to take me with him. Way before that fateful night at the beach.

Even now, two decades later, and fifteen years after my father has been dead and buried, she still tells me how he must have been bi-polar, but the doctors didn't diagnose that sort of thing back then; especially not a man with such impeccable character as my father. She protected him from everyone. She alone knew his sudden moods swings. She alone suffered his violent tendencies. She tells me stories to make me see him in her camera lens instead of my own, where the polarizing filters fall away and the harsh light shows him for who he was, a monster who hated his life. But I want to lend her my camera. Have her watch the slide show in my mind. Show her how the shooting angles make all the difference. She forgets, in the twilight of her life, that we all bore witness to the fights. And she forgets the role she gave me to play.

As a child, I was conscripted into domestic espionage. "Did Daddy smoke any cigarettes today when you were fishing? Did you two stop by the donut shop on your way home? I only want what's best for him. You want him to live a long and happy life, don't you?" I had no idea the high treason I was committing in the bright interrogation lights of my mother's gaze.

I am six years old. We are living in the last house in La Boca, Panama; a duplex four bedroom, two and a half bath, split level plan. The family neighborhoods with children in every other house. Federal Government socialism. Everyone just like the other. My room is at the top of the stairs, painted bright-boy blue and I am sitting on the white laminate square tiles playing with matchbox cars as he comes storming up the stairs. The heavy, thunderous clump of his size thirteen shoes stops just inside my doorway. I look up to see my new fishing tackle being thrown at my feet.

“So this is how you treat me after I take you fishing? Spying on me for your mother?” he yells. The bridge above his nose arched into a wrinkled snarl, his teeth glistening with saliva just below his upper lip. His ears move backwards, like a dog ready to attack, but my mother is right behind him, lashing back before I can answer.

“You leave him out of this,” she says, supposedly shielding me from his rampage. “We just want you to be healthy.”

Who is this we she is talking about? Certainly, I’m not part of that. Dads live forever. Who isn’t healthy?

“I don’t know why I stay around here if this is the way I am treated,” he screams. “This time, I am leaving for good.”

Her words come rushing back to me. I only want what’s good for him. Keep him alive. I realize that I hadn’t understood. My life with her was not my life with him. Two seemingly similar worlds, yet separate, two planets orbiting the same sun. What good is keeping him alive if isn’t here with me?

I don’t let him make it back to the stairs before I am wrapped around his leg, begging him to STOP. Please don’t go! I promise I won’t tell again. Not ever. Please. This last wish spreading out with machine gun sobbing breaks in between. Please.

Seven years later, by the pool in our perfect backyard, my promise still intact, I wished I had let him go, for the sake of everyone involved. But six is not an age of reason. And thirty years later, I understand that parents never truly forgive themselves for the mistakes they make in front of their children.

\* \* \*



Back in the future, University Boulevard, pulling into my apartment complex where Brianna sits scared in our living room, and a crowd of people standing near the pool flags me down. The apartment manager, an overweight woman with a propensity to blow things out of proportion, tells me a white guy about twenty-years-old, wearing blue jean shorts and a white t-shirt, just mooned residents at the pool, punched a guy in the mouth, and then ran towards my building where he attacked another girl in the parking lot.

How do I tell her that I don't care? I'm dressed in uniform, driving a police car, they've called the police, and here I am. All this means nothing. I have to go home. Something is happening there. She looks at me, that pig nose of hers, and I want to punch her square in the face.

“Someone just tried to kidnap Brianna. I have to go there first.”

“Oh my God. What if that is the same guy? Oh my God.”

I leave her there with her hand over her mouth.

My sister Julie stands on the landing at the top of the stairs; the security door propped open by her body. The girl who lives next door to us stands at her doorway. She's been crying.

“It was her boyfriend,” Julie says.

“Where is he?”

The girl starts crying again. Tells me he would never do something like this. He's just messed up. He takes Methadone for his illness. And Wellbutrin or something. He's bipolar; has problems with people. Fitting in. He would never do this.

“Where is he?” I ask again.

“Please don’t hurt him.”

My voice low, deliberate. “Where...is...he?” My patience is gone.

She opens her door and points down the hall. “He’s passed out on the bed.”

My sister and I have shared the apartment next door for almost two years. I’ve seen this girl coming and going. Our front doors are separated, literally, by inches. She smiles and says hi to me when I walk the dog at night. She favors long, bohemian-style skirts with lacy shirts. She’s tall and wears her blonde hair chopped and wispy like the sword wielding heroines in animé comic books. I’ve never seen the inside of her studio apartment until now.

The boyfriend, just like she said, is passed-out flat on his back with his legs over the side suggesting that he sat down and then fell over. I kick his legs. “Hey, buddy, wake up.” He doesn’t answer. I call down the hallway. “What’s his name?”

“David,” the girlfriend says. “I swear he would never do this.”

David wears blue jean shorts and a white t-shirt. I shake my head; try to calm the tingling sensation running up and down my arms and neck. Same guy did everything. I kick his leg again; my right hand on my gun. “David, sit up.”

“Wha-?” David rolls over on his side away from me. “I told you I didn’t do it, Sharice. I didn’t touch no kid.”

It is in these moments, when my mind is reeling, where time speeds up, and everything reverts back to training. It’s getting out of my car at a burglary in progress and ending up with my gun pointed in the face of the suspect on the ground, caught red handed. How did I get here? When did the gun come out? And how am I the police in this particular moment?

One of the first things they teach in the police academy is the Matrix. There are six levels on the Use of Force Matrix. Every action begets an equal reaction. Words beget words, sudden movements beget bladed stances, and aggression is met head-on in the moment. Level one is Presence. The uniform. The haircut. The vacant sunglasses stare. All “the man” needs is the appearance of force to make John Q. Public’s stomach flutter. For the convict candidate, however, level one usually isn’t going to bend him to your will. For that it takes the “one time” approach. Level two: verbal. “I’m only going to tell you this one time.

Levels three through five on the Use of Force Matrix are where a cop can get himself into some trouble, depending on how well he is able to articulate the incident in the report.

Scenario: White male in early twenties accused of molesting seven-year old girl is holed up in a cluttered, one-bedroom studio apartment. Subject is lying on full-size bed, periodically making sudden movements, and refusing to comply with verbal commands. What level of response is needed? Please articulate subject’s actions and requisite response. Be sure to include level of force required for scenario.

Level three: Passive Physical—Subject displayed level three force by continuing to be uncooperative to verbal commands. Deputy uses level three approved Physical control tactics—counter moves, pain compliance, take downs, transporters, and restraint devices—to obtain requisite compliance from subject.

Level four: Active Physical—Physical tactics are inadequate for subject’s level of resistance. Deputy is unable to secure subject whose actions are now Active Physical. Deputy initiates level four approved Intermediate weapons—Taser and baton.

Level five: Incapacitation—Intermediate weapons fail to render subject compliant. Defensive tactic used to render subject unconscious.

Level six ends with someone dying.

\* \* \*

If you ask her, my mother will tell you that she remembers that day when I was ten years old and I came home crying, the day my best friend Russell flipped me over his back, karate-style, in front of all our friends after flag-football practice. Little Vance was flushed red with anger, she'll say, as if there is any other color to be flushed. She'll recall to you—and anyone else who will listen—how I rifled through the silverware drawer for a butter knife with which to kill my best friend. She'll tell you as if it were yesterday; as if the pain is still fresh in her mind, but she wasn't there. It was our maid, Ruthie, who chased me passed the yellow plastic flower patterned kitchen chairs, through the front door, and out of the house, crying for me to put the knife down. It was Ruthie, not my mother, who knelt beside me as I came to my senses and buried the silver shiv in the grass that stretched between Russell's house and mine. My mother remembers things the way I suppose we all remember things sometimes, coping with guilt, mixing the truth of the past with the regret of the present.

While I feel these moments in time are mine, I cannot truly tell my story without involving the rest of my family, and this scares the heck out of them. More so, it is starting to scare me. I want to be someone other than someone's brother or son. I want to make a mark in spite of them, not because of them. But it is the "we" I keep coming back to. The "we" that traps me like one of a hundred silver fish in a net, struggling to swim free, but caught nonetheless.

We—like so many other families, sisters and brothers, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons—struggle to love each other while still striking out some semblance of who we are alone. This is particularly difficult for me sometimes as I am the only man left in the family. I am at once loved for the brother I am, and yet loathed for the father I can't replace, no matter how much I may resemble him—the tenor of my voice, the stiffness in my stride—I cannot provide the praise or forgiveness for things in the past. It amazes me how the memory of a man fifteen years dead still plays a pivotal role in the relational dynamic of the ones he left behind. While they may not say this to me directly, both of my sisters seek the approval from me that they seemingly lacked from my father, and my mother longs for forgiveness for how things could have been. As if any of the missteps years ago could have fixed our lives, and yet still we tell little lies as if to somehow trick ourselves into believing that everything is just fine. After all, what's the harm in trying? Few people want an audience to the daily show in front of the bathroom mirror. So, while no one is watching, we swipe at a blemish here and tweeze away an errant hair there, quietly plucking our way to pseudo-perfection.

\* \* \*

Two decades later and another country away, my mother still shakes her head when I tell her my plans to go into law enforcement. My sister Julie quietly agrees with her. I hear their conversations when they think I am out of earshot. I tell them not to worry. I have changed. I don't throw temper tantrums anymore. I am not the tiny child I used to be where kicking and punching things had no impact. At sixteen, after a year of long, eagerly anticipated, accelerated growth, I swatted at Julie's arm when she tried to change the television station. With the bruise that appeared the next morning, came a

stark realization of the power that was finally breaking through in my body. I was Peter Parker taking pictures of radioactive spiders realizing that with great power comes great responsibility. I could not be strong and juvenile at the same time. Something had to give. I made a conscious decision to avoid any physical conflict, relying on my words to get me through. Unfortunately, not everyone believes that the pen is mightier.

Still, I try to assuage their fears. Tell them I became a cop to help people. No matter, they think. The badge and gun will unlock that cell in my head releasing the threat I used to be, and somehow that rage will find fertile ground again, and it will dig in deep. Just like when I was ten, with knife in hand, running across a field with murder on my mind.

\* \* \*

Stoned. This stupid, ignorant kid. “Not Sharice, David. Police. I’m only going to tell you one time to wake up.” I grab his thigh with my left hand and squeeze a small section of skin tightly in my fingers. “Get up.”

David jolts up, sees me standing in front of him, and vomits on the bed.

The urge slaps me. Two shots. Pop. Pop. Center mass. Guy went for my gun. That easy. A lesson to others; leave my family alone.

Rivulets of chunky drool hang from David’s mouth.

Too many people here. Need more time.

“Sharice, get in here,” I say. David’s vomit missed my feet by inches. “He’s puking in here. You might want to get a bucket or something.” His vomit looks like mustard and ketchup. Blood maybe. His shirt is covered in it. David looks like he’s going to die. I reach up and call Dispatch on my shoulder mic.

“Go ahead, car 518,” Dispatch says.

I give them my location; tell them to send Fire Rescue for possible overdose.

“And send another unit to respond. He tried to kidnap my niece.”

\* \* \*

We try to hide the imperfections of our time telling stories. My sister Julie likes to tell the story of my murderous rage, saying she was there. She likes to be part of the drama. She’ll say this because we all remember things differently, with our own individual agendas in play. Julie was constantly picked on for being overweight, a condition that carried over into adulthood, and still casts shadows on the good memories of what I remember as a fairly benign childhood. She remembers my fight with Russell having to do with me defending her honor, because after everything, I am still her hero; an unwanted title, but labeled just the same. Like convict, predator, or dirty cop.

At a show of hands during a staff meeting, my father was the only one who said he could pull the lever to hang the man presently on trial—and likely to get convicted—for raping and murdering an elderly woman earlier that year. When we came back from vacation that summer, his desk was at the Penitentiary.

In this role—cop, warden, and sheepdog—the goal at the end of the day is to come home with the same number of holes in your body as when you left for work. My father, always on guard. I studied him. Walked like he walked; head up, looking everyone in the eye, standing straighter, standing taller even when I wasn’t. And I talked like he talked; serious when gravity was called for, or being quiet to make myself look threatening. I have his stare. His picture. My thousand words. I fine-tuned my mind to track any incoming threat. Whether at work or at play, I trained myself to respond in an

instant; just a turn of the screw to be golden. Problem is, sometimes the screw gets turned too tightly or not enough. Sometimes, you lose yourself. Sometimes your wife walks in on the new you, the termite-ridden, hollow shell sitting still in an antique rocking chair counting the grooves in the barrel of your service revolver. Like my father did when I was in high school. Or so my mother says, now twenty years after the fact. But my memories don't gel with that recollection. I was in the thick of it, the go-between they each turned to, each one spilling their own truths to me, editing away any wrongdoings they felt shame about, lying to my face.

And I remember how the father of my sister Joni's best friend killed himself in Panama and how my Dad was the first responder to the scene. So we both know what it looks like to have brains splashed across the walls and ceiling, and the carnage it leaves behind. Everyone who knew my father keeps telling me that he is me, or I am him, but I would never do that. Of course, I have heard that more than once from family members when working a suicide.

\* \* \*

The police report on David had the following facts: he was at the pool because he wanted someone to buy him beer. When they refused, he bared his ass, slapped it, and told them to piss off. Someone told him to get the hell out of there and David took a swing and missed. On his way home, he saw a girl in the parking lot with blonde hair styled like his girlfriend's. She thought her boyfriend was sneaking up behind her to give her a hug. She screamed when she saw different, just like she'd been trained. David panicked and swung at her too, running home before she hit the ground.



He was sitting outside his door when Brianna came out of the apartment to visit a little girl who lived across the hall. David saw Brianna and got up to give her a hug. Or so he said. Because the combination of drugs and alcohol make a man happy don't you know? Make him need a hug. Even if that someone is a scared little girl standing in a place that is supposed to be safe. He needed a hug so much, that he followed Brianna into our apartment when she ran away. Stepping foot across our thresh-hold, he added burglary to his list of offenses.

\* \* \*

In my life of truth or consequences, consequence has a quick turn around time. Ruthie, our maid, told my parents everything she saw that day. Ten-years-old and I was touring the inside of the penitentiary two days later, courtesy of my father. He wasn't supposed to have family members in an agency vehicle, so the ride to the penitentiary was at once exhilarating and terrifying. Driving under the wrought iron entrance, the black rock and mortar pillars on each side, purposefully erected to strike fear into the men as they were driven to their new home, I was no less petrified. I did not know this side of my father other than the nametag and police shield he laid on his dresser each night. There were guns in the house, but I didn't know where they were. We had all been to the family cookouts at the firing range, but shooting is fun when it's paper targets and barbecue. Being escorted into a prison cell of an American Federal prison in Panama isn't like what you see in the movies. Especially when it's being done by the man you both love and fear the most in your life.

At his particular prison, when space is limited, six by six cage cells make their way into the dining facility for everyone to watch while guys piss into a coffee can.

Humiliation can turn even the worst offender into an eagle scout. Flaking gray-painted walls, the dank smell of damp and musty sheets, and the overall absence of anything remotely familiar or childlike all have a way of cementing obedience. By the end of supper that night, I was ready to pledge my allegiance.

The day after Russell flipped me over his back, humiliating me, I gave him a fifty-cent piece that I thought was particularly cool. He was my best friend and I wanted to share. He never knew my shame.

He would never have seen me coming.

\* \* \*

At David's violation of probation hearing months later, the prosecutor asks me to tell her what really happened with David in that small confined space, the heat of the moment being what it is; white hot. She finds it odd that Fire Rescue was called, and that the shirt he was wearing was different when he was later identified by witnesses on the scene. She wouldn't blame me, she says, given the circumstances.

"The paramedic said he was on a lot of drugs. He was throwing up blood. I wish I could say otherwise."

Seems David did have a problem fitting in with people. So instead, he stole from them and beat them up. He wasn't supposed to be living next door to us, but Sharice loved him. She wanted to help. Pig-nose served her with an eviction the next day and Sharice was out by the end of the week.

\* \* \*

My father died in bed, in his own home, after a medical specialist turned off the defibrillator in his chest. A suicide of sorts since the chemotherapy kept stopping his

heart. Being shocked alive every other hour takes its toll on a man. After twenty-four years of being my example of how a strong, responsible man is supposed to be, my father, whose normal body weight was around three fifty, died at under two hundred pounds and just minutes after the hospice nurse stepped onto our patio to tell us it was time. I held his tremendous hand and I told him I loved him. He half-smiled when I whispered in his ear to have a nice trip. It was the day before Father's Day.

\* \* \*

I guess David didn't have a man like my father in his life, because he didn't take the plea for violating probation; resolute that he never tried to kidnap anyone. He wanted to tell the judge his side of the story before he blindly took three years for a simple mistake.

Julie truly believed that he had tried to kidnap Brianna for God-knows-what. Brianna had already been a victim of sexual battery by her half-brother at the age of four and subconsciously, even though Brianna doesn't remember what happened, my sister means to perpetuate the victim in her. All Brianna thought, at seven years old, is that a stranger tried to hug her. She was trained to scream and run, and she did just that.

The judge sentenced David to eleven years in a Florida State prison for his violation of probation. That is how things work when someone gets probation instead of jail time the first time around. It's supposed to solve the overcrowding in jail. The only problem is staying out of trouble. At least that is how it was for David.

"I'm sorry, your honor," David said, his voice cracking with fear. "I can't do eleven years."

The judge must have heard that one before, because he didn't even skip a beat. "Do as many as you can." And he brought down his gavel, closing the case. And this was before he even faced charges for the threats to Brianna.

\* \* \*

When I was a teenager, sitting in the car next to my father, I often studied his face. I remember on more than one occasion asking him about his seemingly, permanent scowl.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

He would reach his hand over and cover my knee, patting me softly while asking me to repeat the question.

"You look mad, Dad," I would say, trying to make this serious question sound light. "Are you mad?"

As if on cue in a rehearsed stage play, he would smile then, shaking his head, and say, "No, Bud. I was just thinking."

Unlike most kids who ask for the who, what, when, where and why for every little thing—the color of the sky, the falling of the rain, the place where babies come from—I asked only close-ended questions back then. Whatever yes or no he gave me was absolute. I pressed no further, his replacement ersatz smile wiping away the need for any clarification. Only now, after ten years of working in law enforcement, finally seeing for myself the worst that everyone has to offer, have I figured out why I never asked him what it was he was thinking. I was smart enough to know that I didn't want to know.

\* \* \*

“I’m glad to see this job hasn’t changed you,” Julie says on the trip home from court. “Dad would have killed that man. Sure as I’m sitting here.” She shakes her head. “Couldn’t control himself like you.”

We’re stuck in new construction traffic in an unfamiliar county. I half-smile and nod my head, concentrating on the orange cones guiding my way. Content with the verdict handed down, knowing that David still has to face another judge in my county for attempted kidnapping, burglary, battery, and indecent exposure. I am thankful that I don’t have to make good on the promise I made to Sharice after they took David away that day.

She stood in her doorway, apologizing, saying again that David could never hurt anyone. I wanted to believe her. So, I convinced myself that he was drunk; that he never intended to hurt anyone. But he could. He did.

“Nothing against you. You can believe what you want. Stay with him. I don’t care.” I move closer to her, my face inches from hers, “But, if I ever see him here again. If he ever comes near my family,” I pause and realize that I am whispering. “I will kill him.”

“Okay,” she says, “I understand. I’m sorry.”

Julie looks back at Brianna. Tells her how brave she is. She doesn’t talk about what brought her here in the first place. The first time something like this happened. Saying ‘first’ instead of ‘other’ making this be something that will just keep happening unless they guard themselves against it. An unseen scar which continues to manifest itself whenever the need arises. Instead, she squeezes Brianna’s leg and reminds her that she has an uncle who loves her, who invited them to stay when she needed to get away from her previous life. Just a year, that turned into three, until she got back on her feet.

“Doesn’t he, Keaton? Wouldn’t your Dad do anything for you guys?”

Keaton smiles and nods her head.

Construction workers hold up signs that read Slow, Men Working. I lift my foot off of the gas pedal, hovering over the brake, holding tight to the wheel, cautious of the new road stretching out in front of me.

## ***ROUTINE CALLS***

THE VIDALIA ONIONS are in bloom, so you might get the odd call from Dorothy who insists that someone is stealing her vegetables again. They were there yesterday, she'll tell you, flicking her wrist to bring you back on the one acre lot, her mobile home slanted on its rusted support beams, the smell of dirt stagnant in your nose. She'll point to the water basin where she grows her garden and tell you how her next-door neighbor from fifteen years ago has it out for her. She doesn't remember he's dead so it's likely she won't remember meeting you again five days from now when she calls back about the missing celery.

She might start in on the bogeyman. She may peel back the sleeveless t-shirt she's wearing to expose her breast, lifting the pancake of her sixty-year-old skin to show you where he was biting her while she slept. Just give her a card and tell her you'll check the area. She'll thank you and ask if you know so-and-so from back in the day. Just smile or pretend to get another call on the radio; your presence is needed somewhere else. She'll make her way back to the filth of her life. Try not to stare at the bald spot on the top of her hairy calf muscle as she walks away. Ignore the slap-slap of galoshes on skin. It's just the tick tock metronome for the day moving right along.

Next, you might get called to the Circle K for a disorderly conduct. If Jesse James is back out on bond, he'll be raising hell. Of course, he'll be gone when you get there, but his pregnant, homeless girlfriend will tell you that the store manager is a witch and all they wanted was a fucking beer. She'll go not so lightly back into the woods where their

two-man, plastic, blue tent awaits her. Try not to shake your head at the life that unborn child has ahead of it, and don't offer to help her find a home because her family gave up trying a long time ago. Besides, she's using meth. You'll see that. She'll smack her lips when she speaks to you and her face will be pockmarked from the acne of Muriatic Acid and rendered red phosphorus. God helps those who help themselves. She's putting her faith in Jesse. He'll take care of me, she'll say. If he's not back in jail by the end of the week.

Finally, you might meet John. He'll be calling you about the threats he's been receiving. It will take you a couple of drive-bys to find his address since this is your first time. His driveway is overgrown, much like the man. On your third pass, he'll suddenly be standing at the gate of a locked fence guarding a seemingly empty lot. But as you look closer, you'll see the remnants of asphalt under the tangle of grass and weeds. And that closer look will only happen after you've been talking to John for a while, for he is the main attraction on this street, as he will tell you.

"They were screaming again this morning. Woke me up at four in the God-damn-morning screaming."

Ask him who was screaming, but it will be hard for you to concentrate at this point. Try to ignore the loincloth towel pinned around his waist. Keep your eyes on his glare, glancing down only when the opportunity presents itself. The towel will be threadbare yet thick with dirt and almost molded to his skin.

"Those kids. Yelling Bum! Bum! Bum! How much of this do I have to take?"

Ask how old the kids are. Try to avoid staring at his receding hairline, which appears to be one large dreadlock of feces; a dirt helmet created from years of sleeping in



filth. You will be amazed that the clump of hair doesn't knock up against the back of his neck as he turns to point to the bottles thrown onto his property by these hooligan youths.

“And I know my rights. If they come on my property, I can shoot them.”

It's okay to wonder why anyone would want to live like this. Just nod your head. Agree with him.

“You could do that. It is your right. But wouldn't it just be easier to ignore them? Stay back in your house?”

And as much as you might want to, don't look for his house behind the brush of overgrown weeds and dense trees. Does it truly exist? Is there some tent back there too? How long has he lived here? Is there power running to the property? Why haven't you met him before now? Why haven't you heard the stories of the hermit, hunched over, bare-chested, and wearing a dirt loincloth pinned precariously at his hipbone? Questions don't help.

“I already got a card from some female deputies last week when the kids threw those bottles, but this has got to stop.”

And how long did it take his beard and mustache to grow so that the only way you know he is speaking is the sound and the slight bump of hair moving on his face?

“So what are you going to do about this?” he will ask.

Your skin will be itching now, but resist the urge to scratch it. Any bugs you feel are probably imaginary. Just give him a card while you back away, tilting your head towards your radio, saying something about a burglary in progress, and go back to the Circle K to wash your hands. He doesn't want help. If he did, your skin wouldn't be crawling.

## ***TEN FOUR, COUNTY***

THE RADIO'S ALERT tone blares in Cordova's ear. "Attention Zone Twenty, any unit break and respond, 911-verbal, all parties 10-12 at 1256 Sunderson Street."

Silence. Cordova is in Zone Twenty-two tonight. Not his problem. He waits for someone else to pick up the call.

"County, One Twenty, go ahead and send it. I'll be coming from Goldenrod and Curry Ford," Voyles says over the radio into Cordova's car.

"Unit to back One Twenty?" Dispatch asks.

Cordova types the letters and number from the tag of the silver car in front of him into his computer. Deep in concentration, his radio ear is not yet in tune. He hasn't yet learned to multitask, concentrating instead on spending his nights running up behind cars running tags. Doing what his trainers taught him. Enter tag, press return. Red light to green. Training manual advises to stay two car lengths back, follow till the computer answers. Barrel fishing.

"County, has One Twenty gotten a back yet?" Corporal Al Giardiello asks.

"That's a negative Charlie twenty-nine."

"One Twenty-two, put yourself to back," Giardiello says. Cordova is yet another soup sandwich he has to babysit on Midnights.

Cordova continues following the silver car Westbound.

"One Twenty-two, Charlie Twenty-nine, you copy?"

Nothing.

“County go ahead and send him an alert tone.” A piercing tone rips through the air out of every shoulder mic in Sector Two.

“One Twenty-two, do you copy?”

Cordova’s concentration snaps to the sound of his call sign. He picks up his hand-mic from the center console. “Calling One Twenty-two, County?”

“Charlie twenty-nine requesting you to back up One Twenty.”

“Ten four, County, send it.” Cordova flips on his red and blue lights. The silver car in front of him immediately slows to a crawl and begins to pull over. Cordova jerks his steering wheel to the right and speeds by the confused driver.

“Ten four, units responding be advised, female caller just said to send deputies and hung up. Call taker could hear screaming in the background before the line went dead.”

“Can someone advise where Sunderson is from University and Alafaya?” Cordova asks.

“Go West to Econ Trail and then south,” Charlie twenty-nine says. “County, go ahead and send me the call and I’ll be coming as well. One Twenty, just advise what you’ve got when you get there.”

“Ten four.”

\* \* \*

Voyles realizes he passed the house when the numbers on the mailboxes jump from 1226 to 1286. The county doesn’t maintain these rural roads. Mailboxes range in color and size from standard boxes painted in John Deere green to Dale Earnhart’s black number three racing car with a checkered flag to signify outgoing mail. Adding to the

confusion, land owners scatter mobile homes two and three to a lot, install speed bumps to slow traffic down the one way road, and then neglect to put in streetlights. No power bill at the end of the month and neighbors get their privacy. Voyles parks the car one house away, grabs his flashlight and gets out of the car.

Past the city, past the fluorescent lights of convenience stores and two-lane roads, the air is cooler; at least three degrees. Voyles lets out a long breath and watches the mist float into the dark and he pretends for a moment that he is up north, where frosty breath appears in late August instead of the week before New Years. In the cold dark air, the peaceful quiet, he envisions a future with full custody of his daughter, living somewhere in the Smoky Mountains, working a job with less danger and more time at home. But the mist clears. His eyes adjust to the absence of light, waiting for the stars to make their presence known as he settles back into the reality of brisk December nights, every other weekend off, and the stability that comes with carrying for a living.

Dispatch said they heard screaming and a woman or child crying for the police. Then the line went dead. He holds his flashlight in his left hand, covers the lens with his right, and pointing it at the ground in front of him, flips the beam on and quickly off again. Clear path to the house. Flash again. Nothing moving. No sounds. No light coming from the house. The scent of burning wood fills the air. Underneath it, he smells the faint aroma of manure. His beam of light strobos on and off the path finding no chimney, no stable. Instead, he catches glimpses of fence posts and barbed wire. A flicker here, glint there. As he approaches the front door, Voyles hears the soft rattle of chains on a concrete floor. About twenty feet from the front door, he sees it. A large, black German shepherd

stirs from sleep, raises his head and looks at him. Voyles freezes, fighting the urge of quick, sudden movements.

“Hey boy,” he says and the dog rises up on his front paws. The chain holding the dog at bay clears at least fifteen feet that he can see. The shepherd makes no sound, which to Voyles, means he is more dangerous than most. He backs away slowly and then moves right to flank the house. Still nothing moving, and the only sound comes from the dry, blown-down branches of recent hurricanes snapping under his feet. The faint odor of manure grows stronger as he rounds the side of the house. He uses his flashlight again, only this time he keeps it burning a few seconds.

“County, Charlie twenty-nine, I’m Ten Ninety-seven on the street. One Twenty, where you at?” Voyles’ radio chirps.

Voyles squeezes the hand-mic on his shoulder. “I’m behind the house to the right. Dog chained up by the front door. I got nothing so far.”

“I’ll take the left,” Giardiello answers. “County, can you advise on the address again. Everything seems quiet out here.”

“There might be a horse roaming around here, too,” Voyles says. “Plenty of evidence in the back yard, so watch out for that.”

“Ten four.”

Voyles continues to maneuver the obstacle course of manure in the back yard until he sees a tall figure rounding the corner of the house. “That you, Al?”

Charlie twenty-nine flashes his light at Voyles’ feet. “I think I found the horse.”

“Funny.”

“No, seriously.” Giardiello moves the beam of his flashlight towards the front of the house. Next to Voyles’ parked car, by an orange tree in the neighbor’s yard, stands a spotted, gray horse.

Voyles points the butt of his flashlight over his shoulder. “Hard to believe the highway runs by here just beyond those trees and pastures there.”

“At least I’m not taking it with me.” Giardiello flips his flashlight on, checks the bottom of his shoes and heads towards his car.

“I saw a man and a woman making a quick pace to the door of the house two lots down when I was driving in here.” Voyles points over to the lit-up mobile home where a black truck sits high on the driveway, jacked up on mud tires. “I kept driving since the address didn’t match. You think maybe we ought to give that one a shot?”

“You go ahead. We’ve been out here about five minutes. They probably saw you driving by and mopped up all the blood by now, anyway. I’ll try to get this horse penned up and head over there in a second.” Giardiello sticks his flashlight in the ring on his belt and moves towards the horse. “Besides, it’s been at least ten minutes since we got the call. Cordova should be here any minute now,” he says smiling.

Voyles laughs. “Right. Dude’ll probably still be heading this way by the time I clear the call.”

\* \* \*

Dead-end, again. Cordova pulls his computer monitor around to face him. Using the touch pad, he pulls up the map program and types in the words Sunderson Street.

“One Twenty-two, what’s your time frame?” Charlie twenty-nine is calling him on the radio again. “One Twenty-two, Charlie twenty-nine.”

“Less than three,” Cordova answers. A map with Sunderson flashes up on the screen.

“Just follow the street till it turns into one lane. Stop three houses before our cars. We got sent to the wrong house.”

Cordova shifts his vehicle into reverse and turns his car around.

“And look out for a horse. I got it calmed down, but couldn’t get it back into the fenced yard.”

Cordova studies the map. He figures it would take him at least five minutes to get there instead of the promised three.

“You copy?” Charlie twenty-nine asks.

“Yeah. Follow it till it turns into one lane. Got it. Thanks.” He’d driven too far west. A shortcut through Rio Pinar Lakes. That would do it. He shifts back into drive and flips the lid down on his computer. Trees disappear as soon as headlights pass them. Soon, streetlights become more sporadic and he feels he is getting closer.

\* \* \*

While Al stands in the living room of the double wide trailer getting one side of the fight that brought them here, Voyles stands in one of the kid’s rooms with his back to the wall, keeping one eye on the door, and the other on Buddy, the other half of the disagreement. Buddy sits on the bottom bunk of his son’s bed, leaning against the stepladder with his head in his hands. His eleven-year-old son sits next to him crying for Voyles to please help his dad. Buddy’s face is leaking. Blood clots in his nose. Just above his left eye, a gash about two inches long. Semi-dried blood tracing a twisted path from the corner of his mouth to his chin.

“What happened?” Voyles asks.

Buddy shakes his head.

Voyles looks at the kid. “Listen, bud.”

“It’s Buddy. My dad’s name is Buddy.”

“Okay,” Voyles says. “Let’s get you out of here so I can talk to your dad. See what happened.”

Kid shakes his head. Like father like son. “Can’t you help him?”

The room smells like kid sweat. Kid shirts, shorts and socks litter the floor. Overturned toy cars wrapped up in bright, dirty blankets. Home sweet home on the brink of sour. Voyles says again, “What happened?”

More head shaking.

“You got to talk to me Buddy. For crying out loud. Your head’s split open in three places that I can see. Who gave you the blood wig?”

Still nothing.

Breaking through Buddy’s silence is the Communications Center coming through Voyles’ radio mic. “Units on Sunderson, unit check.”

In a move resembling throwing salt over his shoulder at dinner, Voyles, head cocked, brings his left up to his shoulder and squeezes a button. “Ten four, County.” Back to Buddy. “Tell me something. Tell me you fell. Tell me the floor split your head open. C’mon Buddy, tell me that the floor also did a number on your pal in the other room. He was just breaking your fall. I’m cool with that. You don’t want me here. I don’t want to be here. Tell me that, and I’ll leave.”



Nothing. Dried blood and dirt caked in Buddy's fingernails. His shirt, ripped at the neck, hangs off his shoulder. Voyles doesn't get it. Why call? Why waste everyone's time? He shakes his head in unison with Buddy. Just another episode of Jerry Fricken' Springer.

"Fine, then," he says. "You know what. I'll take the other guy's word for it. Whatever he says, goes. The other guy with the bloody knuckles. Why should I care? You don't. Maybe he'll say you hit yourself. Maybe I can Baker Act you since you're obviously a danger to yourself." Voyles turns around to leave the room. He reaches up and grabs the hand-mic on his shoulder. "County, if you have Fire Rescue staging, go ahead and send them in reference to numerous lacerations to the head."

"Ten four."

Voyles walks into the living room. Pal sits in the brown corduroy Lazy-boy facing away from the front door.

"She's a dirty, fucking whore, and now everyone knows it," Pal says to his sister sitting on the couch next to him in the living room. She has a baby in her arms and she continues to rock it back and forth. Her face and eyes red from crying. Pal's jeans are covered in what appears to be a mixture of mud, charcoal, and blood. "And everybody thought she was so sweet. You're nothing but a dirty whore," he screams to the back wall of the trailer.

"So tell me. Buddy in there says he fell. That about right?"

"Yeah." He motions to Buddy in the kid's room. "The father of my sister's two-week-old baby boy. The fucking guy I told her to steer clear of and told everybody he's no fucking good. I saw them." He shakes his head. "I mean, I told her I loved her." Pal

clears his throat, shaking the tremble out of his voice. “At first, I couldn’t believe it. But there he was, out by the fucking fire with her and I just flipped. You’d done the same fucking thing, it’d been you.”

Giardiello in the background. “Yep. Imagine I would.”

“Fucking A, you would.”

“Of course, I picked a good woman.” He smiles at Voyles.

Pal lowers his head. “Thought I did too.” He lifts his head again. “Fucking Whore!” A stream of spit flies off his lips. The word whore stretches through the living room, out the back door, and taps Pal’s girlfriend on the shoulder as she stands outside by the fire.

It would seem that Pal never met a cuss word he didn’t like. In his agitated state relaying the evening’s events to the deputies, each sentence is punctuated by a four-letter word. In the first few seconds inside the house, Voyles noticed at least five children under the age of eight running around. And that’s not including Buddy’s son, who still sits in the other room waiting for paramedics to arrive and bandage his dad’s broken face, or the two-week-old baby.

“Hey, Pal. You mind if we take this outside and talk about it? Or maybe get the kids out of here so they don’t have to hear all the sordid details? If you know what I mean?”

“Ain’t nothing they haven’t heard before.”

Clearly. That’s the problem. He looks at his watch. One a.m. and kids are still up running around with all the adults half drunk or passed out. Rerun of Law and Order

muted on the big screen TV near the front door to the mobile home. “Just the same,” he says, “They don’t need to hear more, do they?”

“Fine. Fine. After all, the children are our fucking future, right?” Pal says.

More like job security. Voyles says nothing. Instead, he puts on his poker face and waits for Pal to fold.

Pal sits back in his recliner. “What the fuck ever, man.” He motions to his sister sitting on a dirty, brown couch against the wall. “Hey, why don’t you take the kids out to the truck. Let them play with the satellite radio or something.” He looks at Voyles. “I don’t want them to see me get arrested for Christ’s sake. After all, that is what’s gonna fuckin’ happen, right, boss?”

Voyles shakes his head. “I’m not saying that. I just need to find out what happened, so we can figure this whole mess out.”

Pal’s sister rounds up the kids, five on the floor and one in her arms and takes them outside. Pal watches her leave with the kids and then turns his attention back to Voyles. “She ain’t got a brain in her head staying with that fucking guy. They begged me to forgive him for Christmas. I did. It’s why I’m here tonight. And I should’ve never done it. Only reason you’re here, cause of that son of a bitch. Oh yeah, and that whore out back by the fire.” He screams to the back yard again. “Jump in it, whore!”

While Voyles wrestles the story out of Pal, Fire Rescue paramedics pour into the mobile home to work on Buddy’s face. He refuses treatment. His son pleads with him to no avail. Then his girlfriend comes in carrying his newborn son. She wears a white spaghetti-strapped blouse, dirty lace at the bust line, stretched tight against her postpartum belly. Her hair is dusty blonde and streaked with brown lowlights. She is the

picture of soil, smiling uneasily as she bends over his head. Then she whispers in his ear, kisses his blood-dried forehead, and leaves the room. Buddy says his first words of the night. “Okay. Go ahead with it.”

Firefighter #3 taps Voyles on the back and tells him to come back into the room with Buddy and the paramedics.

“You ready to tell me what happened?”

A paramedic holds Buddy’s hand still and slowly wraps it with a sterile gauze bandage. Buddy tilts his head towards the living room. “What did he say?”

Voyles runs his hands across his shaved head. “Well, basically, he said you all had been drinking, he and his sister passed out in the living room, and when he got up to pee, he went outside and saw you kneeling out by the campfire with your face buried in his girlfriend’s lap, her pants around her ankles. He flipped, and beat you bloody. End of story. That about right?”

Buddy looks at the floor. “You believe him?”

“We got the same story from the girl, too.” Voyles looks at Buddy’s kid sitting on the floor next to him. “What I don’t get is why he went outside to take a leak. Don’t you guys have toilets in here?”

Buddy looks up from his seated position, his expression turns from guilt to injured pride. “You gonna judge me now, too? How the fuck should I know why? You think I planned this? Look at my face. You think I fucking wanted this?”

Voyles looks around the room again. Crayon markings on the wall that he missed the first time. An empty, half-crushed soda can lodged between the twin mattress and the wall. “No. I can’t say as you did. You want to press charges?”

“What do you think? He’s my baby’s uncle.”

“Well, that didn’t stop you from—” Voyles shakes his head. “You know what? Never mind. Doesn’t matter. He’s got a warrant out for him for driving without a license anyway. He’s coming with us either way.”

\* \* \*

With Pal in handcuffs, Voyles leads him down the three steps of the mobile home. Down the street, Cordova uses the spotlight mounted on his car and lights up another street sign. Hidden among uncut tree branches and reflecting bright green and white, he sees it. Sunderson Street. Underneath, written in all caps, UNMAINTAINED. Finally.

“County One Twenty-two, can you put me Ten Ninety-seven on the street.”

Giardiello laughs at Voyles who is shaking his head and reaching to grab his shoulder mic.

“County, One Twenty.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m going to have one white male in custody for a warrant.”

“Charges?”

“Driving while license suspended, with knowledge. I’ve already confirmed the warrant through teletype. It’s our authority.”

“Ten four.”

Cordova rounds the turn and sees the fire trucks heading his way. He waits for them to pass and keeps on down the road to the other parked squad cars. He notices three kids dancing next to a 4x4 black truck in the driveway. By the other squad cars, Voyles grabs the shoulder of a handcuffed man dressed in a white t-shirt and blue jeans, and

directs him into the back of his vehicle. Another night at the foot of Sisyphus mountain, he thinks as Cordova pulls in beside him.

Cordova rolls down his window. “What you got?”

“Nothing. Just another warrant and a pseudo-domestic issue that they want to ignore.”

“Don’t we have to arrest on a domestic?” Cordova asks.

Voyles shakes his head, just glad he’s heading out of the sector for the hour it takes to book Pal into jail. As he drives away, he sees the gray horse that Giardiello couldn’t pen up standing on the side of the road and he thinks of how much worse it could have been. How Cordova could have come a minute sooner and blasted his air horn at the animal to get him out of the road, only to have Murphy’s Law truly come to life. Where an otherwise uneventful arrest could have been interrupted by a gray spotted horse startled by noise rearing back on two legs like a wild stallion and running in the other direction. And with his windows shutting out the cold air, Cordova wouldn’t hear the clip clop of horse hooves as it ran straight towards the truck where the kids were playing at one in the morning. Then having to call county one more time for Fire Rescue to return.

Instead, Voyles drives away feeling lucky that things went the way they did. Ignoring the pictures in his mind of other nights that didn’t end so easily. Where guns fell into the wrong hands and shots rang out filling the night with fear, or when knives fell into the hands of someone smack dab in the middle of a psychotic break and other zone cars rode on two wheels trying to get there to help him. Or like tonight, where a prisoner could have sat handcuffed in the back seat of a patrol car, helpless, watching deputies performing chest compressions. The sound of muffled screams coming from behind the

fogged glass of the caged car, the mouths in the shape of a perfect O's. Where a gray horse, stands defiant, almost majestic, bobbing its head up and down while misty, hot breath from his nose blinks red, white, red, white. The sounds of sirens moving closer, bleeding out the night.

## ***FORCED***

SITTING AT THE kitchen table, crumpled Kleenex in your hand, the question weighs heavy. Your friends in the living room tell their versions to one another. He seemed like such a nice guy; dressed in that purple button-down when he stood in your doorway, the way he unlocked your car door instead of pointing the key fob and heading straight for the driver's side. He looked into your eyes all night. Even after the alcohol, when your speech slurred. He was gentle.

This morning though, your girlfriends giggled. Called you slut. They laughed at the stoner newbie in his imitation Prada. They trashed his throwback car that took two tries to start; how you disappeared in a cloud of black smoke.

"You didn't want to sleep with him, did you?" They don't question. They accuse. "I can't believe you let him-"

"But I didn't," you say. You are not a slut. You are not easy. You are not sure what really happened.

"Listen," the detective says. He is trying to be nice. He makes small jokes to ease you into the conversation. You listen to the sound of his voice and how it reminds you of your brother, your father, even a little like the boy in the purple shirt.

"I'm here for you," he says. "Take your time." But the room is cold, and he is waiting to hear what really happened. He won't wait forever. You have to speak up or he is going to force the issue.

"What happened?"



## *ALLEGEDLY*

“A good detective can put a guilty man in jail.  
A great one can put an innocent one there.”

--Advice from a first line supervisor in reference to report writing.

“I’VE GOT A female here, five months pregnant, saying that her baby-daddy held her hands behind her head with one hand, and then used an arm-bar on her neck with the other while he raped her.”

This is what deputies wake me up with at one a.m. I hate being on call. My first month in the unit, I screened seventy sex-related calls just like this. Now, having been a Sex Crimes detective for three years, I roll out of bed on instinct and make my way to the cold garage connected to my house before echoing his words back to him. First, I want to be sure I heard him right, and second, I want to be sure he heard himself.

“So he had one hand on her hands, the other on her neck, right?” I say, yawning.

“That’s what she’s saying.”

I hear the irritability in his voice when he answers me. I can almost see him standing in the breezeway of an apartment building, annoyed that he had to pick up the sex call, annoyed that his supervisor told him to call me. He’s a cop. He knows what he’s doing. And here I stand in my underwear, in my garage, doubly annoyed that he doesn’t see the skewed logic in her story. I have found that the more annoyed I get, the higher my voice goes. Trying not to wake up my wife and kids inside the house, while also trying not to sound like I am struggling with puberty, I lower my voice. Don’t patronize him, I think, just give it to him in a different light.

“Okay then, how did he get her clothes off? Or his for that matter? And what about the physical mechanics of it all. I mean there’s got to be some shoehorn action to get the job done, right?” I realize I am moving into the upper registers and the ‘not patronizing’ is probably failing, so I wait for an answer while I pace in a circle around the kids’ multicolored matting on the floor. And why is it that in my half-dead sleep walk, I can still see she is lying, and yet, the well rested and on regular duty deputy isn’t getting the picture? I am waking up and I don’t want to wake up. “You don’t see anything wrong with her statement?” I ask and wait a few seconds, and add a joke. “I mean, are we looking for a three-armed man?”

“She says he held her captive in her home all weekend and forced her to walk around naked the entire time.”

This statement starts the red in my neck. It takes everything in me to not pull the phone away from my ear and just stare at it.

“She looks pretty beat up to me, Detective. I don’t think she's lying.”

“I’m not arguing whether she got beat up or not. I’m just saying she didn’t get raped.”

Getting called on cases like this is nothing new and it is expected. Policy states that it is required for all acute sex crimes cases that the road-deputy notify the on-call detective. Acute meaning that one of the following things is true: One, the sex happened within the past seventy-two hours. Two, the victim and suspect live together (i.e. father and daughter, boyfriend and girlfriend, siblings, etc.). And three, the suspect is on-scene at the time of the call or will likely return very soon. Anything else and I’m not getting dressed and coming out. They just write a report and send it up. The police equivalent of

take two aspirin and I'll call you in the morning. The deputy on the other line probably wasn't expecting an argument from me. He's up dealing with this at this unholy hour, why shouldn't I be? I still hear nothing coming from his end to make me think we are having a conversation.

“Is she close by? Can you put her on the phone?”

It is hard not to judge these first responding deputies. Most cops are A-type personalities. If you want the job done right, do it yourself. We're both cops. We both think we know better than the other when it comes to the job. Not so much a right-versus-wrong-way of doing things so much as a my-way-versus-his-way. Tonight, I win by sheer volume of sex cases. Even when a victim is telling the truth, somewhere in the telling there is a lie. Like a fish story two months after the catch, reporting bigger and bigger catches to keep the listener on the edge of his seat. After three years of the same story, I don't need to hear the hype. Just the truth. So when the fish seems too big to true, I look for the spot where the story went awry. It's not that I don't believe. I want to believe. I do. It's just that time and cases have forced me to become a skeptic. Besides, no matter how good the deputy is on the scene, it just isn't that easy to ask the hard questions and basically call someone a liar to her face. Especially a victim who is beat up and scared like this one tonight. Who wants to be that guy? There was a time that I sure didn't want to be, but things have changed. I'm tired of chasing wild geese. The deputy tells me her name and gladly puts her on the phone.

“Carla?”

“Yes.”

“Hi. My name is Detective Voyles. I’m a Sex Crimes detective and I need to ask you a few questions, okay?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounds thick, Spanish. I think of my mother, my sisters, thick dark hair, brown eyes, a scraped forehead and ripped shirt. I have to be easy.

I am leaning on the dryer now. I’m awake. “Now, I’ve already gotten what happened from the deputy there, but I have to tell you that some things aren’t making much sense.”

“Okay.”

Good. She is already in agreement. Most people don’t want to lie. They’re just scared and want the situation to end. She needs a brother, a father to help her. Her heritage on the other line. The hard truths that only family can tell.

“I understand that you’re pregnant. Is that true?”

“Five months.”

“Okay. So we already have felony domestic violence battery charges on him for hitting you. Do you know what that means?” Most people don’t understand the difference between a felony and a misdemeanor. Both get you arrested. Both put you in jail. Misdemeanors can put you in the county lock-up for less than a year, tops. Felony arrests lead to years, plural, in prison.

“I think so.”

“The difference is that right now with you being pregnant and visibly beaten up, the deputy that gave you the phone can go find your boyfriend right now and put him in jail, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Now the other stuff, the stuff about him holding you prisoner, naked in your house for the whole weekend, forcing you to have sex with him...that just sounds a little odd. You know what I mean?”

“Yes.” More agreement. The Carla in my head relaxes her shoulders. Prepared for what comes next.

“The problem with your story about the sex is that it takes more than just you saying it to make it true. The bruises and scratches are evidence that he beat you up, but a rape; that’s another thing. With a rape, we need to get a rape kit done. You know like the ones you see on T.V. Have you ever seen that show, Carla? You know, Law and Order SVU?”

“Yes.”

Law and Order, usually the bane of my existence. Crimes cleared up in under an hour. No one takes the time to read the scene setting on the screen that show months have passed from crime to solving. Not to mention the passionate detectives of the 15<sup>th</sup> squad who nab serial rapists while driving everywhere with lights and sirens activated. For the record, I have yet to investigate a media-driven congressman for having a harem of sex slaves locked in the dungeon of an apartment that is paid for by his constituents. Likewise, my suspects are not A-list movie actors with clinical schizophrenia like the ones who frequent the show during sweeps week. I don’t have a drinking problem, I love my wife, and my kids aren’t caught up in the antics of the bridge and tunnel crowd. Elliot Stabler, I am not.

“Well it’s like that and it isn’t. Cases like this don’t get solved in an hour. Rape kits alone take a couple of hours to do, and with you being five months pregnant, I don’t

know if you want to really do that. And remember, we already have one felony that we can prove right now.”

“But we did have sex.” Right there. She says it. People who are raped do not have sex; they are raped. Having sex implies consent.

“I’m sure that you did. But I don’t think it was forced. I mean I don’t want a jury to hear a far-fetched story and throw everything out when it is clear that you’ve been beaten up. It wasn’t forced sex, was it?”

“No.”

“See. That’s what I thought. I understand that you’re scared, but lying makes it worse and really, it just jeopardizes the case we already have on him for hitting you. I know you’re scared, but please, if this happens again, just tell us the truth so we can get him locked up for what he actually did, okay?”

She apologizes and hands me over to the deputy again. I try not to be smug, but I’m sure it seeps through the phone line. “Did you hear her?”

“Yes.”

He still has an attitude, and I don’t care. In the dark aftermath of getting beat up, everything seems bigger than it is. A defense attorney will rip apart a ‘held captive wife’ story. I want to shout that I am helping even though it sounds like I am not. But over the phone at three in the morning is no time for courtroom debates. “Unfound the sex battery and call domestic violence. She needs a place to stay with her kids.”

\* \* \*

“What Vance really needs is a bona fide rape victim.” Corporal pushes his glasses up on his nose while laughing at what I got woken up with the previous night. Within

months, he'll be sent off to the Middle East again, courtesy of the U.S. Army Reserves. A year later, he'll come back sixty pounds lighter, but just as bald and just as sarcastic.

Heather and Dave both smile, nodding in agreement. They feel the frustration too. But for them, the months will pass differently. Together, they will shoot an alleged child molester going for a gun instead of showing them his empty hands. After the shooting, Heather will take cover behind a thin pine tree with her gun still aimed at the bad guy while Dave will stand behind an even thinner tree thinking skinny thoughts. From their positions, they will hear the child molester muttering, "Oh, it hurts" over and over as he dies slumped against the steering wheel of his car waiting for an ambulance to arrive.

While we train for the possibilities of violence, we try not to let it consume our every thought. More often, we sit at our desks making hand gestures into the phone as we calmly listen to the calls from deputies on-scene. We hold our tongues until the receiver is hung up, only to let loose with the things we aren't allowed to say within earshot of the public.

"She's fifteen, binge drinks and can't find her underwear. She needs a property detective, not me," Heather says when she hangs up. This is how we cope.

We're not all cold and hardened. Real sex crimes occur. Women and children get victimized regularly, even grown men on occasion, not that they report it. I won't say raped, because while it does happen, rape is a salacious word insinuating some type of force, whether it be real—a knife or gun—or just implied, which has a far greater spectrum of possibilities. Somehow her knowledge that he owns a gun turns into a threat even if he never mentioned it and she hasn't seen it since they bought it for his birthday two years prior. Or she has seen the way he acts when his football team loses, so she was

afraid to tell him no when he asked for sex, even though she didn't feel like it. Or three years ago, he punched a hole in the wall when he found out his father died, so clearly he has an anger management problem.

So, while real acts of sexual violence do occur—it's these types of cases that drew the bulk of us into the squad—they are infrequent. Mostly, we deal with illegal sexual activity between kids on the cusp of adulthood or the perverted old men grooming sex out of children who can't legally consent. Rape is too small a word to encapsulate everything we do. While no still means no, sometimes so does yes. We put people in jail for consensual sex all the time. Age isn't just a number when it comes to breaking the law. It's where most of our sexual offenders come from.

In the last year alone, of the over 800 sex-related cases that reached our desks, only 300 ever made it to court, 273 were cleared without arrest (the victim either recanted or backed out or no evidence could be found) and 180 were unfounded altogether, that is to say, no criminal violation even occurred.

I used to dream of becoming a sex crimes detective, thinking that I would finally be making a difference. Like my father before me, I would be helping true victims, putting real bad guys behind bars. When I was eight, my father sat around a table with the other heads of his agency. To hear my mother tell the story, the current warden was facing a moral dilemma; a man was about to be convicted of raping and killing an eighty-year-old woman and the penalty for that where we lived in the Canal Zone of Panama was death by hanging. The problem was that the warden of the penitentiary was the one cast to pull the lever and let the convict swing. He couldn't do it. Of the eight men in the boardroom that day, only my father stood up for the eighty-year-old woman. By the end



of our summer vacation, my father found his new desk as not only Captain of Police, but also Warden of the penitentiary in Gamboa. While he never had to pull the lever—the man got life in prison instead—my father was willing. I am my father's son, but three years in sex crimes and the truth has a way of putting a damper on my enthusiasm. I also used to be in favor of the death penalty. Now? I've put too many people in jail to support the idea.

The far more negative byproduct is my ever-increasing suspicion of victims in general. More often, we get the cases that are more of a lapse in judgment rather than the sex crime they are made out to be. Many are just a ribbon of regret wrapped around a box full of allegations. A woman goes out partying and sleeps with a stranger. She comes home to her sorority house or dorm room to be met with ridicule. The cry of rape makes words like slut or whore miraculously morph into the word victim. Teenage girl sneaks out of the house with her boyfriend-of-the-week and gets caught sneaking back in and her parents want to hang the guy. Anger and disdain turn into special treatment for the poor innocent daughter. I should have seen the signs, they say. I should have known better. Everything becomes all about the guilt-ridden parents and less about the rotting fruit of their loins sitting there in front of them.

What you need to do is lock your daughter up, I think, but instead, I end up chasing shadows and lies until I come back with facts proving their daughter wrong. Sometimes, I feel like I spend more time and energy tearing down victims' lies than solving actual crimes. While I want to put bad guys in jail, I don't want to aid and abet in the ruining of someone's life because he didn't call her the next day, or because her father doesn't like him, or worst of all, because his skin tone doesn't quite match what

her parents and friends had envisioned for her. I thought we were enlightened, but I have had cases stemming from all three of these reasons.

Likewise, I have discovered that seemingly consensual sex between minors can turn one person into a victim and the other into a sexual offender for life. I'm sure this isn't what people think of when they pull up the sexual predator websites. And for the record, there is nothing casual about sex anymore. If a guy thinks he's having consensual sex with a consenting adult, friends with benefits even, he better make darn sure she is, in fact, a consenting adult. Not that this would create a problem, right?

“Hey, Suzy, I'm having a great time and all, making out on my bed. And it kind of feels like we are heading somewhere cool with this. But before we, you know, do the deed, would you mind letting me Xerox a copy of your birth certificate? Oh, and another thing, I have this personal rule. It's not perverted or anything, but it's, well, it's just a video camera. And gosh, it sure would be great if you could really put on a show of how much you are enjoying this. You know, just in case I forget to call you tomorrow and you want to say I raped you. I'm just trying to keep this cool. I just don't like cops, is all.”

Well, easier said than done, I suppose, but otherwise, he's taking a risk. All I need is a victim willing to press charges in order to take away a man's life. I've done it. More than once. And while I tell myself that it isn't me putting them there, that I just followed the lead of my victims, I wrote the report. I conducted the investigation.

Of course, I have had my share of real baddies. Guys I have put in jail for being a serial rapist, or child abductor, or hard-core child molester. So far, I have over five hundred years of prison time dealt out to these guys. So, it could be worse. I could spend my days pulling cars over, writing hypocrisy tickets for speeding. Because I never drive

over the posted speed limit. Not even if I have to go to the bathroom really bad and the idea of sitting on some dirty quickie-mart toilet may give me pause. At least now, one way or another, for victim or suspect, I might be making a difference.

\* \* \*

Ten minutes after my corporal laughed about a bona fide victim, my phone starts ringing. A Sector Two sergeant is calling about a boy named Austin, a fourteen-year-old who came to school that morning fragile and shaking because some stranger had grabbed him, dragged him into the woods near his school, and forced penile-anal penetration on him. The communication center is advising that K-9 is on the ground and the area is completely sealed off by backing perimeter units.

“Now see, ask and ye shall receive.” Corporal is already heading to his office to lock up and follow me to the scene. “Nothing better than stranger-on-stranger attacks to make you believe in the job.” So much for water cooler talk. In my experience, fourteen-year-old boys don’t make up stories like this. Questions about manhood are taken very seriously at that age.

I remember when I was thirteen and hearing the phone ringing in the kitchen. The blue glow of numbers on my desk telling me it’s too early for the phone to be ringing. And why wasn’t my mother answering it. Or Julie for that matter. And I remember she was spending many of her nights out around that time. I was alone. Again. The phone kept ringing. My first thoughts back then were of my father. It could have been him. But I had probably already talked to him before I went to bed. Ringing. Still. Could have been trouble. When I stepped to the phone, the kitchen was lit up by the headlights of cars

passing through the intersection behind our house. To this day, South Florida never sleeps.

“Hello?” I said, waiting to hear my Dad’s voice.

“Are you gay?” It was Joni. My oldest sister.

“It’s three o’clock,” was all I could think of to say. I wasn’t sure what to say, or even why she was asking.

“I had a dream that you were gay. It woke me up.” She said to me and I could hear the sleep in her voice. She moved out of our house about the same time Dad did. She was living the life she always wanted; out every night until she was ready to come home. Singing in bars. Living it up. “So are you gay?”

“No, Joni. I’m not.”

“But you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“I’m thirteen.”

“I was dating when I was thirteen.”

“That was Panama. It was different back there.”

“Girls aren’t any different up here,” she said as if to confirm her dream state.

“They’re farther away.” Everyone was farther away. Through the sliding glass doors, past the pool and the screened-in enclosure was the highway I couldn’t get on. The amber lights blinked as cars drove by, everything so bright in the middle of the night.

“What about school? You have girls there, right?”

I wanted to tell her about the bevy of girls who had come into my life. Julie’s friends, most of whom I’d seen in various stages of undress. Not that I ever did anything about it. But still, I thought about it all the time. Things were just not good there in the

new landscape. I missed the old life, before we came here. I couldn't tell her how this land of opportunity sucked. How leaving Panama, sucked. I was supposed to be too young for it to matter, but we moved into a big house in a new development without any kids my age, and then my parents got divorced, sending my dad to Orlando. My slightly older sister, Julie, lost all her weight and dumped her family life for spend-the-night-parties outside where drugs were the soup de jour, and my mother was out, working, somewhere that wasn't home. I was alone, eating carrots for dinner. Carrots. That's it.

“Joni?”

“Yes?”

“I'm not gay.”

“You sure? Because I would still love you.”

“That's good to know. Go back to bed.”

I unwound myself from the cord and hung up the phone. I had to get up in the morning for school. Not that anyone would have noticed if I hadn't.

Six months later, Joni would overhear a conversation between my cousin and me talking about the games of truth or dare and the shape of each of Julie's friends' naked breasts. Joni would then misconstrue the conversation and report it to my mother, insinuating an incestuous relationship with my other sister, Julie, and therein end the parade of nubile girls spending the night at our house.

So young boys don't make a habit out of telling people about encounters in the woods with other boys. Not when penises are involved.

Driving from my office's downtown metropolis, through the morning traffic, to middle suburbia that is Austin's neighborhood takes awhile. Longer still is wading through witnesses, first-responders and supervisors before I am able to come face to face with Austin. First I speak to the principal who called the police. According to him, Austin came into the cafeteria that morning a nervous wreck. When the cafeteria lady asked him if he was okay, he broke down. The principal spoke to him at length before calling us. He meant well, but time was wasted. The suspect was long gone, and thanks to the dry Florida sun, so was most of his scent for dogs to track. Once deputies got there, Austin was able to take them to the scene in the woods where he found the school I.D. card that he dropped during the attack. So it was over an hour from the time he was raped before he was sitting quietly in the back of my Ford Explorer. He doesn't look shaken. He isn't crying anymore. He just sits there looking through a school yearbook from a nearby high school.

News helicopters swarm the sky and reporters litter the area. Austin tells me that he was followed by a stranger dressed in black shorts and a black t-shirt with a white wife-beater on underneath. The stranger struck up a conversation with him; "You know what time it is? Don't you have a sister that goes to Colonial High School? You want to earn some quick cash?"

The stranger is about sixteen or seventeen, Hispanic and wore a light goatee. He crossed paths with Austin at the corner of Pershing Ave and Commander Drive. The video feed from the convenience store down the street from there shows both of them walking to and from the store at 7:52 a.m.; exactly when Austin said he was there. He skips ahead and tells me how about a half an hour later, the stranger forced him into the

woods and stuck his penis in his butt for five or six minutes before he pushed him aside and squirted white stuff out onto the leaves and pine needle bed that made up the impromptu attack.

I want to believe him, but something isn't right. White stuff? What fourteen-year-old says that? Back in the early eighties, at fourteen, I was as naïve as they came. I remember hearing the other boys in gym class talking about sixty-nine and laughing, only to ask my sister later what it meant. But when it came to my own equipment, I knew the ins and outs. Besides, both sperm and semen are funny words, and just lingering on the word *come*—even when used in proper context—got laughs in classrooms. Fast forward twenty-five years where sex is everywhere and twelve is the new twenty, how does he not use the proper term? Anything besides white stuff. And he's still so calm. All these police, all the media, and he sits quietly waiting for the next question. Before I can finish talking to him, he has already identified a picture of a guy named Victor from the yearbook. I call Awilda, our crime analyst, and she sends me a photo line-up to my e-mail with Victor's driver's license picture along with five other similar looking guys. Austin picks him out again. Two for two. We make a call to Colonial High School and lo and behold, Victor skipped classes today. Whether his story makes sense or not, it looks like Austin is telling the truth.

\* \* \*

As a detective, it is important to qualify that everyone is playing by the same set of rules when conducting an interview. While the state attorney requires that I qualify that anyone under the age of eighteen understands the difference between telling the truth and lying, I make sure to talk about this with everyone I speak to, from victims to

witnesses. By repeating this with everyone I meet, I know can regurgitate it later, on the stand, the script in my mind being entered into evidence during my courtroom testimony.

\* \* \*

Jasmina sits in the bland room of the Sexual Assault Treatment Center with her legs crossed. She is tall, dark, and beautiful, and the way she looks me in the eyes tells me she knows it. Her mother called the police to report her missing the night before. Four hours later, she returned home with nineteen-year-old Jeff and after a little coaxing by her angry parent, she came out with a story about sex in the front seat of Jeff's car. To her credit, she says it was her idea. However, at thirteen, she's not allowed to have such thoughts and this is news to her. Jeff broke the law by asking are you sure, when he should have just said no and driven her home. And because she is thirteen, I have to qualify whether she even knows the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie and that she knows that lying can get you in trouble, even if it is clear she knows exactly what she is doing.

"Okay. You know the difference between a truth and a lie right?"

Like most young girls, she forgets that the recorder can't hear her nodding and she just mumbles an affirmative Mmm hmm.

"Okay so if I told you I had long, blond hair, would that be a lie or the truth?"

"A lie." She smiles even though her arms are crossed, locked in a defensive position. She has already told me that she didn't want to be here, but felt she had no choice. The woman who trained me in these kinds of cases told me to ignore how bullshit the case might be and how adult this kind of girl seems. Focus on the likelihood of the guy doing this again to someone not as mature. If he likes thirteen-year-old girls, he likes



thirteen year-old girls. Get the evidence and get his DNA in the system in case he takes advantage of another girl who isn't as willing. I think of my daughters; one twelve years old and the other a twin to her three year old brother. I must make them the next girl who might not be so grown up. What if a Jeff-character tries to get a hold of one of them next?

“And why would that be a lie?”

“Cause you're bald.” She smiles as if she's been through this before. Like maybe I'm not the enemy.

“Well I prefer the word shaved, but whatever, Jasmina.” I smile and she smiles back. There is a poster on the door that tells friends to watch each other's back when they go out drinking. Another one that says, You said no, but he said yes. Cliché posters teaching common sense that somehow imbue the victims with more strength just in case they think they want to go home without pressing charges. We are here to serve.

“Okay. And you know why it is we need to know the difference between the truth and a lie?”

She shakes her head no. I need her to tell me that you get in trouble for lying. The State's attorney wants to hear that on the tape when she gets to trial. Otherwise, six months down the road, the bad guy's lawyer will try to suppress her whole statement saying something like ‘clearly your Honor, since the victim didn't swear she was telling the truth then she must have been lying. Did she even know she could get in trouble for lying?’

“What happens when you tell a lie?” I ask her, waiting for the normal response.

She smiles and says, “You have to tell another one.”

\* \* \*

Ten minutes after Austin identified Victor twice as his attacker, my sergeant has K-9 on the ground near Victor's house less than two miles from where the rape occurred. Contact is made with three young Hispanic males playing hooky at Victor's house. Austin picked him out of a yearbook of over a thousand guys, and then pointed him out of six driver's license photos, but sitting in the back of my car, anonymous in the blacked-out tint with Victor standing not ten feet from him on the street just two miles from the scene, he says it isn't any of them.

"Are you sure, Vance?" my sergeant says to me on the privacy of my agency-issued Nextel. "Not for nothing, all three of these guys are queer as a two dollar bill." I can hear his slight New England accent at the end of queer and dollar. I don't correct him on his misuse of the old saying. We're looking for a gay rapist, and he has at least one out of the two standing outside my door. We cope with what we are given. Tense situations brings out the best. Public Relations demand that I don't profile—a lone black male standing on a street corner making lots of friends with passersby is just a friendly fellow and not a street-level drug dealer, and a guy who stands, walks, and plucks his eyebrows just so is just more in touch with his feminine side than me. No harm no foul. But I'm looking for a guy-on-guy rapist and the one guy Austin picks out of a yearbook just happens to swing in that particular direction? It's suspect is all.

"None of those guys are the guy? He could have changed his clothes since you saw him."

"No. It's not any of them," he says. He doesn't hesitate. He doesn't put his head down in fear. He just answers the questions.

And just like that, I'm second-guessing him again. He's lying, I think. Maybe not about the event itself, but the way it all went down. Maybe he got in over his head. Maybe he thinks he's gay. Maybe he just wants to get out of his FCATs. Too many maybes keep swimming in my head. But he's fourteen. He's a boy. Not that being a boy makes him special or more prone to telling the truth. I just can't imagine that a fourteen-year-old boy wants the stigma of being raped. I know. I know. Like a fourteen-year-old girl is any different. But it is. It is different. Like raping a nun.

No woman wants to believe that she could be a victim of a sexual battery. People are good. We live in a decent time. Going dancing with the girls is just another Friday night and nothing to arm yourself for. Guys just want to talk and be chivalrous gentlemen who walk you to your car so that you will be safe. Or that life long buddy who finally came out of the closet understands that you are not gay and the fact that you are cool enough to grab a few beers with him doesn't mean that he's going to try and change your way of thinking. Because the way you dress and let loose with alcohol should never dictate the way your evening goes. But it does. And when people continue to ignore this reality, it makes me less and less sympathetic to what happens to them.

\* \* \*

Danny picked Jess up at the corner down the road from her house. He called and invited her to a party at the Embassy Suites on International Drive. As it turned out, there was a party in the form of three guys and her. Jess told me that even though she had consensual sex with Alex in the beginning of the night, he did give her a drink that made her feel dizzy. For the record, GHB, the date rape drug, does not make you dizzy. It knocks you out until morning. A freight train of guys could move through your bedroom

and not wake you up. She's distancing herself from any responsibility. After having sex, she fell asleep and when she woke up alone and scared, instead of calling someone to pick her up, she left the room and went to find Danny and his friends who were roaming about the hotel lobby. They all returned to the room where she and Alex once again had sex, although she did not want to, this time. She didn't say no, mind you. Just in her head, she didn't feel like it. That sentiment is alive and well in marriages throughout the world and most of them aren't calling it rape. Likewise, Danny stopped after awhile saying "I'm tired of having sex with you. Ronnie is going to take care of you." It was at that point that Ronnie forced her legs behind her head and his penis inside her, telling her all the while that he was "going to break" her. Jess told me she could not fight him off due to the positioning of her legs, the strongest part of her body.

Weeks later, after I interviewed Danny at his school, I call Jess back to re-interview. To clear things up, I tell her. After all, she is pressing charges. I need the whole truth. If she's not willing to do that, I hope that she is at least willing to put an end to this farce in order to save her own reputation.

"He told me that the night started off with you asking him to drink his dick off. He says they call you Gateway Jess because you give it to anyone who will have it." I can hear her breathing on the other end of the phone. It's the point in the phone conversation that can take a terrible turn. My judgment is a hunch. A leap of twisted faith. If I am wrong, she can complain to my boss. Although I have yet to be counseled for being insensitive, it could happen today. If I am right, the case will be closed. It is this lull that holds me in suspense. And then she makes that clucking noise that young girls make these days when they are insulted or pissed off. The counseling won't happen today.

I continue to tell her how Danny said a lot of other things too. He wasn't afraid to take a lie detector test and he provided me with the names of everyone who was there that night. Liars don't do that very often. That and he was too stupid to be lying. He said he was the only one having sex with her that night and he was surprised that she even came with him since up until a week prior, she had been pissed at him for talking about her behind her back.

"Oh, I got this," she says, going gangster on me.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I got this."

Problem solved. "Does that mean that you no longer wish to press charges?"

"No. It's all good. I don't need you guys anymore."

True victims do not give up that easy. At least not in my experience. They'll go fifteen rounds with you to prove that they are telling the truth. I've accused enough people of lying to me to know that liars quit. They rarely make it two rounds before they go down for the count. I have a number of inactive cases waiting for the right evidence to float in from the DNA specialists in Tallahassee for just this reason. If it happened, it happened. True victims don't care what my hunch says. They know what they know. They have that going for them. Well, true victims and paranoid delusionals, but she's not one of those.

\* \* \*

Austin's mom calls me up the day after everything goes down. She's up from South Florida and wants to know how the case is going. We've had everyone and their brother calling in tips to the crime-line after the news ran the story. Everyone is positive

that the guy we captured in the convenience store video cameras is the guy living two doors down from them. Panic has set in throughout the county. I've already shown Austin two more photo line-ups with known pedophiles and sexual offenders who live in the area. Nothing. Not him, he says.

His mom tells me in broken English that she doesn't believe him. No one in the family does. She says she's taking him and his twin brother out of school. Going to take them back to South Florida with her. It's something he's been wanting for a while now, she says.

In the sexual assault treatment center, just before he went in for his rape kit exam, he said something strange. He asked me if getting raped made him gay. I told him no, but he seemed unhappy with that answer. Earlier in the day, while still sitting in the backseat of my Explorer, he said "of all days for this to happen." When I asked him what he meant by that, he said he was going to miss taking his FCAT. I told him that the principal was a nice guy and he would be able to make it up. Again, he seemed unhappy with that answer. Now his mother shows up to take him someplace that he's wanted to go, and then she tells me that she's gay and her ex-husband is blaming her for this.

The nurse at the sexual assault treatment center calls me into the room after Austin is finished. She is a little old lady with tight, curly, gray hair. Outside of this setting, she would be making milk and cookies for her grandchildren.

"I hate to say it, but I didn't find anything," she says. "No tearing, no swelling, nothing to swab, nothing under the black light." She moves the blue light wand over my hands. Little white particles light up showing the Lay's potato chips I ate just minutes earlier from the victim's kitchen. "See, even you have something to light up. I got

nothing off him. Sorry.” Normally there is something. Even on the ones we know are false; known consensuals that cry rape usually have something to light up. This can’t be the first time for everything.

Back at Austin’s house the next day, I drill him again about telling the truth. His family doesn’t believe him. Aside from being forcibly raped, he’s getting to get the heck out of dodge, getting to live with his mom in Miami, maybe getting to be gay by default. With everything else he’s wanted to happen in his home life coming true, he sits on the couch in his small apartment living room, and says those horrible seven words.

“What? Do you want me to lie?”

That is a classic sign of deception, said to make me feel guilty for pushing him so hard. They teach us that in basic interview and interrogation school. When cornered by logic and lack of evidence, the suspect or lying victim might turn the questioning around on the interrogator to deflect a real answer. The question itself is rhetorical. Of course I don’t want him to lie. I want the truth. That’s all any of us want when there is an alleged sexual predator on the loose. The news media is waiting to see us capture another terrible threat to our children. What do I want? I want to help. I want to fix this. I want to catch the bad guy. I am, after all, here to protect and serve, like a faithful mutt.

But what I want more than that. What I need. I need to get away and let time spill out to distance myself from this work of fiction where what I do supposedly matters; where someone else deals with other people’s lies and bad decisions. I want to forget all of this so that if, a decade or so from now, when my twins are Austin’s age, and God forbid, something like this happens to either one of them, I won’t be filled with doubt. I’ll

have faith in the system and the people trying to help. And they won't inactivate my case or simply pray for DNA to come back from the anal probing.

And just like television, the passionate detectives will sit with my family as we go through this horrible ordeal. They will catch the bad guy and put him under the jail because every word my child utters will be the truth. There will be no one standing off to the side second-guessing what he or she says. They will believe, like I do, because my child would never lie about something this serious. Especially not over something consensual.



## *RANT*

WHEN YOU START out, you are going to make a difference. You will train, run, lift weights, study. You will learn to enforce rules that govern the people; put order to where there is none. But over time, the injustice will surface. Rules once written in stone turn to rules scribbled across a dusty chalkboard and set out in the rain. The more you obey, the more you question. And then you are questioned for your split-second decision making by people who are supposedly your peers; people who do not answer the call, but post judgments under your video that is watched over and over on the internet. Why didn't you fire a warning shot, wait for back-up, yell 'stop resisting' one more time? How dare you fight for your own life? And they can question you because they pay your salary.

\* \* \*

Sitting in the monitoring room, you see the alleged rapist sitting slumped in his chair, up against the corner, waiting for your arrival. He mumbles to himself, words you cannot hear right now, but later, when listening to the tape, you will hear him practicing. Telling himself the story first, before you sit down and confront him. You know from hundreds of interviews just like this, the practiced tale, already backed into a corner waiting; this one will be easy. That alleged is just a word the lawyers use, because this one is guilty. And you wish it were 1960 or 1970 again, when police were more physical, this horrible crime deserving of a beating. A beating that no one would question too hard. But in this new age of video and lawsuits, justice does not look like it did. The definition

somehow twisted into a cop being second-guessed. Somehow, sitting in a jail for the rest of his life is payment enough for what he did to that little girl.

Nine times out of ten, when you ask John Q. Public what he would do, the answer lies in violence. But you have lost that emotional response. It has been trained out of you. Sometime between putting on the vest and gun, sitting shotgun in training, and your first day out on your own, you have become a robot, incapable of that particular set of emotions. Eight weeks in and you must be ignorant of hate and wrath is no longer an option. You can only exercise keen judgment when the world is falling around about you. Good vs. evil is no more. Despite what you see, you are told there is only good and the fallen good. Somehow, you must know the truth and then ignore it. This is what it means to be the protector. In this way, there will always be work for you.

## ***WAIVING MIRANDA***

“Nothing says Christmas Spirit like a child abduction.”

--Sex Crimes Sergeant on overtime monies made during a tragedy.

MANUEL DOESN'T SPEAK English. A few words, maybe, but not enough to have an intelligible conversation about the kidnapping and rape of a twelve-year-old girl on her way to school that cold day in February. So, before he was brought to me to be held accountable for his crimes, before he would confess, I was terrified. Not of Manuel, but of my own ineptitude. How would I talk to him about his DNA? How would I get it across that I knew for a fact that he and his, as yet unidentified companiero, terrorized her? How would I do this in his native, Mexican tongue; a gritty, street slang that I was hardly prepared for with the six years of formal Colombian Spanish I learned in grades two through six in Panama—twenty minutes a day, three days a week, just so that I could ask the maid at my house for queso derretido, por favor. Asking a guy to sell out a co-conspirator is not as simple as ordering a grilled cheese sandwich. Thanks, but no thanks, he should say. Would I be able to fake sympathy with Manuel like I have done so many times when I know, with absolute one in eight quintillion percent certainty that he did this? And how—when every base instinct I have tells me I should just kill the man—will I once again resist my conflicting thoughts of vengeance?

\* \* \*

“They’ve been having sex for a year. What’s one more day?” Triano says just after getting yelled at by Sarge. He throws his hands up in the air muttering to himself as

he heads back to his desk. “It’s not like he’s in the house any more. Mom kicked him out.”

Sarge thinks he should have responded to a call-out where a girl had disclosed that her stepfather has been slipping into her room at night to have sex with her for over a year. Triano figured since the mother already kicked him out, that there was no hurry. What we can do on Saturday night at 11:30pm we could do on Monday morning at 9:00am. In a way we all agree. Why do these people call in so late? Catching someone flagrante delicto, okay, but after a year? I’ve had mothers calling it in after the whole family has been alerted and by the time we get there, the kids are asleep. Not the best time to interview them. So Triano figured to have them come in during the cold light of day, but Sarge is right since the guy could come back. It’s kind of like a restraining order protecting you; a piece of paper isn’t going to stop a bullet. After all, gun ranges make their targets out of paper.

In my darkened corner of the Sex Crimes section, I smile and laugh to myself. My first thought is that the girl probably got in trouble at school and is trying to deflect, and it bothers me that I am this jaded. Well, sometimes it bothers me. It’s only when Triano tells me that the supposed deflecting teenager is actually an eight-year-old that I almost spit out my drink. I instinctively reach for my I-touch and open the notes section. What he said is so wrong. That I laughed is worse. I have to write it down. I then go from cubicle to cubicle telling anyone who didn’t hear him, until I reach Sarge’s office.

“Oh my gad,” Sarge says with his slight Boston accent, his jaw dropped in over-exaggeration before he too laughs. “He actually said that?”

I raise my I-touch as proof. And I have virtual pages of these quotes from every one of us. Triano is not the first, nor will he be the last. He's not a monster. He has two relatively well-adjusted, teenage kids, and his I-touch has a King James Version of the bible application. Of course right next to that is another application called Beautiful Boobs.

"It was free," he says. I remember seeing it on the website. I didn't get it because my kids use my I-touch and my wife would disapprove. In his shoes though, I don't know. Triano is no more an animal than the rest of us. A stocky, self-proclaimed mesomorph, ex-construction contractor, and forever GED-ed Marine, who constantly gets his buttons pushed by Sarge, Triano transfers his stress with inappropriate behavior and we laugh at his pseudo-depravity.

"It's a sickness really," Sarge says of his own pot-stirring behavior. He stands behind me as he asks me to read the latest case he has assigned. A forty-year-old homeless black woman who says she is the illegitimate child of Stephen Segal disclosed that she was raped by an adoptive father when she was six years old. First, she's obviously crazy. Steven Segal was learning martial arts in the Far East when she was supposedly conceived, and second, I hate cases over twenty years old. It's been twenty years with nothing, and the only evidence this crazy, homeless woman brought in is a sweatshirt with a picture of herself at the time; a hand-drawn stick figure with a cut out of a little white girl's face plopped on the top.

"C'mon," I say. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

“She’s a victim, Detective. I expect you to investigate,” he says, trying to hold back a smile. He’s a giddy, ten-year-old boy waiting for every one of us to sit on a whoopee cushion of his own personal design.

\* \* \*

When Jason was first assigned the Mexican kidnapping case, the entire Sex Crimes squad spent weeks of eighteen and twenty-four hour days following leads called in by the crime lines. With the help of the road patrol squads, we scoured the county looking for the car described by the twelve-year-old girl. In the end, we were looking for the wrong color car, but we figured for that. Eyewitnesses are the worst for derailing an investigation. Months later, on a separate case during a search for a serial rapist, we released a guy who turned out to be the rapist because the first victim swore he had a tattoo on his chest; big roman style letters with vines and flowers weaving in and out. So descriptive it had to be real. So every black guy in dreads faintly resembling her description of the guy had to lift his shirt and show us his chest. Our bad guy had no such tattoo. He was bare as the day he was born, so he was free to go right after he willingly gave us a sample of his DNA. We need this to clear your name. Open wide. You don’t mind? Do You? Thanks. Three days later, his DNA came back as our guy. If we trusted the eyewitness testimony, the bare chested bad guy might have been able to continue his fantasy of getting back at his older sister by raping more than the four heavy-set black women he already picked out as her doppelgangers.

This time, if you were a Mexican male in the area, you got asked to provide DNA to rule you out as a suspect. Road patrol units drove through every neighborhood in the area looking for the house where they took the girl until they found it. She described a red

hose winding through the back yard and the garbage can and its contents sitting beside the back door. Forensics responded while Jason wrote the warrant to get inside the vacant house.

A little digging discovered that the last few renters of the house were Mexican. Being the only Spanish-speaking detective in Sex Crimes, I hardly saw my wife and kids during these couple of weeks. At first, when I suddenly got a call and was out the door to work, my pre-school age son would comment on how he wanted to learn Spanish so he could go with me. As the years progressed, he started asking why no one else would learn the language.

So, instead of spending time with my family, I ran down crime-line tips at work with everyone else and got called to Jason for translation help at one house-full-of-transient-Mexicans to another. Then rinse, repeat, for days. In Florida, land of permanent construction work, there are a lot of Mexicans. Every other case on the blotter got triaged to nowhere. Finding these two men was everyone's top priority, not just Jason's.

Having known Jason for the two years we worked together in Sex Crimes, I would never have mistaken him for a softhearted individual. He wears cowboy boots instead of dress shoes, which saddled him—to my utmost glee—with the nickname of the Sex Crimes Cowboy by people at the State Attorney's Office. We've joked that he has a dungeon in his basement because he looks the part of a serial killer; the tiny glasses perched atop a small bald head with a Ross Perot maniacal giggle to complete the illusion. He owns land in Georgia for routine hunting trips and will jump into angry interrogation mode in a blink if he thinks you are lying to him, which is most of the time. We both think we are right and have gotten into heated discussions over whether an arrest

should be made. He thinks I am jaded and suspect-friendly, and I think he'll arrest anyone as long as he has a disclosure, no matter how illogical it sounds. We don't work well together inside the same interview room. I make nice. He makes mean.

"The problem with you is that if they don't confess, you think they are innocent," he has said to me on more than one occasion. He figures that if someone is disclosing sexual battery about you, you did something wrong.

What if something wrong means he forgot to call, or he got himself a new girlfriend, or her friends just don't approve of drinking and dialing? I don't think 'something wrong' should get you locked up for the rest of your life. Before I came to the squad, I thought something wrong had to involve a penis and a five-year-old, or a gun, or some real threat of violence, but his three years seniority in Sex Crimes and pull with Sarge usually wins those arguments by default.

If you can't prove it, file it. Let the State Attorney figure it out. But by then the damage is done. You get arrested for suspicion of rape; you are a rapist. Plain and simple. That mark will follow you.

So it was a surprise to me, when in the days before Manuel was arrested, Jason admitted how he had a hard time going to sleep at night. She wasn't just another victim. He felt a duty to this twelve-year-old girl. This wasn't one of our regulars; the naïve girl who puts herself in a bad situation dressed like a tramp and reaps the negative results. She wasn't teasing anyone, throwing common sense to the wind, drinking it up with a room full of sexually charged men. She was walking to school. Lying in bed at night, his mind reeled. Did he do this? Did he do that? What else could he have done to take these men off the streets? Stranger abductions are the worst-case scenario for a Sex Crimes



detective and he couldn't sleep over the anxiety of these guys possibly striking again before we caught them. Turns out he did enough.

\* \* \*

Normally we have two detectives in on every suspect interview; a back-up to take over if a train-of-thought is lost or to redirect the line of questioning away from bad relationships starting to bloom. In that wall to wall, floor to ceiling carpeted room, ideas don't always get the desired response. Perhaps my tone is off, or the look in my eyes is too judgmental. It's times like this when my partner Dave might say something.

"What I think Detective Voyles is trying to say when he says she isn't your flesh and blood daughter is that it must be hard raising someone else's children, right? " And maybe the bad guy will nod. "Especially when fourteen is the new thirty. I mean, maybe she had a crush on you. Came on to you. And you were weak. Just for a moment." And then it's back on me.

This time though, since no one else speaks Spanish, I am alone; something I find is happening more and more. Every one else crowds the observation room and the surrounding hallway to try to catch a word here or a gesture there to see what I am talking about.

"See there, he's got his hands up and then down. He's giving the guy the monster/mistake scenario. Blame it on the other guy," someone will say.

"Oh, he's moving his seat closer, trying to make a connection. There it is. He's touching the guy," says another.

They laugh although they are just as nervous. Too many hours have been dedicated to this and we need to know who the other guy is before he flees the country. We are all scared that he already has.

Ten minutes into the conversation with Manuel, after reading Miranda and participating in small talk about why he was already in jail—Jason had him arrested right after he got his DNA the day he first met him, something about an outstanding warrant and being illegal and the possibility of deportation, a lucky break that gave us time for Jason to compare his DNA standard to the evidence left on the girl—I finally tell Manuel why I am here with him.

“Oh, because we used to live at a house where an accident happened,” Manuel says. He wears a blue jumpsuit furnished by Central Booking and Receiving. He picks at his ear where a plastic stud keeps an earring hole open while in jail. “The other detective asked me about that,” Manuel says, “but it has been three or four months since we have had to go there.” He slides one dirty fingernail under another and flicks the grime onto the floor.

As a general rule, being interviewed slash interrogated by the police is a stressful situation. Whenever an individual has a laissez faire attitude about being questioned, there is most times, not always, but most times a guilty person in the hot seat. Innocent men don't generally groom themselves in the hot seat. Guilty men can't help themselves.

“I don't know anything about that,” Manuel says.

“Have you not seen it on the news, about the girl and the two Mexicans?” I ask.

“I’ve just been asked for my DNA. But I don’t know a lot about that,” he says. “The police are very difficult around where I live because they are deporting all the Mexicans around there.”

“Yes, all of them,” I say. “That is true.”

“I know something about that.” The corners of his mouth rise up in a slight grin, almost non-existent.

Manuel is a monster. I know this after ten minutes. I have his DNA on top of her, inside of her, and there is no way to escape that. Yet he is calm, relaxed, and in total control. He is a man in this country for four years without a green card. Any lies he tells are just different truths to him. I wonder if his name is indeed what his fake identification card tells us. He could be Javier, Pedro, or Ricardo for all I know, and he knows this. Too many Mexicans. Too many to count. His arrest and immigration issues will solve this problem.

“The thing is, Manuel, we know who one of those guys is. The ones who did this thing.”

“One?” he asks, feigning interest. “Well, that’s good.”

My interviews are an act in my head. A one-act play, so to speak. I can feel the facial expression coming to my face before I say my next line. My nerves have been replaced by endorphins. I finally get to tell him the truth. In my head, sometimes I feel like Robert Deniro in these types of situations; eyebrows raised, chin tucked under, mocking back the cool attitude this guy is giving me. Maybe it’s more Dennis Franz ala Andy Sipowicz. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t learn most of my interview skills from

watching movies and cop shows as a kid and young adult. You talking to me? Sure thing, fella. It's good alright, I think. And then I tell him.

“Yes. But the thing here is; you are one of those people.”

“Who? Me?” he says, mocking disbelief. “It must be a mistake.”

“It's no mistake.”

\* \* \*

Most cops don't want to be in Sex Crimes. Standing in the elevator, suit and tie, on my way into the office, another guy in uniform, someone I worked with on the road asks if I'm still in Sex Crimes.

“Yes,” I nod. “You ought to come up and cross-train some time. You've got the gift of gab we need. Besides, you never know when we'll have an opening. We always have one detective or another weighing their options.”

“Oh no.” He squirms, shaking his head and hands at the same time. “Not for me,” he says, and he tells me how he went to the Sex Crimes Investigation class and by the end of the week, the child porn and graphic nature made him too angry. A retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant and in this he says, he couldn't handle the stress. “I wouldn't want to take that home,” he says. “I'd want to kill the guy who did that to my kid.”

I smile politely and think, but they're not my kids. I tell him that and he smiles back, but it is uncomfortable. He doesn't understand that it is possible to become an expert in compartmentalizing the depraved world I visit every day. We walk towards the Criminal Investigations Division and as we part company, he remarks that working homicides would be cool though.

“Too much death sticking to your clothes,” I say, giving him a head nod as I put my ID up to the access pad therein ending the conversation. He was heading to the I.T. Department anyway; the heat of his car getting to the delicate components of his laptop computer.

Everyone looks to Homicide as the end all, the big leagues. Dead people vs. rape victims. Which one is worse? The way I see it, they can't get any more dead. I can't help them come to terms with why they were killed, but then again, at least with a dead person on the ground, you know there is a crime. More than half of our cases can't be proven past the initial disclosure. Everything is he said, she said. Want your kids in the divorce? Accuse dad of molestation. Got caught shoplifting? Accuse mom's boyfriend of touching you. Dad took away your I-phone and grounded you for a month? Twist his shoulder massage into something else. These are real cases I've had. Some disclosures are just deflections in disguise.

I suppose I'll try my hand at Homicide sooner or later, though. The particular brand of Sex Crimes lies can get to be too much and some of us lose our ability to empathize with each new victim we encounter. I would be lying to myself if I said I was unaffected. The average expiration date for most Sex Crimes Detectives in my agency is about two years. We are constantly being called out to chase suspects, real or imaginary, for hours or days on end. Every eight days, from midnight to midnight, my phone must be on. I will be called. It is inevitable. If I am lucky, it will only be one call. If not, I will not stop for the twenty four hours. If I am really unlucky, I will have already been out with my partner the day before, helping out. There are liars. There are true victims. There is always some kind of story to sort out. It takes time, triage, and an even temperament.

Two years is the norm and part of me feels like I am just getting into the groove. Then again, I may be a little long in the tooth heading into my fourth. While I like what I do on the big cases, spending everyday in the box is starting to make me feel like an old library book; well read, but a little past due.

\* \* \*

It takes me a better part of an hour to convince Manuel that the DNA we have on him rules out the rest of the world's population—not to mention any inhabitants in the rest of our known universe—as far as this particular crime was concerned.

“I still can't believe this is happening to me,” he says as it finally sinks in.

What happened to you? I think. By this time, I had been pounding on the wall with an open hand to make my position clear. He was going to jail. There was no way out. Just please tell me who the other guy is.

“Hace la cosa bueno. Hace la correcta cosa.” Do the right thing, I say over and over in broken Spanish. I have been—it occurs to me—begging this waste of human flesh for close to an hour and now he wants to know why this is happening to him. I want to rip his little plastic earring through his lobe. Break his arm. Have him accidentally go for my gun. But too many people are watching me right now. Video recording. Audio recording. More important, I can feel he is about to come through the admitting and start telling me what I want to know. I lean in again to touch his knee.

“But here we are,” I say.

“Yes, yes. I know.”

“Ayudame,” I plead.

“My life,” he says.

“Help me.”

“Help you? Help you guys?” he asks. He is going to tell me. It is going to happen now. “Can I talk with you again with my attorney?” he asks.

Everybody who has ever watched a television cop show thinks they know what that means. I’m done. But the reality of what my job has done to me is not pretty. My day-to-day dwells in a dank den of depravity, loneliness and disgust. I look at child porn. I sympathize with rapists. While I don’t call women sluts and whores to their faces, I think it. Sometimes I make jokes that are so inappropriate, to tell you any one of them—things as unfunny as demeaning homosexuals or stories on the lighter side of grown men having sex with children—would make you instantly hate me. What’s worse is that I am not alone. People around me laugh in spite of themselves. I work with eight others like me. But if we weren’t like this, we would be leading lambs to the slaughter. Got caught sneaking into the house after curfew, but it’s only because the boyfriend your parents forbade you from seeing forced you to have sex in the back of his new Toyota Scion? Get me a rope. Your father closed down your Facebook account, and now you’re saying he touched you when you were five? Sounds good to me. Let me at him.

Manuel and I were in the zone, and the possibility of him invoking his rights hadn’t even registered with me. I thought he was asking me about a plea deal, if a lawyer could help the situation. Everything was riding on his confession. Everything that came next could be tainted on a misunderstanding. I never hit him. Didn’t kill him and have him “go for my gun.” Instead, I misinterpreted what would later be questioned to whether it was a bona fide invocation of his rights. I was in the zone.

“Can I talk with you again with my attorney?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say. “If you want.”

“Afterwards?” he asks.

“Yes.” He was about to tell me the name of the second guy. Was he asking me to stop? Asking for a lawyer? I can only tell you that in that moment, I didn’t hear his asking so much for his lawyer as opposed to the right to have one there to proffer some kind of deal; tit for tat. Reading it word for word months later in a transcript, it looks pretty clear.

“I need to speak to my attorney first,” he says. No other way to translate it. Reading it months later, two days before trial, I felt like I was going to throw up.

I read further and two pages later he told me the other guy’s name. I didn’t beat it out of him. I didn’t threaten him in any way. It wasn’t the guy we thought it was either. And he hadn’t fled the country yet, even though he was packing his bags. Manuel was sitting in the front seat of my car, excited about the take down involving his co-conspirator, when the other guy was taken into custody. He said it was like being on an episode of Cops. He felt like a celebrity. The other guy came clean to me in under fifteen minutes. He cried like a baby saying Manuel forced him to rape her to make him complicit and not snitch on him later. Two days later, a group of thugs beat him within an inch of his life while the corrections officers’ backs were turned.

\* \* \*

Almost a year later, we all sat in a courtroom waiting to hear what these guys would get. They each got a couple life sentences to be served consecutive to each other. Manuel smiled throughout the sentencing. The second cried as he did the night of his



arrest. They both asked to be deported back to Mexico, and to our amazement, the judge granted their requests.

“When you guys get finished with your time here, we’ll send your corpses back to Mexico, because you don’t deserve to be buried in this country.” It was then that I held back a tear of relief. Another judge would later say that he was certain that if given the option, we would all turn back the clock and never have this thing happen. My Sarge leaned over and whispered into my ear.

“Turn back time?” he said. “No thanks, fella. I made a lot in overtime that month.” He might as well have pumped his fist in the air and said Cha-ching! Like he said, it’s a sickness.

## ***BROKEN***

ethical

adjective

1 an ethical dilemma: moral, social, behavioral.

2 an ethical investment policy: moral, right-minded, principled, irreproachable; righteous, high-minded, virtuous, good, morally correct.

SITTING ACROSS THE desk, the defense attorney chats with the stenographer while we wait for the state's attorney and the beginning of a deposition. He talks of thirty years trying murder cases and defending the un-defendable. He mentions names I do not recognize, ruffling his feathers, one alpha male to another. He's an old one, Clarence Darrow type. I can tell he's going to take the full two hours allotted for this deposition. By their very nature, depositions are a formality. Each side has already seen the testimony and supporting evidence. A deposition just puts a face and a voice to the players. We are boxers at the weigh in, measuring up the other side.

But before the cameras start rolling, the recorder still turned off, for a moment, we are all just people with opinions, setting up before the big debate to come, when six or twelve strangers will decide a man's fate based only on the carefully chosen facts presented by the players in this room. Of course, at trial, I am only a pawn, to be wielded in battle at the moment of their choosing. Sequestered before trial, I know not the schedule of events nor the plan of attack. I am nothing and everything all at once.

But here, in this pocket of freedom, the defense attorney casually says that he once had a client who confessed to murder within the confines of attorney/client privilege and his own decision to defend him anyway. He spoke of it with pride, of doing the right thing, and how the judge found out about it during the trial and set in legal and ethical

rulings to protect the sanctity of the court and the appeals process while still maintaining the man's right to a fair trial. They simply didn't put him on the stand so he could lie. He let his lawyer argue it out. And as in all depositions, within the next few minutes, this man was about to ask me questions to make me look like a bad cop and a liar.

And a jury will only hear what the lawyers want them to hear. I am not allowed free commentary in their courtroom. I must smile and answer the questions posed to me. It is up to the state's attorney to object. This particular defense attorney, like many others before him, is an actor in a charade and not a defender of rights, standing on his Emperor's new soapbox, declaring the man's right to a legal defense.

"But it didn't have to be you," I said. "I mean, I know the system is the best that exists, but even you can admit, it is still broken, right?"

"Every man has a right to a legal defense," he says.

"Yes. I know. But it didn't have to be you," I answer. "I mean, I don't have a choice about sending cases up to the state on an allegation. I have to obey the letter of the law. And the state attorney's not supposed to pick and choose the cases they get," I say, knowing full well that at times, they do just that. "But you do. You have the right to choose."

In this moment, his demeanor changes. He is many years my senior, and I should know my place. It registers in him that this is an opportunity to teach this foolish, younger blue-collar detective about the law and the inalienable rights.

"Did you ever think about being a doctor?" he asks, beginning his lesson.

"No," I say, but he continues.

"No doctor wants to work with cancer, but they have to, don't they?"

He thinks he is saving lives. His comparison is laughable. Apples and oranges, really, and I tell him so.

“No one chooses to get cancer. Killing a person is a choice. Raping someone is a choice. And besides, a doctor fights against the disease. He doesn’t inject it into another human being to see what happens. We don’t sit back and give cancer a fair shot at killing us.” I say. “You have a choice to defend or not.”

“If not me, then who?” he asks.

“Who cares? As long as it isn’t you.”

The state attorney walks in, a woman who has questioned me over and over on the stand, repeatedly putting the bad guys in prison for years. Surely, she would call this charlatan on the table for his hypocrisy.

“What do you think, counselor?” the defense attorney asks her.

She pulls the seat back, unloading her case files with a quizzical look. “About what?”

“Would you defend a man who has confessed his guilt to you?” I ask, adding, “Something heinous.”

She sits in her chair, looking at her files as she opens them up, avoiding eye contact with either of us and says what years of law school has taught her: “Everyone has the right to legal representation.”

I shake my head at their deflection; speaking from the legal drafts instead of from the ethical position. And as if she hears my thoughts, she adds one more of her own.

“I’m sure he got a nice chunk of change for doing it, too.” And we settle into our seats for the deposition.

The defense attorney shrugs it off, saying we could argue this point for another three hundred years and still not come to a decision, and the stenographer leans over to me and says quietly, “You’re probably thinking more about the moral rather than the ethical dilemma.”

I half smile and shake my head, wanting to comment on the fact that each word is the primary definition for the other, but the recorder is about to turn on, and we all have to go back to our corners and wait for the bell to signal the beginning of the next round.

## ***MONSTER MISTAKE***

CHARLIE DIDN'T EXPECT to see me waiting for him in his probation officer's empty conference room. He was expecting to take a court ordered piss test, not answer an allegation of sexual battery. No one likes to piss in front of another man, but I imagine given the choice, the urinalysis is the lesser of two evils. Suspects are never happy to see me.

"Hey, Charlie. My name is Detective Voyles, and this is my partner, Detective Harms," I say, motioning to Dave seated at the big conference table. Dave smiles in that way that tells Charlie he feels sorry to meet him. Unfortunately, we rarely make a good first impression. Fear has a way of squashing our best intentions.

Charlie steps in the door of the room, but instead of moving towards the table, he half steps inside with his back up against the wall.

"These detectives need to talk to you, Charlie," his probation officer says, standing behind him. "As soon as they are done, we'll get what we get and you can take off."

Charlie nods at this and keeps looking back and forth between Dave and me.

"I'm not here to get you in trouble, Charlie," I say, "but your name came up in my investigation, and this was the quickest way to talk to you so we could rule you out as a suspect."

It is best to start off by trying to put the suspect's mind at ease. Being arrested isn't something new to him, so it is important to remind him that he is free to leave; that

something besides jail will happen after our conversation, and I want him to know he can be ruled out. At this moment, not all is lost.

“I’m clean,” Charlie says. “You’ll see that from the piss test.”

“We’re not here about that, Charlie,” I say, sitting down at the conference table. “Frankly, I couldn’t care less about that. Your business is your business.” I motion my hand to try to get him to sit at the table with me, but he sits in one of the chairs near the door. “We’re here about Kelsey.”

“Who?” Charlie says, but the name has registered.

“Kelsey, Kelsey Chavez. You know her, right?” Before he got in the room, I set the tape recorder on the bookshelf near where Charlie took his seat. He’s been through the system. Talking to the police about a girl is never good.

“Um, yeah, like from middle school. A long time ago.”

“But you’ve seen her since. You’ve hung out. At Jared’s house, right?”

“I guess.” Charlie is the last person I have talked to about this case. Kelsey doesn’t know what happened other than she got drunk and woke up in the backseat of her car with her underwear on sideways, and she only figured that out when she made the guy driving her home stop so she could pee in the bushes behind a closed convenience store. She could have had consensual sex or she could have been raped; she was just too drunk to remember which.

And being drunk doesn’t automatically make it non-consensual. Many a stubborn drunk girl has exposed her breasts for cheap beads in the humidity of a New Orleans night, much to her mother’s chagrin when the photo shows up on Facebook. And even more have fought for his keys to drive home, because no one is going to tell him he is too

drunk to drive. Just because a person is too drunk to remember, doesn't mean they weren't intent of doing it. Or should we let all the drunk drivers go home with a stern warning?

"Do you remember that night, Charlie? Because she called in to us saying she got raped."

"She got what?" Charlie's face changes; micro tremors of a scared smile.

"Raped."

"Raped?" he asks, just to be sure, gripping the arms of his seat for stability.

"And people at the party are saying you guys were making out and stuff."

"Uh, huh." The air is being sucked out of the room. Charlie looks at Dave who is still wearing that same sorry smile. He turns back to me.

"So, I figured I'd talk to you and clear this whole thing up. Since you were making out, and everything."

"No. We never made out." This is the first mistake Charlie makes in the conversation. Everything up to this point has been perfect. He is supposed to be nervous to see us. He is supposed to be foggy on the girl. They were all smoking weed and drinking jungle juice out of red Solo cups that night. But he's been through the system and somebody, some other cop before me, ruined his relationships with law enforcement. Oh, I'm sorry, are those cuffs too tight? Maybe you should have thought twice before shoplifting that pack of gum. Respect is a two way street. No matter what crime the guy committed. Two things can be gained. He won't remember you two years down the road when he sees you at the movies with your family. Or he will remember you as the nice cop who let him smoke a cigarette and not key your car in the parking lot, which is the



lesser of evils that he could take out on you. But in this moment, my motivation is different. I truly want to help people. Everyone. I want him to be honest, because a lie will be the end of him.

“They all said they saw you.”

All the synopsis are starting to fire with Charlie. Fight or flight. Two detectives are talking about rape and his name is in the same conversation. He is standing in the batter’s box with two strikes against him.

“Everybody that was there, Charlie. You know. James, Jared, some guy named Soho, and that other guy, the one from Carolina. What’s his name again?” I’m letting him know that he is the last to know.

“Bhodi.”

“Right. Bhodi. Everyone’s saying you guys were hot and heavy on the couch,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “So you remember that night, then.”

“Yeah, but we was all just playing video games, and Kelsey kinda passed out and we took her back to a room to sleep it off.”

“Right. How did that go down?”

“Jared carried her into the room. It was his place. And I held the door for him and then after that, I passed out in the bathroom.” This was all stuff I already knew. James told me this. Jared supplied me with his DNA, and Soho never left the living room. The part about passing out in the bathroom is new, but it was down the hall and near the bedroom where Kelsey lay sleeping it off.

“Listen, Charlie. I’m trying to be as straight forward with you as I can.”

“Uh, huh.”

“I don’t think Kelsey was raped, okay?”

“She wasn’t.”

“See and you know that because you didn’t rape her.”

“Right.”

“But the problem we have is that when a girl says she is raped, we do all kinds of tests.”

“Uh, huh.”

Sometimes an interview turns into a lesson on crime scene techniques and the anatomy of an interview. Gone are the days of bright lights and heavy phone books. Too many television shows have already spilled the beans on what we do, or at least some glamorized version of it. Now the only way to compete is to make it sound like he knows exactly what is going on. If he thinks he is free to go, then I don’t need to read him Miranda. Half-truths also work wonders. Saying a girl was drunk and probably just wanting to hook up infers that it’s okay. It doesn’t negate the fact that she doesn’t agree with that and will sit in court to protect her honor. So, being honest, or half way at least, has given me the best results. Inference is an interviewer’s best tool to keep a suspect in the conversation. I want the truth, no matter how bad it may sound. And to get it, I have to tangle him up. It’s all about the word play.

“Do you understand what we’re up against here, Charlie?” We, not he.

“What do you mean?”

“I came to talk to you because you are what we refer to as a witness slash suspect. You get that right?”

“Because I got a history?”

“No. Unless you have a history for raping girls. Which you don’t, right?”

“I don’t need to rape nobody.”

“Perfect.”

Charlie is still suspicious of me. Trust doesn’t come easy. I can’t really blame him. For the first five years on the road, I was that deputy who would never see him again. I didn’t make big arrests. Nothing that sent anyone to prison for decades. If I arrested someone for possession of his buddy’s marijuana, he spent the night in jail. Time served, and a hard lesson about carrying for a friend. Charlie never interacted with a major case detective; how is he supposed to know that we may have a heavy conscience about whom we put in jail?

“Here’s what we have, Charlie.” I say, laying all my cards on the table. “You can continue to tell me that you had nothing to do with Kelsey or you can tell me you had consensual sex with her. Either way, I leave here with information I want.”

Charlie doesn’t respond. He is a student in a lecture of interview techniques.

“If you say you had sex with her. Sex, not rape. Then it’s your word against hers, and since you were both drunk. It is what it is.” This is true, but still bad for him. She says she passed out. If she sticks to this, he could get hurt in court. Contrarily, if he does admit consensual sex, that gives him reasonable doubt. “But if you deny it. Flat out no way. You didn’t have sex with her. Then I leave here with a rock solid denial.”

“I didn’t rape her.”

“I’m not done, Charlie,” I say. I look over at Dave. He continues his silence, unnerving Charlie in his corner by the book case. “Because if I leave here with that flat out denial and the DNA comes back to you-”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, then not only will you be a liar, you’ll be a rapist, too. Understand?”

“I’m no rapist.”

“But I need you to understand that if you deny the sex, because I got a feeling about you Charlie. I don’t know you from Adam’s house cat, but you seem like a straight up guy. You probably have some moves, and you don’t need to force anyone to do anything.”

“I’ve got a girl, you know? She’s pregnant.”

“See? Congratulations, Charlie. I’m not here to ruin that for you. It’s like I said before, your business is your business.” And there is his reason for lying to me. He wants to preserve the thing he’s got now over some thing he got on the side a month ago. “I know this sounds bad, and not something you ever thought you would have to talk about, especially to the cops, but we have this allegation and you are the last one on the list.”

“It doesn’t mean I did it. Someone else you talked to could have lied.”

“Jared gave me his DNA and the other guys all point to you.”

“Bhodi too?”

“No. I can’t get ahold of him. Do you think he did this?”

“No, but he can back me up. Until I passed out in the bathroom, he was there the whole time.”

“In the room with you and Kelsey? Because she does remember two guys being in the room, and that makes sense.” It’s one of the only things she says she remembers; two faces in the dark talking about having sex with her. She says she was in and out of it. Another reason it sounds like drunken sex and not rape. People don’t go in and out of

passed out. They simply wake up the next day to lights too bright, the thick tongue of cotton mouth, and a dull thudding behind their eyes.

“No. At the party. He can tell you what he saw. How I was passed out in the bathroom.”

“I want to believe you, Charlie, but everything points to you.”

He sits silent in his chair shaking his head. This is the worst place to be, having to answer for stupid decisions.

“And these tests. The DNA.”

Charlie looks up and interrupts me. “But when you get raped, doesn’t, like, the vaginal tissue get ripped?” And another defense against rape. Everything he says screams consensual. I didn’t rape her. I’ve got a girlfriend. She won’t have tearing because she was okay with it going down. He doesn’t realize all the admissions he’s making without coming out and telling me.

“Charlie, you all were three sheets to the wind. When you get a girl all liquored up, chances are, she will be good to go,” I say, shooting down his defense. “So, no. That isn’t always the case.”

His head falls again and he puts his face in his hands.

“And if her underwear comes back with your semen, and all I have from you is a lie.” I pause for effect. “Well, then you’re a monster, and our next conversation’s going to go a little different.”

He looks up. “I didn’t rape Kelsey.”

“But you did have sex with her, didn’t you, Charlie?”

“No.”

“Consensual sex? Your penis didn’t go in anything of hers?”

“No.”

I really am trying to help him, not that anyone is going to feel that way on the opposite side of this particular conversation. I hang my head and rub the wrinkles above my eyes. I know that nothing I say will convince him to tell me the truth. And six or eight months from now, things are going to be different. It’s like trying to tell a drunk that they’ve got a problem. It is going to take hitting rock bottom to bear that out.

“You’re making a mistake here, Charlie. If you guys had sex, you need to tell me before the lie turns you into a monster. You know, the guy in the windowless van without remorse, who takes advantage of girls and doesn’t care who he hurts. Don’t be that guy, Charlie.”

“Do I need a lawyer, or something?”

“No Charlie, you don’t. You have a right to one, sure, but you’re not under arrest. We’re just having a conversation. One where you are free to get up and walk up out of any time you want.”

“I just don’t feel like I should have to defend myself against this girl.”

“It does suck, but it is what it is.”

“So I can go then?”

“Yep.” I hate this feeling. I can tell he had sex with her. I don’t have the proof just yet, but I will, eventually. This is going to end badly for him. Not today, but soon. Charlie gets up to leave and I ask him one more question.

“Hey Charlie, I know your DNA is already in the system over that burglary thing you had a couple of years ago. Just for quicker results, would you mind giving me another sample here, today, to rule you out?”

“Nah. I don’t mean to be a jerk or nothing, but I’d rather not.”

“Cool. No. That’s cool.” I look over at Dave and ask, “You got anything?”

“Nope,” he smiles and stands up, tucking in the chair. “We’ll see you soon, then.”

Charlie stands at the doorway looking at Dave and says nothing. Then he looks back at me. “So, we’re good?”

“Absolutely, Charlie,” I say, adding, “Good luck with the piss test.”

“Right,” he says, bowing his head a little as he backs out of the room.

“I hope we never have to talk again.” I smile at him as he leaves.

“Me, either,” he says, and he disappears around a corner.

Of course, ten months later, when the DNA comes back, he will be brought to me in handcuffs. I will remind him of our conversation, how I tried to tell him. And he will cry as he tells me how it was all her idea. How Bhodi was watching from the doorway, getting off on Kelsey riding Charlie like a champion.

Of course, Bhodi will have told me a different story in the weeks following Charlie’s first interview. How it was too dark to see anything.

“Sure he’s gotten himself in to trouble here and there. Nothing big.” Bhodi will say. “But Charlie is no rapist. You can take that to the bank, Detective.”

“I never thought he was a rapist,” I’ll say, “but a flat out denial is the same thing as a confession.” It just takes a couple of months in a crime lab to process.

## *DISCRETION*

“We’re in our dog years here. One year in Sex Crimes is like seven anywhere else.”

-Detective Jason Levine on the overwhelming caseload and overtime hours.

ASHLEY STEPS INTO the doorway of the empty guidance counselor’s office with her head lowered and a quizzical look on her face. She looks the part of any other emo-kid on the block; skinny jeans, graffiti t-shirt and a thin, plaid, cotton scarf tucked ‘just so’ for decoration. Her thick, brown hair rests on her hunched shoulders. She raises her eyebrows into a question. I stand up from the swivel chair and introduce myself and wave her to the empty chair across from the desk. I rarely shake a victim’s hand. It’s too personal and it opens up too many variables. Living in a world of allegation, I err on the side of paranoia. No touching of any kind.

The office is devoid of any personality; no blotter, no pictures, nothing to get her mind off of the subject at hand. This lack of ambience wasn’t planned. The secretary at the front office was nervous, as most people are when the police asks for a place where they can talk to the student. They don’t think guns and badges belong in school, so it’s better to get them the closest office to hide them away. This is not the norm. Ashley just waited too long to tell her story, so I had to meet her here. Office hours are the same as school hours. This school is new and the number of faculty has yet to reach the number of available offices. For once, Florida has planned ahead. I close the blinds in the room for privacy. The bell will ring any minute and I don’t need teen-aged passersby to interrupt her concentration or the mood I will be trying to create. If I do my job right, this will be



the last time she has to tell her story to strangers. She is wary, but I am wearing a tie. I am safe.

“Your mom told you I was coming, right?”

“Uh huh.” Ashley sits like she stands, in a permanent state of shrug.

Fifteen-year-old girls do not want to talk to me about sex. I understand this. They want a woman. Someone who will understand them. A girlfriend who can share their secrets. Someone they can cry to. What they don't understand is with this 'understanding' often comes judgment. It takes a tough woman to be in law enforcement. Strong characters with the ability to recognize danger in even the most banal situations. Headstrong women like this rarely give young girls the benefit of the doubt when it comes to not taking care of themselves. They are constantly surrounded by A-type personality men looking to prove something to their father. Insecure boys who turned into insecure men and wearing a badge and a gun is just the ticket to cure their ills. Not all men in law enforcement, but a stereotypical ton of them. To deal with that type of constant day-in day-out testosterone dump, the women have to be tough, and more able to give as good as they get, shooting a man down when he tries some bad line on her. To be gullible is to be a failure. They picture themselves in the same situation. They Monday-night quarter-back. 'How could she have gotten drunk with all those boys? Doesn't she have any sense at all?' They look down on her.

The other side of the coin is the bleeding heart detective, in Sex Crimes to save the world. She will give the hugs and tissues needed to get the girl through, but the suspect tends to eat her alive. Most rapists have a problem with women. Coming up short with another woman isn't usually on the agenda. We have no room for real emotional

connections. Everything is an act. Nothing can be personal. We must live in the case number and not in the people. At least that is the idea. So even though I am not what she wants, Ashley is probably better off for it. Well, as long as she doesn't start feeding me a load of soap opera fiction. I don't do fiction.

“So, listen,” I say. “I am going to be recording this so you don't have to write this all again later. Okay?”

She nods her head.

“And who knows, you may not have to testify, okay?”

She looks at the recorder.

“Are you nervous?”

Nods.

“Don't be. I know this is weird, but I'm here to help. I'm not here to judge you. I just need to get it all down exactly how it happened. The more I know, the easier it is for me to put them in jail, right?”

More nodding.

My sergeant wants me to speak to all of my victims first-hand these days, or at least be present for the disclosure. We used to partner up. One with the victim, both with the suspect. Unlike my speech classes in high school, I can't wait to speak up in an interview. My partner Dave gives me that leeway. He listens and puts me back on track if my signals get crossed, and I head in the wrong direction. ‘I think when Detective Voyles mentioned the thing about Spock, he was trying to say you weren't being logical.’

Because of this inability to quietly sit tight, in most cases, the theme is mine to determine and without having sunk my teeth into the victim disclosure, I depend on the

story through hearsay. No tears or emotion to take with me into the interrogation. And I don't like the word interrogation. It's not like the movies and television. No blinding lights, no thick phone book to beat a suspect down with just in case he refuses to confess. That's not me. I make friends. I tell them I understand them. Partly because I do. I mean, if you put away the morality that we are all taught, let go of the golden rule, we all have it in us to do bad things. Some of us are better at keeping the faith than others. I just don't act on the bits of depravity plinking around inside my head. My Jiminy Cricket is strong.

That doesn't mean I don't understand. How does the saying go? It takes a thief, or something. Drug abuse, I don't get. Stealing cars, nada. But getting lost in attraction to sex? The fundamental desire we have as humans to go forth and be fruitful? That I get. And I use this knowledge like a realtor who knows his market. Except I'm selling a limited edition beachfront timeshare. Yes, tell me your secrets, and I'll set you up in a small condo, six by six. There's no beach, but it's an all-inclusive resort.

Sarge wants me to see, hear, and feel the victim testimony first-hand. Know the horrible victimization. Without it, I'm just too suspect-friendly for his taste.

"Tickle-tickle, cut the pickle," he'll say. "Jesus, Vance. You plan on putting anybody in jail today?" I'll nod and dismiss him. Suspect-friendly or not, I've heard my share of false allegations. I don't like being bamboozled. Not by suspects. Not by victims. The women in my family are master manipulators. They used me to get what they wanted from my father.

Starting when I was five or six, my oldest sister, Joni, would whisper in my ear to have Dad turn on the car radio before we even left the driveway, knowing that if she asked, he'd give her an Archie Bunker whine.

“Can’t you at least let me put the car in drive before you start bugging me about the music?” So, I would do my best Charlie McCarthy act to keep the family happy. I can see my sister in those best friends coaxing their sorority sisters into pressing charges. Third parties who don’t have to live with the ultimate decisions of testifying in trial and the accusations expressed under the breaths of those closest to her.

My mother kept my father from leaving so as not to devastate me. Instead he endured another ten years of misery with both parties having just reasons to leave. She is the face of countless mothers pushing their children to tell the big policeman about how their soon-to-be ex-husbands took too long when he was drying his daughters off at the pool.

My sister Julie, the second born and seemingly forgotten a year later upon my arrival, used guilt and pity to make my parents dance. She fed on their regrets of neglecting the middle child, staging her own crafted play of desires like a director on Broadway.

Three nights before I shipped over to the Persian Gulf for war, Julie told my father about an alleged conversation I had with her extolling the virtues of lying to our parents for our own personal gain. In Julie’s mind, I was the chosen one in my father’s eyes. Twisting the conversation I had with her about the value of keeping her private life private, into a lesson plan on lying to our parents about everything to get away with murder, she undermined my relationship with him. I was on the eve of war, and she watched with painted on innocence, thinking this would somehow elevate her own status in his world. Instead, my father’s faith in me was crushed and I spent the night

convincing him of my true intentions, patching together another miserable moment in my life that had been ripped apart on the whim of one of my sisters.

I see her innocent face in every other young girl willing to say something inflammatory to get some attention, no matter how bad that attention might be, and then shrinking from responsibility when the wrong people find out about it. A lifetime of watching calculating women is a hard imprint to undo.

In Ashley's case, I see the crocodile tears before they crest an eyelid. Fortunately for her, Ashley looks like a girl I dated when I was living in England. When we met, she was seventeen to my twenty-four. The first time we had sex, she had been eighteen for all of four days. This shot of nostalgia has a weakening affect on what I know is all an act. I am no better with my biases and past experience. Sarge will be happy. This will help Ashley's cause.

"But she's fifteen, surely you can't see her as a woman?" This from a road deputy as I get to this point in the story. We are faithful mutts, temporarily blind from the need to serve and protect. It is easy for him to disbelieve the suspect, who, upon hearing the allegation feigns shock, telling me that his sister was molested as a child and he would never, ever (emphatically) have sex with a child.

The fact remains that Ashley is fifteen, and most men start having sex in their teens. When they think back on those encounters, they remember the tight firmness of youth, the rush of euphoria when they first entered into that forbidden zone. The image in their mind is that of the girl then, not the woman now, well into her forties, and worn down from two point five kids and a car pool.

Memories are like old Polaroids; while the edges may crack and yellow with age, the images and emotions connected to them never do. Consequently, in their minds, grown men never stop having sex with young girls, because inside that mind's eye, they are still young themselves. They just know to obey the moral standards and laws that delineate the crime of passion. This idea is a good selling point in my interviews. I am counting on my bad guy to bite on this and admit the truth. Having sex with a fifteen-year-old girl isn't so bad after all. It's the hypocrites that have the problem. Conversely, I am counting on a jury stocked full of those very hypocrites, finding it morally reprehensible and wanting to put the guy under the jail when I get a confession.

Ashley spells her last name for me and I jot down her date of birth. She is happy with the laminate wood desk that serves as a barrier between us. This separation is just what the psychologist ordered. But still, her voice trembles a little. I will need to get her a tissue before the interview is over. The original report said she didn't remember what happened that night. Too drunk on fruit-flavored vodka to process the images swirling around in her head. She says there are no images. The rumor going around school is of a threesome. After three weeks in the mill, she can't take it anymore and asks to speak to the school resource officer, who in turn, passes the torch to me.

“Okay. Um, this, do you understand the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie?”

“Yeah.”

“If I told you I had long blonde hair would that be the truth or a lie?”

“That'd be a lie,” she says with a smile.

“Why is that?”

“Cause you’re bald.” She says it like an apology.

“Well, I prefer the word shaved, Ashley,” I say with a smile. “But whatever.”

This is how I start all of my interviews; making fun of myself to grease the wheels a bit. I want her to feel at ease. I want her to tell me the truth. I want her to tell me that she really remembers what happened. That she is just embarrassed because the whole school knows she let two guys have sex with her when she was drunk. I will explain to her about the law; how she is too young to consent to anything and even if she was all for it, even if it was her idea, he will still be in trouble for having sex with her. He’s twenty-three. Too old to even be hanging out with her. I’m not everyone else. I won’t judge her. Of course, the insinuation is there. Whether I say it or not. However friendly and amicable I am, the word slut is a hard pill to swallow. It chokes you the way the word victim does to a strong woman after losing a fight. But when you are lying, the word victim slides down smoothly, like a shot of vodka, only burning for an instant and then forgotten.

When I ask about the course of events, everything starts out innocent. Kids from the neighborhood sneaking a swim in the empty-house-for-rent’s pool.

“They said, oh okay let’s, let’s take shots.” Ashley pauses while she talks in a staccato rhythm. “It was, I think it was Garret’s idea.”

“It doesn’t matter whose idea it was. Okay?”

“Or somebody. I think Garret or one of them guy’s idea and so we’re, like, okay. And then, I don’t know how many shots all of us took.”

This is the easy way out. Drink until you can’t remember. What Ashley fails to realize is that she waited three weeks to tell someone. Three weeks after the next morning

when she woke up fully aware of having had sex. Three weeks after she read text messages from Garret telling her that he wanted to kiss her soft lips again. Most true victims don't wait that long. They tell a friend who helps them make the call or they write it down in a diary that is read by a nosy, caring mother. Something.

The ones who wait are most likely having an argument with themselves. Did I do something to bring this upon myself? Does any of the responsibility lie with me? If they have these doubts, so will everyone else. Especially this nice detective sitting in front of them with a quizzical look on his face. Three weeks gives me nothing more than her version against his. No physical evidence. She deleted the text messages on her outdated cell phone. The clothes she was wearing washed and returned at week's end. Nothing but rumors and conjecture and a blacked-out recollection.

All that being said, sitting in the room with her, I know I'm going to arrest Garret. He shouldn't have been feeding this girl drinks. Any jury these days will eat this up. It was stupid of him and he'll probably spend some time in jail for the mistake. There was a second guy too. When I sit down with him in another office of the school, he lies to me about it before I trick him into telling the truth. He thinks I'm after Garret and since the second kid is only fourteen and already a frequent flyer at the juvenile detention center, he figures he knows the system. He won't get real jail time. Not when Ashley willingly got herself drunk. The state of Florida doesn't work that way. He thinks he'll be home before I am.

Just because the system is flawed, doesn't mean we don't have our way of reconciling the injustice. Instead of arresting him the day he unwittingly confesses to me, I wait until a week before Christmas to arrest him. Juveniles that commit capital offenses



get at least twenty-one days behind bars before getting released back to their parents. I think spending Christmas in jail is the least he could do for taking advantage of the cute, drunk girl at school. He should consider himself lucky. He's younger than Ashley. The sex he had with her was an afterthought to Garret's little interlude. Garret's the one who will pay the price.

Ashley cries like she should, at just the right moments, and I hand her a tissue.

"I didn't think it was my fault," she says through the Kleenex. The tears stream down her face. So I do what comes naturally. As the only boy in my family, my father trained me to fix the problem. Never make a girl cry, but if she does, fix the problem. If you can't fix it, shut up and let them cry. I cannot fix Ashley. I am to be the metaphorical shoulder to cry on, so I pardon her.

"It's not your fault. It's not your fault. Listen, is it? Okay do you think that if you wore a pretty dress to prom that somebody should be able to have sex with you? Is that what you're doing? Or are you doing it to make yourself feel pretty? Cause you want to have a nice night and you want everything to be perfect. Right?" This is victim friendly; clichés and platitudes. Ignore all the signs around you. It's not your fault.

I don't mention that most couples get a hotel room on prom night because the sex is expected. I don't fill her head with the truth about how men think, like I normally would. Five guys, five girls; that's a party. Five guys, one girl; she's the party. But she's crying. Now isn't the time. I lay the blame on us. Filthy, dirty, men. The bastard should have taken care of you even though later, Garret will tell me that she wasn't raped. That she stripped her clothes off so quick that it made his head spin. She, you know, God. How can I say this? She just, she just, like I said, she took matters into her own hands.

She just went ballistic. Just took things off out of nowhere. Without nobody asking either. I'm telling her yo chill, like relax and you know, and she's like yo she's yo yo come on, like she's telling me let's do this, let's do this, let's do this.

And I will sit quietly listening to him prattle on. Garret will run when felony units show up at his house with the warrant. He will go to jail in his underwear and no shoes. We don't like it when you make us run.

Before I leave her so she can return to her classes, I try one last time to explain to Ashley how helpful her memory would be for putting Garret in jail. She's already told me that she was sexually active with an ex-boyfriend before this all happened, so anything she can remember about force or threats would be good. Even though it is against the law, not everyone feels bad for sexually active drunk teenagers when it come time for picking a jury. I repeat her testimony back to her, almost like a rhetorical question.

"You don't really remember anything that happened except for what you were told by Garret. You don't actually remember any of it going on."

"Right."

"Are you positive?"

"Yeah."

Deep inside, I know that she does, because she would have spoken up sooner. Or at least I feel like she does. I wasn't there. I'll never really know for sure. Not that my opinion has any weight where the law is concerned. Garret is twenty-three. He will be going to jail no matter what. At least for a couple of days, until he gets bailed out or she changes her mind.

Ashley is smiling by the end of the interview. It wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. We talk about her schoolwork and her plans for the future. I don't get too philosophical, the way I can be when talking to young girls who make mistakes. I do preach, though, because I don't ever want to meet her like this again. It's the father in me.

“So I would say abstain from sex completely,” I say, arranging my tie under my hanging badge, trying to hide the buttons on my shirt. I might as well be putting on an invisible *Father Knows Best* cardigan and pipe for the good it does, because she lowers her head and laughs it off the way kids do when they don't want to hear it. Who am I? I'm not her father. I'm not anyone, really. So I put in the only two cents I can truly enforce when it comes to a fifteen-year-old girl.

“And definitely abstain from fruit-flavored vodka.”

## *HE SAID, HE SAID*

WHEN WE PICK him up from his house, he is surprised to see us. Perhaps a little confused. I stand at the front door, my partner out by the street. His mother answers the door, her hair a frazzled, grey and black mess, pulled tight into a low pony.

“What is it you think he’s done, Detective?” she asks, looking me in the eyes. I meet her gaze. A small gold chain hangs low into her buttoned-up breast with the cross pulling heavy against her neck. I am six again, eyes wide with sympathy telling my father a lie. I know what my strengths are. I can make nice, make things look better than they are. I’ve been doing it my whole life. I do not hesitate.

“As I said on the phone, his DNA came up in this case.”

“Well, he would never,” she says.

“No, of course not.” They never do. “I’m sure there is some explanation, but that means I need to talk to him.” These situations are hairy. One wrong word and she can invoke her son’s right to Miranda, stopping me cold.

“He is only seventeen, you know.”

“Yes ma’am,” I say, without the slightly more arrogant and sarcastic, ‘Which is why I am even discussing this with you.’ Instead, I point to my car under a tree. “We parked down the street like you asked,” I say. “And I won’t put him in handcuffs until I get him to my car.”

She is worried about the neighbors. Of course she is. This is about her after all. What will they think when her son is carted away again? His shoplifting already ruined

her reputation on her street, but surely he's no rapist. Still, she looks back and forth between neighboring houses, perhaps seeing the idea of people inside, even though it is midday and they are probably all at work. And then he is standing behind her in his unlaced sneakers.

"Go then," she says. "I'm sure he will tell you how all of this is just a big misunderstanding." She reaches behind her son and guides him through the door. "Go."

As promised, my partner and I walk beside him until we get to my car and the handcuffs come out.

"Sorry, Justin," I say, holding them low so he can see. "It's policy."

He turns around without saying a word, his hands held close behind his back as if in prayer. Clearly, not his first time.

We talk of school and church and his mother's fury, and yet, the car ride speaks nothing of the allegation. I get to know him. He gets to avoid the elephant in the car.

"How are you doing in school?" I ask.

"Fine," he says.

"Got a favorite subject?" my partner, Dave, asks from the back seat.

"Math," he says, and we speak--if you count the odd yeah or no coming from his side of the conversation--of decimals and new math and how one and one make two, and I think of this later when I present him with the evidence that brought me to his door; how one in one quintillion makes a boy turn eighteen in jail.

By the time we get to my office, he is no less stressed than when I stood at his front door. I sit him in the room with the chair closest to the door, Dave and I sitting casually as if this is just another conversation. An illusion that he is free to leave and that

this truly is a misunderstanding. I ask him if he knows why we are here. He feigns ignorance. I read him his Miranda rights, and he tells me he understands. I ask him about this time last year. He cannot remember. I ask him about his route to school and back again, that certain area where he met that certain boy.

“I’m not gay,” he says, but there has been no mention of sex, no mention of nature versus nurture, no mention of the cross around his mother’s neck and the sin she wants to wash off of him each day. Just a simple question before the accusation, and he remembers everything the way he wants to remember it though he is not old enough to keep track of lie upon lie, not savvy enough to compete with us, in this box of carpeted walls, where everything he says is recorded, watched and spit back at him with smiles and understanding, and the only rules are known by those who brought him here.

“Nobody said that, Justin.” I reassure him. “No one thinks you’re gay.” But of course we do. Or at least trying on the hat for a day. Just to see if it fits.

“I like girls,” he says. “I have sex with them all the time.”

“You have a girlfriend, then?” Dave asks.

And he looks at the floor and then follows the seam of brown carpet up the wall and to the ceiling.

“Not right now, but a friend.”

“With benefits, I suppose,” I finish, and he nods in agreement. “But the DNA,” I counter. “What of that?”

Age seventeen or seventy-one, it takes time to Out someone. A boy is still a boy is still a boy until he can finally say the words, which Justin cannot. Only a rationalization and denial to himself. The room enjoys many conversations of denial. It wasn’t me. It

must have been planted. I know how you guys operate. I watch CSI, you know. I would never, he would never, we would never. Never. Never. Never. Until this one time. She wanted it, he wanted it, I wanted it, we wanted it. They tell me the moon is the sun and the sun is the moon, and we sit in this room until it finally sounds ridiculous, even to them.

“He told me his name was Andy,” Justin says. “He said he did it all the time.”

“He said that?”

“Well, I mean, not in those words, but I could tell.” Justin squirms in his seat.

“What are you going to tell my mom?” he asks.

“How did it happen?”

“How did what happen?”

“The sex.”

“It wasn’t even sex. Not-” he says, trying to explain his side. “Not for real anyways.” And we go round and round like children singing Old MacDonald; here a lie, there a lie, everywhere a lie, lie. But his denial does not mesh with science and logical reasoning, and so it all comes out in small little admissions, bit by bit.

“It was only oral, because I knew he was younger than he said.”

“How?”

“Well, I figured, you know. He didn’t know what to do.”

“Maybe that’s why he said you were forcing him.”

“I didn’t force him to do anything,” Justin says. “I didn’t even use my dick.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You know, because he was so young. So I used my thumb instead. So it wouldn’t hurt.”

That is the way of these interviews. No phone books. No bright lights. People really do want to tell the truth. They only lie because they are scared. I want to thank him. For being earnest. For all of the detail. Too much not to be the truth. I tell him that.

Of course, none of it matters. The truth, I mean. I can’t help him out of this. No matter how much I want to. The law is the law. I tell him how fourteen is too young to even ask about sex.

“But I told you. It wasn’t sex.”

It is here where I lay all the cards on the table. He remembers the who, the when, the how, and even though his seventeen-year-old brain cannot grasp it, after all the ins and outs, the backs from front, what he has told me is indeed against the law. The upside down, while now right side up, is still upside down.

“What are you going to tell my mom?” he asks again, tears running down his face. He is ashamed. Not of the sex, but of the boy, of himself, of his nature. He is a child, afraid of ripping off a Band-Aid for fear of the pain it will cause. It is once again ancient Greece, a young Socrates meeting up with other younger boys willing to learn. How does the rap song go? Willing to get in the driver’s seat, willing to turn? Besides, Justin still likes girls. He just hasn’t the game to play with them.

“She is going to find out eventually, Justin. He’s saying you forced him.”

“But I really didn’t.”

“Then why would he say you did?”

“I don’t know,” he says, leaning into his seat. “But it’s what I would do.”



“What do you mean?”

“You know, if someone saw, or he started to feel bad about it, and he didn’t want anyone to know. I would say it was forced too.” Justin bends over crying now. “Even if it wasn’t. Because it wasn’t. I didn’t hurt him. He just said he had to go and he left.”

And my job isn’t so great anymore. The tools I have to break through the lies don’t feel as good. What has happened when I feel sorrier for the guilty than I do for the innocent, when they both start looking the same?

“I guess that makes sense, Justin,” I say patting him on the back. “But I already tried to get him to tell me the truth and he isn’t budging.”

Justin sits up straight again. His tears wiped dry. He asks me what happens next and I tell him about juvenile rules. The twenty-one days in jail. The sex crime segregation inside. How he needs to listen to the guards when they tell him to do something.

“But first, I need to call your mom,” I say, standing up, his head tilting up to look at me and my partner as we move towards the door. “Tell her what’s happening.”

“Right now? You’re going to tell her right now?” he asks. His voice echoes fear. Dave keeps walking towards the monitoring room to shut off the video.

“It’s policy, remember. You’re seventeen.” And in truth, I do not want to make that phone call. I know what I’ll hear. Not her son. What had she done wrong? As if any of it had anything to do with her. Why was God punishing her? And what can I say to her that won’t turn into a religious debate? Who was she to judge? Do I need Jesus to come down and ask her to cast that first stone to make her understand that she is no better than him, or me for that matter, setting kids up to fail in a system that is flawed. Justin is

seventeen, and now facing the same amount of years in jail. If not more. He doesn't need a mother to judge him when there are so many others just waiting in the wings.

I know the system. Close enough to eighteen, he will be direct filed, kicked up to adult court. What has he done, really? In the eyes of all those who have no idea what it is really like down here, in this carpeted confessional? They have no idea what real life is. They don't get to listen to all the lies from both sides. What gets said in this room, with the victims, with the suspects, everyone, isn't really what it sounds like even though it is exactly what it sounds like. The boys were just playing tug of war in the woods. That's sounds harmless enough. Kids will be kids. Part of me wants to sit with him. Tell him it will be okay. I spend so much of my days almost preaching to my suspects about telling the truth and now here I am, wanting to tell him a lie.

Justin lowers his head again, wiping tears with a flat hand against his cheek. Trying to man up when his world is falling apart around him. "Can you do me a favor, Detective?"

We don't do favors. Miranda doesn't allow for it. A defense attorney would love for me to try. Extend my hand in real friendship. Give him something for something. Quid, pro, quo is a very slippery slope in my world.

My hand is on the doorknob. He wants time to compose himself. A drink of water. A trip to the bathroom, perhaps. I think of my own son, still too little, still too, everything. "What's that, Justin?"

He turns his face up to mine, dry now, but still not ready for what's next. "Can you tell my mom it was a girl?"

## ***REGRET***

“If you’re accusing my son, I wouldn’t let him talk to you in a million years.”  
-A Sex Crimes Detective’s perspective on talking to the police.

PATRICK STOOD AS the judge asked the clerk to read the jury’s findings. Dressed in light blue with a clean shave of innocence, Patrick fingered the seam of his dark dress pants. His buttoned-down dress shirt stuck to his back from the steady stream of sweat that had run down his spine all morning. None of the jury members looked at him. He stared at them. Almost begging for a quick glance to tell him it would be okay. His lawyer stood next to him. He too, looked for a sign. Throughout the day of witness testimony and breaks, Patrick continued to mumble the same mantra under his breath. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.” Nothing had changed in the ten months since I arrested him. The same day Mick called me about the case.

\* \* \*

“Sorry for waking you Detective, this is Candi from the Comm Center. I have 150-A, Deputy Mick Kispert, on the line asking to speak to Sex Crimes.”

My head is on my pillow, the phone stuck to my ear. I hoped I heard her wrong. Zone 50 is home to the Disney Internship Program. Kids on vacation from mom and dad, first time on their own.

“Can I put him through or do you need a minute?”

I breathe deeply through my nose and reluctantly sit up. I take another breath and stare at the wall, struggling to wake up. My wife stirs in the bed next to me and I make my way to the kitchen in the dark.

“Detective?”

“I’m here. You can put him through.” The line disconnects momentarily and I lean against the counter. The light from the microwave blinks 3:17 in the morning. Mick isn’t a brand new deputy calling me to tell me what he’s got. After ten years in Criminal Investigations, the last six months he’s only taking a vacation back on the road. If Mick is calling, I am going to be up for a while. He doesn’t call for nothing.

“Go ahead Detective, he’s on the line.”

“Good morning, Detective,” Mick says, like it’s the welcoming dock on Fantasy Island and he is Ricardo Montalban; ‘Smiles everyone. Smiles.’ Except he follows it with “Living the dream, baby! Living the dream.” This is his line whenever the day begins with overtime.

“Just tell me if I need to come out Mick, because if you are calling me to just let me know what you got, then I’m going to have to wait until noon, when you’re sleeping, to call you back.”

“Whoa. Don’t shoot the messenger,” he says, laughing. “My girl here was banging on dorm doors crying for help, saying she was raped, and now her mom is on the phone from Georgia screaming holy hell. Trust me. You’re coming out.”

“The mom is there?” I ask Mick. The kitchen is brightening in the soft glow of numbers and clearing my sleep cobwebs. There is a commotion coming from the other end, somewhere behind Mick.

“No. She’s been on the phone with her parents. They are threatening to sue the mouse. Hold on. Ma’am, please step-” Mick covers the phone and says something out of

earshot. “Sorry, Vance. Your victim keeps calling me Andy Taylor. Earlier she was calling my partner Barney Fife.”

“Is she drunk?”

“If she’s not, she’s got a good act. Anyway, she’s not coming off the rape.”

“Stupid Cracker Bi-” someone says before Mick covers the phone again.

“Who was that?” I ask. “Mick?”

The phone stays muffled. “Please, Ma’am-” Mick says.

“Who is that?”

“Sorry,” Mick says back into the phone.

“Who was that?” I ask again, but Mick ignores the question.

“We do have a scene. Liquor bottles, bed sheets, and a used tampon.”

“A used tampon?” I feel like I am still dreaming. I stifle a yawn and my ears plug, dampening the voice coming through the phone.

“...n the bathroom garbage, and she can’t remember how it got there. You want me to call forensics?”

“I’ll send forensics to you. Did someone just call you a cracker bitch?” I ask, knowing full well that Mick does not let things like this sway him in his work. However much what a person says contradicts how they behave, this is still just a case number, nothing personal, just business, and nothing will stop him from working it into the ground. He just makes sure to put it all in his report. If they stick with a bad story, it’s still just another case number to him. He’s not the one putting people in jail, the lawyers are.

“Are you going to come here or do you want to meet her at the SATC?”

“It sounds like she would do better to be removed from the area,” I say, trudging towards the bathroom to get cleaned up. “I trust you can cover the scene there, right?”

“You’re not sending your secondary?”

Normally, I would send another detective to cover the crime scene with CSI, but why muddy the waters with another person to testify? “If it was any other deputy, I would; but since you are fully capable-”

“No. I got it,” he says. I can see his jovial red face in my head. “Living the dream, baby!”

“Yeah,” I say, flipping the receiver closed and reaching for my toothbrush.

\* \* \*

Less than an hour later, I step into the Sexual Assault Treatment Center interview room to find Emily already seated in the overstuffed blue-vinyl chair. Sitting so small in the spartan room, she looks like a twelve-year-old; baby-doll shoes, matching blue denim jeans and jacket, her hair swept back and presented in a clean fashion. I sit across from her, set my digital recorder next to me, and introduce myself.

“Nice to meet you,” she says in a lilting, southern accent, just above a whisper. There is no mention of Barney. No Andy. No Cracker anything. Sitting here quietly, she’s as sober as a nun.

I smile at her, explaining that I will be recording our conversation so she won’t have to write down what happened. “I know this can be daunting, but I’m here to help, okay?”

Emily nods politely, but her body is tense, sitting ramrod straight in her chair.

“Where are you from, Emily?” I ask, hoping to make her more at ease.

“Savannah.”

“Well, that explains the accent.” I say, pressing the record button on the digital recorder. “This is Detective Vance Voyles and I will be in the room with-” I motion to her.

“Emily Ralston.”

I tell the recorder the case number, the time of day, and where we are. “Emily, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“Can you tell me why we are here this morning?”

“Because Patrick raped me?” she says, but her eyebrows are raised in question.

I try to smile, to calm her nerves. “I’m sorry, Emily, are you asking me or telling me?”

“What?”

“I asked you to tell me why we are here and you said you were raped, but you said it like a question. Like you’re not sure.”

“Well, to be honest. I’m not.”

“Okay.” This is not new. This should be easy to fix. I’ll be home sooner than I thought. “What do you think happened?”

“Well, I was sleeping, in my room, and my roommate woke me up crying, saying Patrick raped me.”

“You didn’t know?”

“It was my first time drinking.”

There is a knock on the door and the deputy who drove Emily here pokes her head into the room.

“I’m sorry, Detective. Can I speak to you for a second?”

Does it look like it? I think. But Emily is calm, and my getting pissy with another deputy isn’t good for our image. Especially at this place of peace and tranquility. Instead, I turn off the recorder and excuse myself. Stepping into the hallway, I notice the Victim Advocate standing by the bathroom door, ready to pounce in and give Emily a hug if necessary. The treatment center is just an old house, remodeled after the hospital went up across the street. Its old walls painted a bright white over heavy spackle. It’s supposed to be a safe environment in this troubling time. Posters of young girls just prior to their victimization are taped haphazardly to the walls. Propaganda and rhetoric about respect, abuse, and victim’s rights to convince her to press charges. It’s a government building with feelings.

“These are the statements we collected on the scene. One is from the roommate, and another is from her boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend? But I thought,” I say, tearing the pink carbon copies off. “Then who is the suspect?”

“Some guy she met at work,” she says.

“But the boyfriend was there too?”

“No. He came after.”

Before handing back the originals, I quickly read them over. Everybody drinking. Too drunk to drive. Work guy sleeps it off in Emily’s room. Roommate kicks Work guy out after hearing noises. Boyfriend comes to the rescue.



“Thanks.”

“You need anything else from me?” It’s close to her quitting time.

“No, but if you want to sit in on the interview, you can,” I say smiling. Always an opportunity to train the guys on the road. “Probably going to do a controlled phone call, too.”

\* \* \*

When I walk into the interview room at Central Operations two hours later, the sweet smell of malt has already filled the air. Upon my request, deputies made contact with Patrick at his dorm room. He answered the door on the third knock and his eyes were glassy with sleep. He squinted at the deputies with a faint recognition. He didn’t struggle as they put his hands behind his back and locked the handcuffs in place. Now Patrick sits in the corner, still cuffed and still wearing the red-striped shirt that Emily described in her sworn statement.

“Morning Patrick. My name is Detective Voyles.” I set my case file on the chair opposite him. “Stand up for a second so I can get those cuffs off you.”

“Can you tell me why I’m here?” Patrick says as he stands, turning away from me.

I step to his side and pull his arm upwards from his body. “The guy who put these cuffs on you locked them all backwards.” I fumble with the key before unlocking him. “That’s better. Have a seat.” I move my file to the ground against the carpeted wall and sit down across from him. Reaching into my ID holder, I pull out a preprinted Miranda card. “Since you were put in handcuffs, something I didn’t want done, mind you, technically, you’re not free to leave.”

“Well, no kidding,” Patrick says, rubbing his wrists. “Are you going to tell me-”

I hold up my finger. “And since you are not free to leave, I have to read you your rights before we start talking about why you are here.”

“Fine, but I can save you the time. I’m going to want to speak to my lawyer.”

“Are you sure, Patrick? Because-”

“Why am I here?” he asks again.

“It’s about Emily.”

Patrick hangs his head and begins to shake it from left to right. He knew this when he answered the door. When I saw Emily in the SATC, she was cute. Halle Berry-esque. This guy is a mutt. Greasy hair. Flabby gut. He is discount rack all the way. She is totally out of his league. The only way she would have hooked up with him is if she was drunk. He needs to tell me this. Tell me that she drank of her own accord. People do stupid things when they are drunk. Many a country song has been written about it.

“And I think that this is something you need, should, talk to me about.”

Patrick doesn’t look up.

“But if you ask for a lawyer, then all I have is her word.”

They tell us not to do this. He asked for a lawyer. Nothing he says from here on out will be used against him. But it can be used to help him. I have no hidden agenda.

“I’m not trying to trick you, Patrick. I just don’t like having only one side of the story. I don’t trust-”

Patrick looks up. “I’m sorry, Detective. What did you say your name was?”

“Voyles. Detective Voyles.”

“Right. I’m sorry Detective Voyles, but my father always told me not to talk to the police. No disrespect.”

“None taken. After all, I was just about to read that you indeed have that right.” I stand up and grab the handcuffs again. “Can you turn around, please?”

“Wait. Why?”

“You want a lawyer, so there are no more questions, Patrick.” I say as I lock the cuffs back in place.

“So, I’m still under arrest?”

I can hear the surprise in his voice. As if mentioning an attorney was some get out of jail free card. It doesn’t work that way. This isn’t television. Well, at least it’s not New York. Their SVU detectives don’t make the big decisions like arresting someone. At least not without the assistant district attorney’s backing.

“Yes, Patrick, for the sexual battery of Emily Ralston.”

“So you’re taking me to jail now?”

I want to tell him that I don’t want to, but the minute the handcuffs went on, he was officially arrested. Even if I let him go home, we still only have 180 days to convict him. I figure there is a lesson here for him. Stick to the minor leagues.

“First, my desk. I have to write the charging affidavit. Then jail.”

\* \* \*

Minutes later, Patrick is sitting on the couch next to my desk talking again.

“I’m sorry, Detective. I know you are trying to write, but sexual battery? That’s rape, right?” Part of me laughs at this small talk. When I came in the interview room, he

was polite, but holier than thou. It wasn't what he said, it was how he said it. My father always told me to never talk to the police. So busy not talking. So busy not listening.

“Yes.”

“Emily says I raped her?”

“According to sworn, written statements, Emily isn't the only one. Some girl walked in on you.”

“Melissa? She sent me a text after she kicked me out, but-”

“Listen Patrick. I wanted to talk to you about this. I really did. But you asked for a lawyer. If you want to un-invoke your right to counsel, on tape, then we can discuss it.”

“And if I do that, you will un-arrest me?”

“No. Once you are arrested, the clock starts ticking.”

“But I didn't rape her.”

“I didn't say you did. She said that. You said you wanted a lawyer. That combination didn't give me much choice.”

“Why didn't you tell me that before you arrested me?”

“I'm not allowed.” I'm starting to feel the morning, and lack of sleep is pissing me off. “It's called coercion, Patrick, and it would violate your rights.”

“So, you just arrest me on her word?”

You, and the hundred that came before you. If I had a dime for every guy caught up in a he said, she said. Case number such and such, Two girls on vacation with their families get caught sneaking in late after having a ménage a trois with this cute little seventeen year old surfer they met. What happens in Florida stays in Florida, until their dads sit waiting for them at the beach condo. Then it's he raped us. We didn't want to do

it. And now Dude Spicoli is standing up against two counts of sexual battery. That is all it takes to be a sexual predator. Two felony convictions. No more school. No good introductions to dads on down the road. Nowhere to go but hang yourself in the closet of your mother's house after bailing out of jail. We don't play in Florida. No sir.

"Her word, the statements, the phone call earlier this morning where you told her you guys had sex. All that." He took that call when the deputy walked back into the room with Emily and me. That awkward morning after call. About as hard to swallow as the morning after pill Emily took when she went in with the nurse.

"We were drunk. We were in bed, and one thing led to another. There was no rape."

I stare at Patrick in silence. I knew all this before I met him. The phone call. Get him talking. He'll apologize. Admit the sex was a mistake. What do you mean you don't remember? Of course we had sex. I thought you were into it. Are you kidding me? How could you not know we were having sex? We made out. We were drinking. Maybe it was a mistake. I hope this doesn't ruin our friendship. And it's all recorded. Sometimes I feel bad. Sometimes. What I would give for a magic megaphone. The ability to somehow scream into the ear of every young, horny guy on the planet. For this oh-so-valuable, sought after friendship, sex must be the icing and not the cake.

If only he hadn't asked for a lawyer. Hadn't laid that blanket of guilty conscience on himself when I ask him to talk about it. Given me his half of the he said, she said. I would have let him go home.

"Then why did you ask for a lawyer, Patrick?"

Patrick looks confused. He sits back in the couch.

“If this was all such an innocent mistake, what did you need the lawyer for?”

Patrick doesn't answer. He just hangs his head and breathes deeply. I turn back around and start typing.

“So there's nothing I can do to stop this from happening?” he says to my back.

I swivel around and look him in the eyes. “Not today. At least, not right now. But your lawyer can. You also have a right to a speedy trial. So, don't waive speedy. I'll write what you have told me and maybe you'll get lucky and the state will dump it. Better yet, maybe Emily will change her mind. It happens all the time, Patrick. Eighty percent, usually.” I don't have to tell him this. But I heard the spitfire in Emily's voice over the phone when I was talking to Mick. She was supposed to be drunk, but sitting in the room waiting for me, there was nothing. No slurring. No bloodshot eyes. No tell tale smell of sickly sweet alcohol seeping out of her pours. She was acting out a role. Just like me. I am the police. She is the victim. My hands are tied. I'm not supposed to feel this way. My job is to stand for the victim when she cannot stand for herself. She's not supposed to make me mad at her and sad for him. I want to rewind time and take them aside before they started to drink that night. But I am not Samuel Beckett from Quantum Leap. However much I wish I could, I cannot travel back in time, putting right what once went wrong. I can use this time here, in this moment, and I can give empty lectures. So far, there's no law against that.

\* \* \*

The next day, Emily's boyfriend answers the phone like he's in a hurry. “Student Center, may I help you?”

“Yes, may I speak to Joshua Williams?”

“This is Josh.”

I introduce myself. Tell him it’s about Emily.

“Um, can I call you back in about two minutes? I’d prefer to take this outside.”

When my phone rings, the recorder is on and Josh sounds confused.

“No sir. It’s just that I am surprised to hear from you. I mean, I wasn’t part of what happened.”

I lean into my desk, tracing my pen in circles as he talks. “According to Emily, she came banging on your door for help.”

“Yes sir, but-”

“She also told me that you were her boyfriend.”

“Well, we hang out, but, I don’t,” he pauses. “I’m surprised because I wasn’t there that night. In her room, I mean.”

“Yes, I understand that, but afterwards. After the incident, she came banging on your door.”

“No sir. That was before.”

“Before what?” I ask.

“Before she was raped. Sir.”

This is not what I want to hear.

“So she came knocking on your door before she was raped, saying she was raped?”

“She was drunk. Flirting kinda, asking me to help her before something bad happened. Then that guy Patrick came up and helped her back to her room. They were all drinking a lot, sir.”

“But you were there when we arrived.”

“Only because Melissa came and got me. She told me what had happened and that Emily needed my help.”

“Emily asked for you?”

“Well, I don’t know. She had fallen back asleep by the time I got there.”

And where was this information before I sat down with Emily. Did it come over the phone when I was sitting at home, too stuck in my sleep to hear it? IS this something I missed, or something left out of the transfer to me?

\* \* \*

“May I speak to Melissa, please?”

“Speaking.”

I stare at the numbers on the phone with my finger poised over the mute button. I lower my voice to its police tenor, the one with authority. “Hi Melissa. My name is Detective Voyles. I work for the Sheriff’s Office, and I need to talk to you about Emily Ralston.” There is a silent recognition streaming through the phone. I peek over at my computer screen at the last driver’s license photo Melissa took. The voice doesn’t sound right for the face. Too high. A bit whiny for the long, thick hair.

“Oh. Okay. Sure,” she says, her voice softer now. More grave.

“Is this a bad time? Because if you want to come in-”

“No. This is fine. Um.” Her hair scratches the receiver. “Yes. Hold on a second,” she says. There is shuffling in the background and Melissa speaks to someone in a muffled tone. Over my cubicle, two other detectives laugh. I press the mute button and stand up.



“I’m taking a statement, guys.” The look on my face tells them to quiet down. As I sit back down, I hear my words come whining back from one of them, mocking me. This is nothing new.

“Detective Voyles? Are you there?”

“Yes. Sorry. Is this a bad time?”

“No. No. I’m at work, but this is better.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I’m sorry I didn’t get to talk to you the night that this happened. I was with Emily.”

“Yes.”

“And, well, I was able to read over a copy of your written statement that night, and I have some questions.”

“Did I forget to put something down?”

“No, Melissa. I just find it easier to write what happened when I hear it from the witnesses themselves. From the horse’s mouth, so to speak.” I look at her long face in the photo and smile.

“Sure, I guess. Well, like I wrote in my statement, Emily-”

“Oh. I’m sorry Melissa. Before you start. Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but?”

“Sure. Yes. I mean, I do.”

“Perfect. You were saying?” I press the mute button so she can’t hear the commotion on the other side of the cubicle. We respect each other to not respect each other.

“Well, like I wrote in my statement: I walked into Emily’s room and saw she was passed out. And then I see Patrick on top of her, raping her.”

Unmute. “Do you two share a room?” Mute.

“No. She’s moved back to Savannah with her parents. When they showed up,” she pauses for a second. “Well, they kind of insisted.”

The joking from the other side subsides and I press the mute button again. I can hear my own breath back on the line. “No. I mean when this happened. Were you sharing a room with Emily?”

“No. Sir.”

“Then why did you go into her room?”

“To make sure she was okay. She was really drunk-”

“Was she screaming for help?” I pick up my pen again, tracing and retracing circles.

“No, but I heard moaning. And Patrick was supposed to be sleeping it off, and this was the first time she ever had anything to drink and I was kind of watching over her.”

“So you’ve said. But I’m curious.” I stab my pen in the beer stein mug I use for a pencil holder and flip through the file to find her statement. “Excuse me. I can’t seem to get your statement in front of me. It must have slipped out of the file or something. Didn’t you say something about Emily and Patrick kissing earlier.”

“On the couch, yes, but-”

“And you heard moaning coming from her room?” The statement is stuck to a stapled medical sheet. I pull it out to read as I talk.

“Yes, but-”

“Let me finish, Melissa, okay?”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, I’ve got it now. It says that you see the two of them kissing on the couch. Later, you hear moaning coming from her bedroom. And because you think it’s a mistake, you decide to interrupt them?”

“Well-”

“You know he’s in jail now, right? I arrested him.”

“She was passed out.”

“You said you heard moaning, right?”

“Yes.”

“People who are passed out do not moan, Melissa.” I wait for a response and get none. “I’ve also talked to Josh about this. It says here in your statement that they were dating?”

“Yes, that is what she told me.”

“Would it surprise you to hear that Josh disagrees with that?”

White noise from the phone.

“He also told me that Emily told you that Patrick was fingering her earlier. Is that right, Melissa?”

“Yes.” The answer is almost a whisper now.

“Okay. So, you saw them making out?”

“Yes.”

“And she told you he was fingering her. Was this before or after you walked in on them in her room?”

“Before.”

“Was she unconscious when she told you this?”

“No.”

“And did she say she didn’t want this to happen?”

“No, but-“

“Kind of sounds like she was hooking up with Patrick, wouldn’t you say?”

“She was really drunk.”

“So, after you kicked Patrick out and went to her. Did she say she had been raped?”

“No.”

“Did she ask you to go get Josh?”

“No. I thought-”

“Did you ever think that maybe she might be embarrassed?”

Melissa doesn’t answer.

“Put yourself in her shoes. You’re in the middle of a drunken hook-up and your roommate barges in, kicks the guy out and calls another guy that you’ve been dating off and on to come to the rescue.”

Melissa breathes into the other end of the phone.

“Kind of embarrassing, huh?”

“Yes,” she says, almost inaudibly.

“Patrick is in jail awaiting trial for sexual battery, Melissa. Rape,” I say, punching through the phone.

Melissa doesn’t answer.

“Does that seem fair to you, Melissa?”

“Well, not when you say it like that.”

\* \* \*

A year after Patrick had his day in court, I receive a plain, white envelope in my inbox. The return address has his name printed in block letters at the top. He must have gotten my name from the original charging affidavit. I doubt he would have remembered it from our interview introductions.

I slip the letter into my laptop bag and carry it to my new desk in Homicide. I try not to think about Sex Crimes anymore. When I pull the envelope out of my bag, the return address catches my eye. Scribbled under Patrick’s name, in what looked like an afterthought, is his prison inmate number.

After arresting him, I only saw Patrick months later in passing at the courthouse. I was there on another case, and surprisingly, never called to testify on his case. Instead, the State Attorney chose to have Mick testify. When I called him about it, after the verdict, he told me he wanted an unbiased opinion and Mick is nothing if not that.

“Your report told me how you felt, Vance,” Ryan says over the phone.

“I didn’t write anything that wasn’t true.”

“But I know how you felt. You can’t hide that from a jury.”

“Five years, Ryan,” I say. “Over a he said, she doesn’t remember?”

“She was a credible victim.”

“She told me she was a virgin and she wasn’t even sure-”

“And that’s why I didn’t call you to the stand,” he says. “If it makes you feel better, Vance,” he adds before hanging up. “It wasn’t you who put him there. He had an attorney.”

Sure. You have the right to an attorney. Until Patrick, handcuffs were my answer to exercising that right. And he was so surprised to be put back in handcuffs, after uttering those seemingly magical, get-out-of-jail-free words. How could he know that in Florida, it only takes the sworn testimony of one person to put a man in jail for a sex crime? Even newspapers need more than that to run a story. And she wasn’t even sure. I figured he’d spend a night in jail and never hook-up drunk again. I thought I was teaching him a lesson and giving him a second chance; two birds, one stone.

Using the tip of my letter opener, I let the razor cut a slit into the top of Patrick’s envelope. On small tablet-sized, notepad paper, he asked for a transcript of Melissa’s interview for his appeal. I stapled my business card to the top of a signed copy, and had it in the mail before lunch. I’m still waiting to hear from his lawyer.

## ***RIGOR***

“People who are brown will usually fall down.”

- Detective Jerold White in reference to Next of Kin notifications.

AS QUICK AS the bullet entered his body—slightly to the left side of his chest, piercing his heart—so did it get swept up in the ebb and flow of excited adrenaline, that fight or flight response, and leave the heart via the pulmonary artery, settling just right of center behind the opposing shoulder blade. After using the x-ray as an anatomical GPS, the medical examiner lifts him up onto his right shoulder, and presses his skin in search of any abnormality.

Somewhat hesitant in my new surroundings, I do not speak. All around me are broken things. In my mind, the children’s rhyme of Humpty Dumpty creeps in as I make the connection with all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, standing by, in a helpless wonder of death.

At neighboring work stations, two other bodies lie lifeless, uncovered and exposed, the bright lights leaving nothing to the imagination. Not like television, where blue sheets cover the victim, a modest protection of virtue. Instead, on one table, an infant child, already examined, his head full of soft, brown curls resting quietly on a blue, plastic block; the better to see inside, to unravel the mechanism of death. And now a technician deftly putting back together what the doctor methodically took apart; her hands sewing cross-stitch after filling the empty spaces with white clouds of cotton. On the other table, the other side of the spectrum, a middle-aged woman, partly incinerated

by her own hand, choosing not to live anymore, smelling faintly of gasoline and fear, her arms drawn up in a permanent “Thriller” dance move.

And I should be solemn. I should be sick with anger or pity, or something less than this curiosity now taking hold. Stepping away from her, the odor of gasoline fading, and I wonder where the other smells are, the rot and funk I was expecting, forgetting momentarily how this place is new not only to me, but to the examiners as well; each workstation state-of-the-art, ventilation designed to suck out the foul stench of death and decay, replacing what should be the normal smell of rot with a 21st century normal, technology and climate control, a cleaner scent of sterility and fresh pumped oxygen. Instead, my thoughts wander back to the task at hand and the single item scavenger hunt in progress; one spent .380 caliber bullet.

“Yep. Here it is,” she says, calling her assistant over. “Let’s see if we can get it out of there from behind.”

I instinctively reach for my phone and push the video mode as she reaches for a scalpel to make the first cut, both of us anxious to see what is discovered, but then I remember my place.

“Can I take a picture in here?” I ask.

“We’ll give you one in the report,” she says without emotion. “And not that you would do it, but Dr. G doesn’t like to have independent photos floating around out there.”

I put my phone away and reach for my iTouch, texting digital notes instead. This is my first autopsy after becoming a Homicide detective, leaving the sex crimes behind, and aside from my initial somberness, I now find myself smiling while surrounded by death. Is it wrong to be excited by this?



\* \* \*

Twelve hours before, I was sitting in the living room of the victim's apartment asking his girlfriend if she knew what her boyfriend had been doing that afternoon. This is just before I tell her he is dead. Shot and killed, I say. Before she collapses in grief. Before I think of the words coming out of my mouth. Four years of Sex Crimes has numbed me. I'm used to receiving the bad news, not doling it out. At least not to the victim's family. I need to remember this. Remember what my father taught me. Remember to be kind. I reach over and pat her on the back in a sad attempt to console her.

My temporary partner during my transition into the unit, Detective Dottie Rivera, stands in the dining area of the small apartment while I break the news. She holds an iMac laptop in her hand, turning it this way and that, trying to escape the shadows of the dimly lit room to locate a serial number. The girlfriend, still on her knees, tells herself that it isn't true. She just spoke to him. She's having his baby. It's not true.

"You know what kind of things he's into?" Dottie asked, still shifting the laptop around, not looking at the girlfriend. "Because it would really help us if you could tell us why he was over at those apartments." Dottie is not a doctor and therefore has no time for bedside manner.

Back at the medical examiner's office, the assistant is taking the victim's fingernails for evidence, clipping one end and then ripping. Perfect, I think. No pop off. No need to keep the edges smooth and ready for polish. He then moves from finger to finger, pulling at each one, massaging the rigor mortis out. He does this without

sentiment. Silent. Fingerprinting made easy with outstretched hands. Later, this same technician will lean on the bloody, exposed, skull of my victim, the face already peeled back, while he tries to get the right angle for a photo. Then he will lift his own foggy face guard and using a miniature electric saw, power through the bone of this dead man's forehead. This is my new normal.

We are still in the rigor window, only fourteen hours since he stumbled backwards from the gunshot wound, turned and fell face first onto the steps of the apartment stairwell. Thirteen hours and fifty-five minutes since he held his best friend's hand and died. Two months since he made love to his girlfriend and created something new.

Just before I broke the news of her boyfriend's death, I had no idea the girlfriend even existed. I was focused on the witness, his best friend and roommate, who was less than forthcoming about why he and his friend were at the apartment complex. What were they buying out of the back of the shooter's trunk? Neither party lived there and he kept swearing to God that he didn't know anything that could help the investigation.

"I just ran like a punk when I heard the shots," he said under his breath, more to himself than to me. "I just ran," he said again, his head hung low in shame. I did not console him, nor paint him a picture of survivor guilt. Every interview is a poker game, cards dealt on the down low with each player being the master of his own little world. But sitting in the front seat of a police car after your best friend is shot is not the time for a poker face. At least not for him. And I didn't believe him anyway. If he painted himself a coward, I would play on that later if need be. I wanted to know about the guy pulling the trigger. It's heads up time. All in. Lay the cards on the table.

And I don't care about his sense of self-preservation or whatever retribution he might be planning. The rule of the street tells him otherwise. Tells him not to cry. Tells him not to feel the loss, but later, in the presence of the girlfriend falling apart, he will falter. Streams of tears streaking down his face. His hand coming up flat against them. He is the Dutch boy with his finger in a dam. He will lift his head a little, the way one does to stop a bloody nose from breaking through. Tough guy. Stiff upper lip, staring at the poster of Pacino's Scarface on the wall of his best friend's living room. Why is that poster on every, single, wall?

But here in the front seat of the car, he tells me of another friend, when he was sixteen, gunned down in the street. This being his second rodeo, and once again, forced to cowboy up. On his arm, a tattoo of art imitating life; drama faces, laugh now, cry later. Soon, in the shadow of the girlfriend, down on her knees, begging to wake up from her own personal nightmare, the walls of his inner strength, and all his conditioning and compartmentalizing will crumble.

In the autopsy room, my smile remains, still in the bubble of newness and the possibilities of helping a true victim. No more sex, lies, and videotape. With a dead body as proof, no more deciphering crimes from cries of wolf. No more second-guesses.

The medical examiner cuts a slit in the back of the dead man's shoulder and spreads the skin apart and the bullet peeks out like a third eye; an all knowing, omniscient eye, who once sat quietly in the chamber waiting to spin up. The first to look down the barrel before the hammer came down, ripping striations into its sides before swimming into bloody currents. The medical examiner probes with her small fingers trying to grasp it without pushing it farther back into the body. My breath shortens. In my mind, I have

already seen the lead and copper drop into her hand, heard the clink of metal on metal like in the movies or the television show filmed right here in this very room.

I do not think of the possibility of it recessing back into the body, squirreling away from my sight, taking with it the secrets I need to hear. All I can do in that moment is hold my breath, make my body stiff while I stand on tip toes to see what she is doing, quietly willing the bullet back to the surface.

## *UNSOLVED*

WHEN GENE WAKES up, he is already thinking about the route he and Mary are going to take; first to the dumpsters behind the drug store on 19th, and then on to the strip club. For the past four weeks, he and Mary hit the jackpot with those new cold-frost cans and he hopes this Sunday will be no different. Early morning is the best time in this neighborhood because the crack-heads and prostitutes are still sleeping off the previous night. The weather is also perfect, not too hot, and not too cold. January in Orlando. Gene sits up, scratches at his beard and reaches to the foot of the bed and grabs his jeans. He smells them. Good for one more day. Then he slips on his leather vest, pulls his gray hair back in a ponytail, and covers it with his Navy ball-cap.

Each morning they get moving before the vultures come; those two or three homeless guys they see regular on the street, making their way to each trashcan and dumpster along the Trail, scratching out a supplement to their intersection panhandling. Anything to make a buck. And while living on social security is getting them by, Gene likes the idea that he is still working for his money, and the walking keeps them both feeling younger than the hundred and forty years they had between them. He is proud that Mary never complains. He feels loved more by her than anyone he has ever known and he tells himself daily that they have a good life, however meager, living just off Orange Blossom Trail. He is able to ignore the prostitutes frequenting the worn out sidewalks along the road and the empty dime bags and used syringes that line the gutters. Each night he hears the sound of fireworks, full in the knowledge that sirens will soon follow.

And each morning he waves at the steady stream of patrol cars driving north and south along his aluminum can route.

Prouder still, he hasn't allowed Mary to fall into that life, working the streets to get them by. They don't need the small trinkets that everyone is buying these days; the iPhones and music players that fit in the palm of his hand, or the gold bracelets hocked on the side of the road from places unknown, each little baubles unable to hold up when they are hungry. No booze or drugs either, to get in the way, or make them feel like they have to resort to stealing to survive, so much like the others they see being loaded into the back of police cars each night. Gene loves Mary and if digging through dumpsters for aluminum cans keeps her smiling, then he is going to keep doing it.

But one hour into their scavenger hunt, Mary comes running up with her hands over her mouth, choking, telling him to go look, and to please tell her she is just seeing things.

"What?" he asks. "Calm down, hon. What are you saying?"

"There's a body over there," Mary points one of her hands towards the back door of the strip club, her other hand stuck at her throat. "I think she's dead, Gene."

\* \* \*

"I've been looking online and found a place that would be perfect for the family reunion this year. That is, if you're interested." I am speaking to my mother from my desk in Criminal Investigations. Each year, she has proclaimed will be her last vacation, her last year on this earth.

"I have to get everyone together just one last time," she says. It's a guilt trip for each of her children, blaming herself for our disconnect. Caught in the middle of brothers

and sisters who just aren't kids anymore. She wants us all to relive our youth some thirty years ago and those summers in Maine when everyone, including my father, was happy.

“The place has four separate cabins so everyone will have their space,” I say, mentioning the website for her to see. The pictures show families on the lake, picking blueberries, and just being happy. I think these pictures must have been taken in the first couple of days of the vacations, when everything is good, before we all start getting on each others' nerves. I figure the four separate cabins should help.

“I don't think Joni is even going to make it. She may have a gig, singing down on South Beach. I know I've told you this before, but her band is very good, you know. She's really happy with them and things are different. I wish you would come down and see it.” As if we are still teenaged kids and the best of friends. My sister Joni has been mad at me off-and-on for the past four years. She makes excuses not to see me, or my family. I just tell my mother straight out that I don't want the drama.

“Well, there's room for everyone who wants to be there.” And I lay out the floor plans and who will be staying where. I try to concentrate on how I am splitting up the families according to each size, two bedroom cabins for the smaller ones and the three bedroom cabin for my own clan of five, but somehow, I know it will backfire on me. At this point, I don't care. I need a vacation and I'm willing to deal with my sister for one week if that is what it takes. Without two salaries coming into my house, a weeklong vacation is hard to come by. When my mother offered the trip, I told myself, and my wife, that we would manage somehow. I held out hope, figuring that whatever drama came with it was still better than staying in Florida in the summertime.

\* \* \*

When the road deputies called Sam, they told her of a body found in a dumpster, covered with garbage. Could be a homeless person trying to keep warm, or something different. They needed a response either way. Sam called me because it sounded suspicious and I had yet to get a bona fide homicide, as opposed to getting called out for every natural, suicide, or overdose that came my way, but now she was on the phone with a new version of the story.

“I’m thinking you can just go on to church, Vance,” she says over the Nextel. “Turns out she wasn’t so much in the dumpster, but laying next to it. Probably crawled over here, covered up in the garbage bags, and then died in her sleep. We’ll know more when the medical examiner gets here and we can move the bags.” This is nothing new. I had spent the last four years listening to one story over the phone and then finding different when I got on-scene. In this respect, Homicide is no different from Sex Crimes; patrol units can always be counted on for misinformation. Yeah, I’ve got a seventy-two year old male, half-dressed, wearing an oxygen tank, and face down in the bathtub. He has a pretty good gash on his forehead, but I don’t see any murder weapon. Because old people in poor health don’t ever collapse in the middle of taking a dump. Someone being held hostage turns into someone standing in the door blocking an exit. Aggravated battery with a weapon turns into someone throwing an beer can at someone. “Besides,” she adds, “wasn't yesterday your last day of call?”

And she was right, I had just spent thirty days in the window of Homicide, getting my feet wet, going to any dead body that was discovered in the county, no matter whether it be natural, accidental overdose, or the very methodical Hari Kari suicide committed by a tourist in town on business. There had been homicides too, but none that were assigned



to me because I was too green, the last four years of Sex Crimes not counting in the Homicide world. This new squad was feeling me out as much as I was them. And then there is the 48 Hours effect. Since the premiere of this pseudo-realistic television show on A&E, the rank and file of Homicide detectives have taken on a Prima donna attitude, seemingly too important to be questioned by any detective of the garden variety. I say pseudo-realistic because while the cases and detectives are real, some of the times are staged or out of sequence to make it easier for the audience to hold on to their seats. And maybe the Prima donna attitude is also internal to my own ego. Taking all of my sex crime victories into consideration, I've put people in jail for over five hundred years, so I'm sure there are times when my inner man has a few choice words to say about this less than respectful treatment. To quote any stereotypical Guido off the other ever popular show Law & Order, What? You think you're better than me? Still, I am a newbie, and newbies know their place.

I could have easily justified turning around and heading home. Only I was three miles from the scene and it didn't make sense to turn around without at least taking a look. I would miss Sunday School and still get back in time for the service.

"I'm almost there," I say. "Might as well show my face to the corporal."

When I walk up to the crime scene, deputies have already strung up the crime scene tape and Jenny is busy taking photos of the area. Near the back door and hidden behind a dilapidated planter, Sandra lies on her right side with her head resting on her arm. Her hair is disheveled over her face. As I lean in for a closer look, her hair shimmers tricolor in the sunlight. Homeless women don't usually worry about the color of their hair and I knew from my wife and sisters that tricolor highlights definitely cost more than a

crack-head on the street could afford. Her fingernails are French-tipped and glitter in the sunlight. Without moving the bags or touching the body, I crane my neck to see the other hand tucked away under the black plastic and noticed two of the fingernails are missing. A struggle.

Was she an exotic dancer who got into it with someone after her show? Or was she just dumped here to make it look that way? One thing for sure; I was more likely to make the eleven o'clock news than I was to make my eleven o'clock church service.

On more than one occasion, my wife, Nikki, has apologized for my absence in Sunday School. He got called out is her normal response to questions. On a normal day, I would be sitting quietly as prayer requests were spoken waiting for my turn, in my head the same unspoken request filling my mind; prayers for resolutions, prayer for my family, prayer for my sisters, mother and me to get along. And this day, leaning over the body of a woman in her forties, her painted nails and tricolored hair, my mind is once again on my oldest sister. For close to four years, we have maintained radio silence; the three hundred miles separating us might as well be three thousand. The friction between us like many other problems I can't solve; a slow moving torpedo on my radar forever pinging, my own movements steady in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

The Welcome Center off I-95 crossing north into Maine is lined with fir trees and smells like summertime with dusty pine needles and long soft grass perfect for picture taking. It's the first stop on the vacation and it leaves me feeling refreshed just hours into the week off. As I get everyone loaded into the van we are driving, my phone starts to vibrate on my hip.

“We are just crossing into Maine now. How is the cabin?” I ask my mom on the other end of the line. Nikki smiles in the seat next to me. The twins are quiet in their car seats, and Keaton and Brianna are playing cards.

“Is that Mom?” my sister Julie asks from the last row in the minivan. “Ask her how the cabins are?”

“They’re rustic, but nice,” my mother says. “Your Uncle Fred and Uncle Harry are here. And Billy is settling in with his family. Some of the kids are already swimming in the lake.”

This is exactly what I want to hear. Every summer as kids, we spent at least one month in Maine getting to know distant relatives. As an adult, each time I got a chance to visit, whether one year or ten had passed between visits, it always felt like coming home. I am Hannibal of the A-Team. My plan is coming together.

“Joni thinks your cabin is the best,” my mom adds. And there it is. What sounds like congratulations, but in reality, is a veiled complaint.

“Is her cabin okay?” I ask.

“She’s in a mood, Vance. She got pulled over on the drive up and mentioning your name, your job, didn’t get her out of the ticket.”

“Was she speeding?”

“Yes, and she thought-”

“It doesn’t always work, Mom. Even I am taking a chance when I do it. Not every cop looks the other way for out-of-state cops.” Nikki rests her hand on my arm and squeezes.

“She’s fine, Vance. Jiorgi is looking forward to seeing the girls. How much longer before you get here?”

“Shouldn’t be more than an hour and a half.”

“The place is nice, Vance.” She can hear the frustration in my voice. “It’s going to be a good week, this time.”

The last time was four years ago just before Nikki and I were about to get married. Joni was mad because I had my mom tell her about our upcoming wedding over the phone instead of sending her an engraved invitation. We were being frugal. Beside, we haven’t been formal our whole lives. Why start now with a wedding invitation? Her presence there should have been understood. But even then, I gave her a hug at the end of our trip and personally invited her.

“Really?” she asked. “Oh, that makes me so happy,” she said, and then she didn’t show.

\* \* \*

Gene has been standing by ever since he sent Mary to call 911 from a convenience store down the block. The sun higher in the sky now, Gene squats next to his shopping cart in the long shadow of a nearby streetlight; a dozen or so cans already crushed in the bed of the cart. Canvassing the numbered streets on Orange Blossom Trail is like trying to find woodland creatures willing to talk about a tree falling. To prey like that, no mystery is worth as much as staying invisible to the predator watching from close by. Snitches get stitches. Having Gene stick around to talk to detectives speaks to his character as much as his Navy ball cap does.

“So tell me what happened.”

“Can’t say much more than what I already told that deputy over there. Me and Mary was on our treasure hunt. That’s what we call it, right?” He says this more as a fact than a question. His voice is gritty and his skin red from too much sun. Pointing to the back of the club, he says, “So, she was walking ahead of me on account I picked up that phone over there.” His callused knuckle point at the broken receiver in the parking lot just behind the yellow tape. “So, my finger prints is all over that thing, you know, because I thought it was something we could sell. I mean, you’d be surprised at what people throw away.”

“Is Mary your wife?”

“Might as well be. What am I gonna do about her now? She got so twisted up about finding the girl, they had to haul her away in an ambulance. I don’t know how we’re going to pay for that.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the ambulance as long as she is okay. The hospitals can send you a bill, right?”

“And you can’t get blood from a stone.” Gene grips the handle of his cart and squints into the sun behind me. I reposition myself to cast my shadow over his face. “Thanks,” he says.

“So, Mary found her first?”

Gene plays with the bill of his cap. “She did, and she come running over to me in a panic and so I went over there, reached into the dumpster like I was looking for cans, you know, in case it was just some homeless person sleeping it off, and I was leaning over but looking to the side and I seen her back all exposed and it didn’t look like she

was breathing, so I come back over and tell Mary to go call 911 and I stayed here to make sure nobody messed with her.”

“Did you see anyone leaving the area?”

“No. Like I said I just went in and leaned on the dumpster,” Gene shakes his head at this thought and slaps his hand on the side of his grocery cart. “And man, my fingerprints are going to be all over that too. I’m real sorry about that.”

“Gene, you did a good thing today calling us. Don’t worry about your fingerprints.”

“Okay.”

“And you said all this on the statement you made earlier?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do you have a cell phone in case I need to talk to you again?”

“No sir. Like I said, I had to send Mary over there to the Citgo to call you guys, but I live down the street and we are always there, you know, if we’re not treasure hunting.”

\* \* \*

“It’s supposed to be a family vacation and a family reunion. Family being the operative word here, Mom.” We are driving into a wireless cafe so my mother can check her e-mail. This isn’t something I took into account during a vacation. I am glad my cell service is horrible.

“She’s having fun shopping. You need to let it go, Vance.”

It’s Wednesday and with the exception of one day with us, Joni has taken to leaving her daughter with us and going shopping for antiques. On the face of it, I

understand. It is Maine after all. Antiquing is part of the fun. What I'm annoyed with is the fact that she keeps leaving her daughter behind for everyone to take care of.

"It's not that. I am going over to Geri's after lunch." Geri and her twin sister Charlotte are the cousins closest in age to me, and whenever we came up for a visit, I was usually playing hardest with them. We also have likeminded views on responsibilities and manners, something which my sisters and I take seemingly opposite stands on. Even with everyone on their best behavior for family, I still identified more with my cousins than I do with my own family at times. "I don't have room for Jiorgi and I don't want to have to fight with my own kids about leaving the lake."

"Why can't they just stay here while you go?" Mom asks.

"I want Keaton to know her cousins up here. If Joni wants that too, then she has to stay behind." What frustrates me more is that I am being pulled from my own cabin to make this trip into town, leaving my family behind. I went on vacation to be on vacation. My emails can rot for all I care.

On the trip back, my mother tries to reason with me. She thinks I am being stubborn. She fails to realize I have more responsibilities with a set of three year old twins along and adding another child to the mix of things I have to watch out for is too much. It's just another failed attempt to see Joni's side of it. She gets a vacation at everyone else's expense. I don't like yelling at my kids to get them to behave, but it's what ends up happening. Keaton, Brianna, and Jiorgi are standing on the porch as I lecture them loudly about family and fun, and how they better get dressed before I lose it. Real mature behavior. Everyone gets to be the typical dad on vacation.

I'm leaning against the kitchen counter in my cabin trying to cool down talking to Nikki and the twins are waking up just as Joni comes storming up the porch.

\* \* \*

At first, the road deputies thought Sandra was one of the neighborhood homeless, but the marks on her neck and the size D implants staring back at us, we start leaning towards stripper. Then the sugar daddies start rolling in.

"She was always telling me about Ralph," Tanya says to me while sitting in the front seat of my car. "We were staying at his house right before I got arrested."

Tanya is Sandra's best friend. Partners in crime. Once upon a time, Sandra had stripped, but she fell victim to her age and prostituting ended up being her backup plan. She had been hanging with a pimp-slash-boyfriend grifting money from unsuspecting rich guys, but when he got arrested, she and Tanya got tight.

"She really treated Ralph like crap, too." Tanya says. "I mean, I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but he is a sweetheart. Old guy, got prostate cancer or something, and he just showered her with money and a place to stay and all."

"That's not easy to find these days," I say, writing the name Ralph down in my notebook.

"Of course, I don't think he done nothing to her. She had bigger problems out here with Jo Jo. You can't take money from a drug dealer and not get yourself in a bind," she adds. Tanya reaches into her bra and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. "Is it okay for me to smoke?"

"I'm allergic."

"Oh," she says, sliding them back into place. "Sorry. It can wait."



“Do you know Jo Jo’s real name?”

“Uh, uh,” she mumbles. “But he lives over off Jackson. Same street you all found Sandra on.”

\* \* \*

As Joni storms across the porch, the release of tight springs cause the mosquito screen door to slap a heavy thwack as wood hits wood.

“I don’t care how you raise your kids, but you aren’t going to yell at mine!” and Joni is already in the cabin before I can stop her. The twins are just waking up from their nap in the other room and Julie is helping Nikki get them ready. I should have expected this. Nikki warned me about it when I started planning the trip with my mother. I can hear the words ‘I told you so’ in my head as I grab Joni by the arm and start walking her outside.

“Not in here,” I say as I reach the front door.

Joni tries to pull away from me, yelling to let her go, but I am not going to have this fight, four years in the making, go down in a vacation cabin while my two-year-old twins are just waking up from their naps. It just isn’t going to happen this way. As I reach for the door handle to escort her out of the cabin, I suddenly feel a sharp pain in my left forearm. It’s that kind of pain that triggers windows opening in your mind. The cliché of your life flashing before your eyes just before you slam into the back of a car or step in front of a speeding train.

I have a scrapbook of memories in my head that I will never forget; the speeding line-drive I caught with my eyes closed in little league, first time I held my children when they were born, and the day I held my father’s hand as he passed away. Now, looking

down at my arm, I see Joni's teeth grinding hard against my skin and the pain is searing it into my head like a laser cutting into metal. This place by the lake, surrounded by family, with the potential to create blissful family memories, is ruined. Instead, this twisted scene, the time my sister Joni bit me at the lake, will now rummage around inside my mind like some squatter in a beautiful beach house, getting drunk and failing to clean up after herself.

As a cop, I expect that someone will try to bite me. We talk about how the fight to get someone into handcuffs can lead to desperation, but my sister? It's not a conversation we have. I'll be honest. When I look down to see that Joni is attached to my arm by her teeth, my first instinct is to punch her in the head. End the threat. But, again, she is my sister. I remember thinking 'just get her to the stairs, get her out.' So I take the pain, pulling the screen door of the front porch open and shrugging her off my arm. Joni takes a step backwards, almost frothing at the mouth, loses her balance, and falls down three steps to the ground below her. From my mother's vantage point two cabins away, I have just thrown her first-born down the side of the Grand Canyon.

\* \* \*

The tip lines are alive with the sounds of allegation. But everything is anonymous and can't be corroborated. Jo Jo is a suspect. So are three other older gentlemen who Sandra took advantage of. But the streets, they're not talking. A search warrant at Jo Jo's house comes up empty and none of the Windermere and Boca Raton suitors have anything to say. Old rich guys don't like to admit that they still think with their little heads. She seemed down and out, and I was just trying to help. There was never any sex. But I'm lucky. There is DNA all over Sandra. Since she was a prostitute, it's a dodgy

area, but all I have to do is get someone to deny being with her and if he matches up, I got a confession of lies.

The worst cases in Homicide are the ones you know could be solved, if only people would care enough to talk about them. Sandra was a person, before she fell to the wayside, she was a mother, a sister and daughter. Falling into prostitution has a way of pushing loved ones away. Now they are back and they all want answers, and so do I. Like where were you when she started down this path. Why didn't you help before it was too late. Of course, I still don't have those answers for myself. Nobody wants to come forward. For Sandra, there is DNA, but that can take months, years even. The only way to solve this case now is wait. Something or someone has to come forth and testify.

\* \* \*

The last time my sister Joni spoke to me directly, she called me a soulless bastard, incapable of helping anyone. She left the family vacation and things got back to normal, everyone taking a sigh of relief now that everything had blown up and then blown over. It's a funny story I tell people, how my sister at the age of forty-five bit me like a two-year-old not getting her way. But it isn't funny. I tried to reach out to her through email. That was a waste of time, each of us going over how much we don't trust the other. Apparently yelling at someone after they bite you equals anger management problems. I think that not punching my sister in the head as soon as her teeth started cutting into my skin showed immeasurable restraint. But what do I know. I am a soulless bastard, after all. Tomato, toma'to. We have agreed to disagree.

But when I was eleven and she was sixteen, she drove me around Panama in her light blue VW bug. I don't remember where we were going, but we were getting there

fast. Every time she had to slow down for a turn or a stop sign or a red light, the car needed to shift from one gear to another, up or down. At first, she held her hand over mine, pushing one way and then the other, her foot working the clutch as our hands shifted gears. By the time we got to our destination, her hand was resting on her seat and we were working in concert, her foot, my hand, no words being said, even when we sped over a certain dip in the road and all four tires lost contact with the ground.

I plan to do the same thing with my kids when they're old enough, minus the taking flight. I'll probably have a serious look on my face in the instruction. If they ask me if I'm mad, I'll keep it light. Focus on the driving. Tell them I'm just thinking.

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