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Odd-Jobs

Screwball Humor / Urban
23,000 Words

*** WARNING ***

This short novel is not recommended for those who can't take a joke. In this novel, you will find references to guns, drugs, felony crimes and a dead stripper named Sally. You will also find stereotypes toward Italians, African-Americans, and urban youth in-general. You will also find the works of an author who doesn't give a rat's ass about "Literary Value" and who uses *Odd-Jobs*, his very first novel, to mock the literary community.

So in short, if I don't offend you in the first three chapters, then you're probably just as morbid and twisted as the author.

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Anyway, happy reading. ☺

CELEBRITY REVIEWS

"I feel dumber for having read it."

- Homer Simpson

"Whoever wrote this crap should be locked up."

- Ted Bundy

"And they call *me* crazy!"

- Charles Manson

"I've seen some messed up things in my time, but this guy needs help."

- Hannibal Lecter

"What book?"

- Ronald Reagan

"Hey Tim...call me."

- Jack Kevorkian

Odd-Jobs

Chapter One

It approached me. Slowly, as a predator seeks its prey. Silently, lurking in the shadows of the darkness. As I sensed it's arrival, warning sounds pounded my brain. *Beeep! Beeep! Beeep!*

I opened my eyes. Morning again. Ughh.

I grabbed my alarm clock and threw it against the wall. No one wakes me up and lives. Strange, I don't even remember setting the alarm.

I sat up in bed and promptly fell to the floor. I climbed back into bed with effort similar to climbing Mt. Everest. It was plainly obvious the Budweiser and Vicodins had not yet worn off. How many narcotic pain killers did I take? Last night was just a warm and fuzzy memory. I lit up a cigarette and tried to piece together the events of last night. Oh yeah. Dad's first birthday since Mom died. He turned 46. I vaguely remember the stripper. She slapped Dad when he grabbed her ass. He liked it, so I gave her a few extra bucks to do it again. I threw up on Sadie, our Black Labrador. Dad threw up on Sally the Stripper. Sally threw up on me when she saw Sadie licking up the mess. We laughed and drank more. Yes, it's all coming back now. I passed out when Sally started giving Dad his birthday spanking. It was a private moment, one I cared not to witness.

It was a party well worth the money. It better be, I spent our house rent money on it, making us six months behind. The landlord had already vigilantly pressed me for the rent, and I was running out of excuses.

A loud knock came from my bedroom door, sending a pain I'd never known through my skull. Before I could answer it, Dad opened it.

One might think using alcohol and narcotics as a sedative would've dampened the shock of what I saw in the doorway, but apparently it didn't. Dad stood there, eyes wide with fright, wearing nothing but a purple condom on his flaccid tallywhacker. Trojan, I'd guessed. Ribbed too, from what I could see from across the room.

"Something's wrong with Sally," he told me.

"Sally? You mean the stripper? What's she still doing here?"

"Well..." he said with a sheepish grin, "she kinda gave me a little something extra for my birthday."

"Okay," I said, hoping to avoid details, "so what's wrong with her?"

"She's dead."

Up until this point my life wouldn't have made much of a story. I was born Nicholas Andrew Stone, to Jerry and Marissa Stone. I'm half Spanish. I grew up moving from one apartment to another, living on the "brink of destitution", as Mom use to say. We didn't live in one place long enough for me to make friends. Just after I turned eight my parents bought our first house in Taylor Michigan, a tiny suburb of Detroit. It's where Kid Rock use to party! The first friend I made was Alan Holt. He lived four houses away from me. We did everything together. We got in trouble together, and if caught, we were punished together.

When Alan and I turned 14, we were introduced to the Sweet Sticky Chronic. Every time we rolled one, we christened it Lady Jane, and passed her around like a drunken secretary at a Christmas party. She became our first love.

When we turned 19, we crossed the Ambassador Bridge to Windsor Ontario. Legal drinking age in Canada is 19, so it didn't take us long to decide where to have our birthday party. We cruised Riverside Drive and discovered a paradise called Fast Eddie's Arcade. Two floors of arcade games! That place is a gamer's wet-dream.

Afterwards we drank it up at a bar called the Spotted Dog. It was there that we met Laurie and Andrea. The two sisters were there because Laurie had just turned 19. They were both piss-drunk, as were we. Alan and Andrea claimed love at first sight, whereas Laurie and I had our first argument after ten minutes.

Nothing's changed since.

Alan and Andrea are still together, but Laurie and I are headed for an inevitable breakup. Every time we talk, we argue about how little we talk, which makes me talk to her even less. How much longer could this last?

Laurie was always kinda trampy and trashy, but I liked it. She knew how to have fun, both in and out of bed. She'd had a troubled childhood. She told me some stories about her dad, and she thinks it messed her up in the head. She clocked him in the head with a cast-iron skillet and killed him when she was eight. Her mom thanked her for it and told the cops he fell down the stairs. Laurie always seemed to have trouble with the men in her life, and I was no exception. Her long, honey-blonde hair and her 5'8" 115lb. body, not to mention her perfectly-shaped award-winning ass, always attracted and demanded the attention of other guys, and I always figured someday she'd run off with someone else, so I decided to have fun with her and not take our relationship seriously. But lately it hasn't been much fun at all, and it looks like she's not running off any time soon.

Soon after turning 23, just days before Christmas, Mom died from cervical cancer. It was sort've sudden because no one knew she was sick. Dad and I were left to ourselves. He and I never talked much before, and after she died, what little time we spent together was spent passing Lady Janes. Laurie and I didn't talk much. I was too busy getting high. Dad lost his job and we lost the house.

I'm 24 now. Dad sometimes comes out of his heartbroken shell, like he did last night. I still get high alot. I still don't talk to Laurie much. We now live in a dumpy little two-bedroom house in Southwest Detroit, and we're six rent payments away from living in my 1989 Chevy Caprice.

And Now Dad's got a dead stripper in his bed.

It took me a second and a half to run from my room to his. I wasn't really counting.

"Damn, Dad! What did you do to her?" I asked. Sally's hands and legs were tied to the bed, and a yellow silk scarf was tied around her neck and to the headboard. I later learned she tied herself to the bed. I never figured out how.

"But I...I didn't! That was her idea! She called it Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation. She said it would make sex better."

I was aware of the term. Slowly cutting off the blood to the brain via the carotid arteries during orgasm. Makes sex better for her, but since she fucked it up, it made life worse for us.

"The police don't buy off-the-wall stories like that," I told him realistically. "They'd rather believe you're a murderer and send you up for life."

Dad slumped against the bedroom wall and sagged to the floor. I untied Sally's right leg and sat on the bed. Fine, you can say it -- I have no respect for the dead.

I continued. "Go start some coffee. I gotta think." As he walked out I yelled, "And roll us some Jane!" Yeah, Sweet Jane will come through for us.

I was abducted from my blaze buzz when the phone rang. As has always been the habit, I answered it. Laurie. Oh, that figures. She always manages to piss me off at the wrong moment.

"Nicky, we really need to talk," she said.

"Laurie, now's the wrong time -- the WORST time."

"It's never the best time, is it?"

"No, you don't understand. It's *really* not a good time."

"I don't care Nick, I'm sick of waiting for you to make time for me, so we're gonna talk now."

I gave up. "Fine Laurie, make it quick," I said, trying to sound like a prick. I laid down next to the dead stripper. I was high! Fuck it.

"Ever since your mom died, you've drifted away from me. Now you do everything you can to push me away!"

Laurie's a great buzz-killer, isn't she? "Laurie, this nagging certainly isn't bringing us closer together."

"Dammit Nick, what are we? Are we just fuck-buddies? Is that all we are to each other?"

"Well, you're certainly good at it," I said, trying to sound even more like a prick. "If that's not good enough, how 'bout we just drop this and split up?"

"Nick, no! Don't do this! I love you, you little shit! We've been through too much for too long to end it like this."

Geez, I really wanted to end this with her, but when she throws her guilt trips at me, I back down. No! Not this time.

"What's the big deal? I'm not the only guy in Detroit. You can always find another guy to fuck you."

"You...asshole! You're treating me like my dad did! Like some little whore that wasn't good for anything but screwing!"

"Well, if the shoe fits..." Okay, that was a bit too harsh.

She snapped. "Auuuuggghhh!!!" Blub. Blub. Click. I later learned she threw the cordless phone into the aquarium.

I hung up and rolled over to look into Sally's dead eyes. "What's wrong with you women?" She didn't answer.

Dad walked in and saw me laying in bed with what use to be Sally the Stripper. "Son, if you need to talk, I'll be here. But please tell me you're not about to jump a corpse."

"No Dad, I..." and I paused, pondered that thought and tossed it aside. "I think I know what to do with her."

"Okay, as long as it doesn't involve sex."

Chapter Two

At eleven p.m. Dad and I put on our Isotoner gloves and loaded Sally into the trunk of the Caprice. I gathered up some provisions: my lock-picking gun, a clean rag, a bottle of chloroform and a flashlight. I fished through Sally's purse and found a business card identical to the one she gave me yesterday, which I immediately flushed down the toilet before Sally's body was cold.

Dad and I drove the distance to Mr. Darvis's house in East Detroit under the guise of nightfall. Mrs. Darvis was visiting her sister and would not be joining us tonight. Parked at the curb across the street from his house, we waited anxiously for the left window's light to go out. That's his bedroom. At almost exactly midnight the light went out. I added an extra half hour for him to fall asleep.

"You sure you know what to do?" I asked.

"I'm high, not stupid," Dad retorted, dropping the glowing roach between his legs.

I put on the ski mask, pocketed the chloroform, rag and flashlight, and grabbed the lock-picking gun. I crossed the street and walked up Mr. Darvis's driveway, hopped the gate and went to the back door. A flick of the flashlight on the doorknob told me which extension to use on the lock-picker. I eased the door open and went in. I walked as far as the kitchen, opened the bottle of chloroform and soaked the rag with it. I crept stealth-style into his bedroom. His snoring was all the proof I needed to tell me he was asleep. On my knees, I gently lowered the rag over his mouth. After inhaling the fumes two or three times, he was out. I slapped him to make sure. He didn't wake up. I stood, used the flashlight to find the light switch, and turned it on and off three times.

Dad saw the signal. He started the Caprice, leaving the headlights off, and backed into the driveway as I opened the gate. Dad got out and opened the trunk. We carried Sally into the house, silk scarf and all, and gently laid her down in the bed next to Mr. Darvis. We both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wow. That was rather easy," Dad said. "Is he really out?"

I bent over and slapped Mr. Darvis again.

With a big grin, Dad leaned over, punched him in the face, kicked him in the ribs and said, "Damn! That was fun! Always wanted to do that to the little fucker."

I went back to the car, grabbed Sally's purse and left it on Mr. Darvis's couch. I left Sally's business card next to the phone. I went back to the bedroom, retied the silk scarf, arm and leg bindings she used on my dad's bed. The scene was identical. But this time, she was in someone else's bed.

We left the way we came in, relocking the back door and closing the gate. I started the Caprice and drove to the liquor store at the end of the street. I found a payphone and called 911. I told the dispatcher I heard screaming from a house, gave them Mr. Darvis's address and hung up.

The drive home was quiet and somber. We both understood what we'd just done. I have no clue how many felonies we'd just committed. It wasn't till we pulled up in the driveway till Dad spoke.

"How long do you think it'll be till Mr. Darvis comes by to collect the rent for the house?" Dad asked.

"My guess is 25 years to life," I said. "We should have the money by then."

I went into the house and immediately went to the fridge for a beer. Dad went next door to score some more Jane. I knew he'd be there a while. It was two a.m. now, but I'd slept most of the day and after the excitement of disposing of Sally, I was wide awake.

I didn't feel an ounce of guilt for framing the landlord. He was a crook! If anything in the house broke, I had to fix it and pay for it myself. None of the money was deducted from the \$600/month rent. Unfortunately this little frame-job would only delay the inevitable. We would need to find a new place to live.

I laid on the couch and sparked my last roach. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what the media would do to the crooked slumlord. I was lost in my morbid reverie when Laurie busted through the front door.

I jumped up and looked at her. She had a wild look in her eyes I'd never seen before. When I looked down at her right hand I saw why. She was clutching the .38 revolver I'd given her for her birthday. She was shaking and started crying. I looked back to her eyes and didn't have time for another thought when she drew the gun in the blink of an eye and fired. As if in slow-motion, I saw the tiny piece of lead leave the gun before I closed my eyes, and I heard the thump as the bullet found it's target.

"Laurie, you're a lousy fucking shot when you're not high."

She collapsed to the floor in tears. She was a wreck. I handed her what was left of my roach, which she took and politely thanked me for, and I sat back on the couch. After a few minutes she collected herself off the floor and sat at the other end of the couch. She never once looked at me. It was a very awkward situation. What do I say to someone who just tried to kill me?

"I got a temporary reprieve on the house rent," I said, hoping that changing the subject might erase the last five minutes.

"Good. That's good," she said as she nodded, still not looking at me.

At that moment Dad walked in, and immediately noticed the new hole in our livingroom wall, the gun in Laurie's hand, and the somber look on our faces.

"Okay. What'd I miss?" he asked.

"The fury of a woman scorned, Dad."

Dad knew about my shaky relationship with Laurie, and he knew about her semi-psychotic behavior, but this looked as though it shocked him. He decided not to ask anything more, and instead passed us each a Lady Jane. We all sparked up, and the ice-cold tension in the air seemed to fade away, though Laurie still had a look of death on her face.

She leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry Nick..."

I answered her in a whisper as well, "I'm never buying you another gun," which brought an almost imperceptible smile to her face. And for the time, everyone was happy again. A regular fucking Norman Rockwell moment.

I looked over at Dad, who seemed to be off in his own world. "This's just temporary," I said, referring to our housing situation. "We're still gonna get kicked outta here eventually. We need money. I was thinking about doing some odd-jobs."

Dad, who was unfamiliar with the term, just stared at me. "What, like mowing lawns?"

I shook my head. "No, like doing robbery jobs."

And the room went silent, finally broken by Laurie. "I'm in," she said. I'm guessing she would've said anything to get back on my good side.

"Do what ya gotta do," Dad said, and went to his bedroom. I know it took alot for him to allow his only child to commit felonies, but we were defeated -- and he knew it.

I looked over at Laurie. She'd fallen asleep. The sun was starting to shine through the window, which reminded me how late it was. But I was still full of energy, so I grabbed my keys and left. I needed to start working on tonight's plans.

And I needed another car.

Chapter Three

In a world of mischief, one can have many uses for an unregistered vehicle. Knocking over street signs is a good start, or you could sideswipe parked cars to raise a little more hell. I suppose you could also drive it through the front door of your previous employer or current landlord. Since I'd been born a child of mischief, an unregistered vehicle is like gold to me, which is why I was thrilled to buy a 1990 Geo Prizm from a friend for \$50.

"What the hell are you doing, Nick?" Alan asked when I pulled into his driveway. "This's a serious step down from the Caprice."

"Fuck the Caprice. This thing gets better gas mileage."

"Since when have you ever cared about gas mileage?"

"Since I paid a stripper to spank my dad."

A pause. "Damn. Sorry I missed that party," Alan said, handing me a Budweiser. "C'mon, let's pull this ugly ass thing into the garage. And hide the Bud, Andrea don't know I bought beer."

In the privacy of Alan's garage, I explained my plans for the Geo -- both in modifications and it's intended use. I trust Alan with my life, and I know he'd never snitch me out.

"Big things, Nick," he said. "Sure you know what you're doing?"

"Sure, how hard could it be? Show the gun, ask for money, and drive away."

"Ask for money???"

"Well yeah! I mean, with a gun in their face, will I really have to demand it? Besides, I think it's common courtesy to be polite during an armed robbery."

"Geez Nick, you need to stop smokin' that shit. Speak of the Lady, are you gonna share, or do I need to buy some off you?"

I handed him a Lady and passed him my Zippo. "I thought you didn't smoke? That's what I heard you tell Andrea," I said with an evil grin.

"Ahh, fuck you Nick. She don't let me do a damn thing. Says she's concerned with my health. Pfff. I'm not concerned, why should she be?"

"Ask her yourself," I said, "here she comes now."

"What?! Fuck!" he yelled, throwing the Lady under the car and making a futile attempt to wave the smoke away.

"Gotcha."

He glared at me. "You shithead," he declared, and slid under the Geo to reclaim his Lady. When he stood up and took a puff, he asked, "So what are we doing to this thing?"

I opened the trunk, grabbed a flathead screwdriver and handed it to him. "Here. Anywhere you see the word *Geo* or *Prizm* or that little Geo logo, take it off." As he did this, I grabbed another screwdriver and removed the VIN plate from the dashboard. I knew this was only a small deterrent, because the Vehicle Identification Number existed in several other more hidden locations on the car.

"Done," he said. "Now what?"

I went back to the trunk and grabbed two cans of flat-black spraypaint. I handed him one and said, "Anywhere you see blue...make it black. And try not to paint the windows."

After an hour and a half of painting I took a break and looked over at Alan, who was still painting. He looked to be giggling privately at some joke I'd not heard.

"What's so funny?" I asked, though I was terrified of the answer.

"Ahh, I dunno Nick. You. This car. It's just...bwahahahaha!!! Fuck a duck, Nick, this's some serious Jane!"

"Think it's time to open the door?" I asked, hitting the button on the wall to open the garage door. He stomped out his fourth roach and tossed it in the car along with our beer cans, as the black dust cloud was sucked out of the garage.

"Okay Nick, the car's no longer blue. Anything else?"

Again I went to the trunk, this time removing a roll of dark cellophane, a spray bottle of water and scissors. "Now, we tint."

In an hour, we tinted all the windows, the sideview and rearview mirrors, headlights and taillights. The Geo now had no other color than black. At night, it'd be completely invisible, and should a little light reflect off it, good luck identifying what kind it is!

Andrea walked out the back door of their house and toward the garage (for real this time). Though Laurie and Andrea are sisters, the contrast still amazes me. Andrea is two years older for starters, and where Laurie was just a little trashy, Andrea was all class. She had long brunette hair with natural auburn highlights, and a natural wavy curl. Andrea and Laurie had both been raised by the same incompetent parents, but you'd never know it. Andrea always did the right thing, and Laurie just loved to be bad. They were as different as City and Country.

"Morning, Nick," she said, giving me a quick hug. "Are you boys done playing yet? We need to do some grocery shopping."

"Why do I have to go?" Alan asked.

She gave him a stern look that told him not to ask.

"Sorry Nick. I gotta go. Good luck with your...whatever ya wanna call it."

I pulled out of his driveway in my flat-black nondescript Geo and thought about Alan and Andrea. Sure, Laurie tried to kill me, but in the end, I still got the better sister!

I got home just before sunset. Laurie was awake, toking from a bong I'd made from an old Chrysler transmission, and Dad was entertaining himself by wrapping Sadie's paws in duct tape ("to improve the slip-factor!" Dad had told me) and was chasing her around the house. Here we go with another Norman Rockwell family night.

"Mr. Darvis was on the news," Dad said. "Murder One. His wife left him."

I smiled. I should've felt rotten, but it required too much energy.

I pulled Laurie off the bong. "C'mon, we got things to do," and we walked out the door.

"What in hell is that?" she asked, pointing at the driveway.

"That, dear attempted murderess, is called a 1990 Geo Prizm."

"But it's ugly."

"That's the point."

"It's spraypainted black."

"Also the point."

She sighed. "Can I bring the bong out here?"

"The point," I explained, ignoring her question, "is that it's harder to recognize the make or model at night. And, if I have to crash and ditch it, it can't be linked to me because I didn't transfer the title and it's not in my name."

"Fine. Does it have a radio?"

Chapter Four

We went over tonight's plans. It was very basic. In the southwest suburbs of Detroit, many gas stations don't have bulletproof glass. None of the 7-11s did either. All were open 24-hours. Laurie would drive, and I'd do the dirty work. We'd hit four stores tonight, each three miles apart, almost in a straight line. I wasn't thrilled with the expected payoff, but it was a good start.

At two a.m., Laurie and I left. We drove to a Sunoco in Allen Park. We took the long way so Laurie could get use to the car. She complained that the radio wasn't loud enough, and smacked it with her shoe to make it louder. It stopped working completely.

We sat in a parking lot across the street from the Sunoco. The gas station was deserted, but still open. When I was sure there were no customers inside, I had Laurie pull up to the door of the Sunoco so close that no one else could get in.

"Do you really think you can pull this off?" she asked.

I flashed her a quick smile. "No one's as smooth as Nick Stone!"

I put on the ski mask, grabbed the .38 and cloth bag and went in.

"Hi there!" was my friendly greeting to the girl behind the counter. "You know what I am," pointing to my ski mask, "you know what this is," holding up the .38, "and I assume you know what to do with this," and tossed her the bag.

The girl behind the counter, who looked much younger than my twenty-four years, just stared at me, a grin slowly spreading across her face. I found her silence a bit unnerving, so I tried another tactic.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. This is called a gun. Though I've never had to fire it, I assure you I know how. It's like using the Internet I hear. You know...just point and click."

As she gave a snort in an attempt to suppress her laughter, she turned down the radio that had been playing behind her. I recognized the punk band on the radio as the American Idiots.

"Dude! Are you fer fuckin' real?" she asked, letting a giggle slip out.

Now I was annoyed. "What in hell do you think?"

"What do I think?" she began, her face turning serious. "I think you're doing well for a beginner, and I like the polite approach, though it might make it easier for the police to identify you. But, you didn't prepare well for this job. How long did it take you to set this up?"

I wasn't prepared for a conversation, so I winged it. "Hell, I dunno," I told her honestly, "an hour maybe?"

"An hour!" she yelled in delight, which startled me, almost causing me to drop the gun. "Oh! No wonder you screwed this up so badly!"

"How the hell did I screw this up? I know I'm new at this, but do I really have to take this abuse when it's *me* holding the gun?"

"You bring this abuse on yourself, because I know for a fact you didn't come here to shoot anyone."

"Oh? So not only are you a gas station attendant, you're a mind reader too? How do you know I don't plan on shooting you?"

"Because you're using a fucking revolver, numb-nuts. And I can see it's not loaded."

A pause. I turned the gun around to my face and saw the empty chambers, clearly visible to anyone on this side of the gun. "Ahh, fuck," I said, slowly lowering my .38 to my side, and hung my head in shame. "Touché my dear. Well, thanks for the advice," I said, and turned to walk out.

"But...aren't you forgetting the money?"

I turned back and looked at her as if she'd grown a third eyeball. "How'm I suppose to take the money with an empty gun?"

"Aww c'mon, weren't you ever a kid? Didn't you ever *pretend*? I can simply pretend I never saw the empty chambers."

Now I was confused. "Why would you do that?"

"Well I can plainly see I'm moving a little too fast for you, so I'll demonstrate." She opened the register drawer and started filling my cloth bag with tens and twenties. "Now what are you suppose to say?"

"I, uhh... thank you?"

"No, you silly fucker! Damn dude, do I gotta do everything for you? You're suppose to tell me to grab the cash under the drawer too!" She lifted the plastic money tray, removed eight fifties and dropped them into the bag. She then removed five one-hundred-dollar bills from under the tray, and proceeded to stuff them in her socks. "And here's my cut."

"But...what about the cameras?" I asked, pointing to one right above her head.

"Oh...yeah, about the cameras. They're fake. \$9.95 at Radio Shack. The owner's tight with money." She smiled. "I'm sure that'll change after tonight."

She handed me my big bag of unearned cash and offered her hand. "Name's Melissa." I shook her hand. "And I'm Ni...not gonna tell you! Nice try."

"Good, you're learning! Well, I'd love to shoot the breeze with you all night, but I should probably call the cops now. Oh, hey! Gimme your opinion on this first." She dropped to her knees, covered her face with her hands and began crying. "He was a relentless madman, officer! He kept waving the gun in my face and talked about killing my whole family! How could you guys let such a psycho walk the streets?!" She stood up. "How was that? Think they'll buy it?"

"Uhm, yeah! Had me convinced."

She took a bow. "Thank you! I'm majoring in Theater Arts at Wayne State. Anything else I can get ya before you leave?"

I thought about this for a moment. "Since you asked, I could use a carton of Marlboros."

Melissa sighed and shook her head in dismay. "I haven't taught you a damn thing, have I? Now I know what you smoke. One more way for the police to identify you, ya turd!"

"Christ, okay Melissa. I'm getting outta here before you talk me into handing over my driver's license!" and I started out the door, hearing her irritating self-righteous laughter behind me.

Outside, I tossed the bag into the Geo, got in and slammed the door.

"What took you so long??" Laurie asked.

"Nothing -- just drive."

She pulled out of the gas station as I searched the glove box for the bullets I'd removed earlier.

"Did she notice the gun was empty?"

I turned and glared at her with contempt. "Yes Laurie, she noticed."

"No one's as smooth as Nick Stone," she said in a mocking tone. "Pfff. Whatever."

The next three robberies went exceptionally well after following Melissa's advice. Laurie persistently asked me what happened at the Sunoco, but I'm taking that story to my grave. Now that Laurie's .38 was loaded, the reality of what we were doing was much stronger. Though I had bullets now, I still worried about what the store clerks might be packing behind the counter. Laurie's little six-shooter would never work in a real combat situation. I'd need a new gun soon.

I pulled into my driveway and into the backyard. Having no garage, I pulled a tarpaulin over the Geo. I grabbed the big sack o' cash, and Laurie and I went into the house and headed straight for the bedroom. I dumped the money on the bed, and allowed Laurie the honors. It took her eight minutes to count \$4,550.

"Nicky...!" she said seductively as she went for my zipper. I was suppose to stay mad at her for trying to kill me, but it was hard to do with her tongue in my ear. We had sex twice on a pile of twenties, fifties and hundreds.

Chapter Five

I woke up around four pm, and found Laurie still sleeping peacefully on the mound of cash. I bagged up the money, rolled Laurie over and bagged the rest, save for a thousand dollars which I put in her jeans pocket. Today would be a good day to visit some old friends.

When I lived in Taylor, I made friends with alot of Arabic Muslims. In fact, all my friends besides Alan were Muslims. They have a sense of loyalty to their friends and family I've never seen before. If one of their own were in trouble, they would go to any length to help them. For the last ten years, they've treated me as their own. I'd do anything for them, and they'd do anything for me, which is why I went to see my close friend Hamoud Bazzi. The 50-year-old Lebanese, nicknamed 'Moody', has a genuine knack for getting *special* things I can't find anywhere else. Whether or not he's part of a sleeper cell, I don't ask. I just know he comes through for me.

"*Kaifhalak, habibi!*" ["Hello, friend"] I greeted Hamoud as I entered the Mobil gas station in Dearborn Heights.

"Nick!" he yelled, automatically tossing me a pack of Marlboros. I grabbed a Coke and joined him behind the counter.

"Where the hell you been?" he asked.

"Ya know...working, smoking, and occasionally laying Laurie."

"You makin-a-babies yet? I wanna see a little Nicky before I retire."

"Moody, you're never gonna retire. Your idea of retiring is pulling single shifts instead of the usual double."

His attention shifted to a customer at the counter. He rang up a purchase, took some money, gave some back, and turned back to me.

"So what dragged you outta Detroit?" he asked.

"I came to catch up! Well, and I need some stuff." I handed him a list. He looked it over and picked up the phone. Five minutes of Arabic and he hung up.

"It's on it's way," he said, "and don't worry about the money. I got an odd-job for you."

Moody originally coined the term 'odd-job'. Back then, it meant vandalizing the gas pumps of the other two stations residing at that intersection.

"What? You want me to cut the gas hoses across the street?" I asked incredulously. I'm twenty-four years old. Surely I've outgrown that. Haven't I?

"Remember my Nissan Maxima? I sold it to my no-damn-good nephew for \$3,000. This's what he gave me," he said, handing me a wad of hundreds. I knew Moody wouldn't be pissed at receiving money, so I took a good close look. Uh oh. All the serial numbers were the same. Counterfeit.

"I can't get the car back because he'd never give up the title," Moody said. "Don't go after him, but go for the car," he said, giving me a wink.

"Ahh, it would be my humble pleasure, Mr. Moody," I said, already forming a plan in my head.

Moody glanced out the window. "He's here. Go. Next time you visit, bring Laurie," he said, handing me a piece of paper with the house's address. "And she better be pregnant!"

"*Nsha'allah*, ["By the Grace of God"] she will be," I said, running out the door.

I immediately recognized the 1990 Toyota Camry parked next to my Caprice. Amazing how much it looks like my Geo. The driver of the Camry I knew to be Abdo, one of Moody's many sons-in-law. He popped his trunk, I popped mine. I transferred the contents to my car, shook his hand and left.

I drove another eleven blocks to Al's Pawn Shop. I had been pawning my baseball cards for Jane to Al since I was fifteen. Al's kept alot of secrets since he opened his doors ten years ago, and today he'll be keeping one more.

"Where the hell ya been, Nick?" Al asked. Geez, have I really been away that long?

"I've been around, Al."

"What can I do ya for?"

"I need some armament. Something big, deaf and blind."

He stared at me for a total of eight seconds. I counted. "Nick, are you in some kinda trouble?" he asked.

"Actually, I was hoping to make some trouble."

He left to the storage room and came back with...what in hell is that?

"Desert Eagle 45mm, made from red titanium steel, infrared laser sight, with a noise and flash suppresser. I call it 'Satan's Penis'."

"I'll take it. Throw in some ammo too. No hollow-points. I don't want to make a mess."

"Hey Nick, I'm not gonna see this gun on the news, am I?"

"No Al, not if I can help it," I said, handing him \$2,000 for everything and left.

I drove back home and took the contents of the trunk into the house. Fifteen M-80s, four cloned cellphones registered in a false name, a small block of C-4, and a laptop computer. Perhaps it was a bit over the top for mere gas station robberies, but hell, I wanted to be ready for anything.

Chapter Six

Laurie was awake and on the phone when I walked in. By the time I finished emptying the trunk, she'd hung up.

"Grandma wants us there for dinner."

"Alright. When?"

"Like, right now. She made Chicken Parmesan."

That's all she needed to say. Within minutes we were in the Caprice and on our way to her grandmother's house in Southwest Detroit. When Laurie was 16 and Andrea was 18, their dear mother kicked them both out of the house when she met some guy on the Internet. She moved in with the guy in Findlay Ohio and eventually married him. Andrea had been prepared for this and had some money saved up. She and a friend rented an apartment together, and she lived there until she met Alan and they bought a house together. Laurie hadn't been prepared for getting kicked out, and had no choice but to move in with her mom's mother. She's been there ever since. Even though she spends most nights at my house, her clothes reside with her grandmother. It's also where she goes when we have a fight.

"My Nicky!" her grandmother yelled as we walked in the door. Gertrude Stephens had long, straight, silver hair, on a tall and slender body. She looked like she'd been quite a head-turner back in her day. Maybe she still was.

"Evening, Gertie," I said, giving her a hug.

She locked eyes with me. "Got something for me?"

"Would I forget?" I asked, handing her a bag of rolled Jane. She took one out, pocketed the rest, and I lit it for her.

She took a deep drag. "Ahh, baby, that's it..." she said, then looked at Laurie. "Dear, why did I find the cordless phone in the aquarium?"

Laurie slightly hung her head. "Uhm.. Nick tried to break up with me."

Gertie looked back at me with a look of dismay. "Is that true?"

"Yes it is," I admitted, "but she tried to put a bullet in my head and missed, so rest assured, I won't ever be trying that again."

Without much more conversation, we started eating. As usual, the food was perfect. Though Gertie isn't Italian, it never stopped her from cooking exquisitely perfect Italian cuisine.

"Have you talked to your mom lately?" Gertie asked Laurie.

"I talked to her last month. I asked her if she'd like Andrea and me to come down for a visit. Her actual response was "Ehh...whatever. "

"Ahh, still the wicked little bitch, huh? Nothing ever changes."

"I think she likes Andrea better," Laurie predicted.

Gertie thought about this for a moment. "No...no, I think she likes sex better. And those men she dates, nothing but trash. Oh, and in case I haven't said it lately, thank you for shattering your dad's skull."

"Anytime, Grandma!" Laurie said without missing a beat.

"So Nick, what are your plans with my granddaughter?"

I thought about this. "Well, I plan to get her high, have lots of sex with her, and occasionally give her money for services rendered."

"Ahh, that warms my eighty-four-year-old heart to hear you say that," she said grinning. "So what have you two been doing for money?"

"Armed robberies!" Laurie exclaimed proudly.

"Ooh, sounds like fun! Shoot anyone yet?" this sweet little old lady asked.

"I probably would have," I said, remembering my irritating experience with Melissa the Cashier, "if I'd had bullets."

We finished eating in silence, and by nightfall I told Gertie I had a job to do tonight, and we stood to leave.

"By the way Laurie," Gertie began, "if I find out my goldfish made long-distance calls, your ass is hamburger meat."

Chapter Seven

I'd decided to do this odd-job alone. At eleven p.m., I turned off 1-75 onto the Springwells exit. Mexitown, they call it. I call it another long-since-wasted-and-forgotten part of Detroit. Like most other bad parts of Detroit, many streetlights were broken, no cops were in sight, and vagrants looking for empty beer cans graced the sidewalks.

I stopped in the McDonalds parking lot just off the Springwells exit and covered the license plate with an old t-shirt. Even though the car wasn't registered to me and the plate was stolen, I wasn't taking any chances.

I rolled the disposable Geo out onto Springwells and slowly drove the seven blocks to the address Moody wrote down for me. It appeared on the left, and I instantly recognized the house. I spent a night here once with some gutter-trash psycho I almost slept with when I was feeling really lonely and depressed.

Parked next to the house was the White Nissan Maxima.

I drove further down Springwells to the corner grocery store's parking lot and pulled up next to the payphone. I grabbed the receiver with my Isotoner-gloved hand and rolled up the window, to make it look like I was using the phone in case a cop rolled by. I opened the briefcase on the passenger seat and removed a cellophane-wrapped M-80. I used tiny strips of duct tape to attach two extra green fuses to the M-80's existing fuse. That would give me decent enough time to run. I then peeled off a two-foot length of duct tape, put the M-80 in the middle, and laid it across the briefcase.

I pulled back onto Springwells after shattering the driver's side window. I forgot to hang up the phone. Oops. I turned the headlights off as I approached the house. I parked at the end of the driveway in the street, set the parking brake, grabbed the M-80 and left the Geo still running.

The rear of the Nissan was only ten feet away. I slid halfway under the rear of the car, with the M-80 in-hand. I reached a hand up and felt the smooth plastic gas tank. I knocked twice. It was full. This would be a hell of a light show! I taped the M-80 to the gas tank, its twelve-inch fuse hanging down. I took out my Zippo, lit the fuse, and ran like hell back to the Geo. I shifted into first and hit the gas. I watched the rearview mirror as I drove down Springwells. Ten seconds. Fifteen. BOOM!

The sight was awe-inspiring. The little Nissan flipped front to back, coming to rest upside-down. A hole was ripped from the side of the house where the car had been parked. Now the house too was ablaze, as was the tree in the front yard.

I was back on Southbound 1-75 before seeing the first of the emergency vehicles speeding north. But why was the Geo moving so slow? And What was that smell? I looked down. Oops, forgot to release the parking brake.

I got back home at two a.m. Laurie was sleeping on the livingroom floor, one arm wrapped around the transmission. Looks like I missed a good party.

I sat on the couch, closed my eyes and planned my next move. I needed a big score; one nice large lump-sum. I wanted to go after a bank, but more often than not, it turned into a hostage situation, negotiators are brought in, a S.W.A.T. team is crawling through the air vents, and the bad guy always comes out in a body bag. Or maybe I just watch too much TV.

I allowed my mind to drift off to sleep. I still had a thousand bucks to live on. Plenty of time to think.

Chapter Eight

Morning arrived again in the form of Laurie sitting on my lap, her arms around my neck. Surprisingly, her eyes weren't bloodshot. She seemed wide awake and in a good mood. This sorta scared me.

"So what are we doing today?" she asked, putting her arms around me and laying a somewhat childlike kiss on my cheek.

"Damn, Laurie. What put you in such a good mood?"

"I dunno. I just woke up feeling like Queen of the World. I didn't even smoke when I woke up."

"Then how much did you smoke last night?" I asked, though I feared the answer.

She shrugged. "Your dad gave me a couple Janes. I'm broke."

I stood up, nearly dumping her on the floor. "How in hell did you go through a thousand bucks?"

She stood there for a second, eyes narrowed with suspicion and asked, "Are you smoking crack? I never had a thousand bucks!"

It occurred to me that I hadn't told her I gave her that money. I simply slipped the wad of money in her left jeans pocket, the jeans she's wearing now. I could see the bulge in her pocket. I'm surprised she didn't notice it. I pointed at her pocket. She pulled out the lump of cash and looked at me with confusion.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"For driving. That's your cut."

"Damn, Nick," she said, looking at the money, "I was just helping you because... I was trying to make amends for trying to kill you."

I shrugged. "Well... keep it anyway."

At that moment I heard a car pull up in the driveway. I pulled out my .45, which was becoming reflex now, and looked out the window. I saw a black guy get out of an '84 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and walk to my front door. I opened it before he could knock.

Did I say *guy*? That might've been a stretch. This kid looked maybe 16. I figured he was selling magazine subscriptions.

I showed him my .45. "If you're selling something, this thing's loaded."

He almost fell off my porch. "Uh no, no sir, I'm not. My name's Dwayne Burton. My friend Abdo said you might be able to help me."

At the mention of Moody's son-in-law I put the gun away and invited him in. "I'm Nick Stone," I said, offering him my hand to shake, which he took, and we sat on the couch.

"So...how can I help you?" I hated that line. It reminded me of my younger years, working at Kinkos.

"I'm here as on behalf of my neighborhood. In the past year, a house on our street was turned into a drug house. I'm told they deal everything there: weed, coke, crack, heroine and prescription narcotics. Cars have been stolen off our street and houses were robbed. Both the dealers and their customers continue to terrorize the neighborhood. The dealers do it to keep us from calling the cops; the customers do it for drug money."

"Sounds like a pretty big problem, but what can I do about it?" I asked, though I figured I already knew.

"Simply put, we need the house and its occupants to...go away. Last night one of them shot and killed a seven-year-old boy that lived next door to me. He shot him off his bicycle and took it. The neighborhood can't stand by and watch them slaughter our children."

I knew what he was asking of me, and a burning in my gut told me it was morally the right thing to do. I looked over at Laurie. I could see it in her eyes she was feeling the same thing I did.

He continued. "We can't afford to pay you, but no doubt there's cash in the house and drugs you can sell."

That thought had already occurred to me long ago. "We'll need to borrow the house directly across the street from the drug house. Can you arrange that?"

"Oh yes, that's Mrs. Parker," Dwayne said, "she'll be more than happy to help. I'll let her know you'll be stopping by."

"Great. Here," I said, handing him a pen and paper. "Write down your number and the address of the drug house. Tell Mrs. Parker we'll be there in a few hours."

"You have no idea what this means to us," he said, walking out the door.

Laurie sat next to me on the couch and looked me in the eyes. "I'm going with you."

"If you feel like I do, I know I couldn't stop you."

"So What's the plan?"

I laid my head back on the couch and closed my eyes. "We've never killed anyone before. We can't aim without shooting. You'll need a new gun."

"I thought you said you'd never buy me another gun?" she asked with a smirk.

"I did, but I can't let you risk your life on a .38."

"Awww. ...I love you too Nicky."

We drove the Caprice to Al's again and bought a similar setup. Her .45 was blue, with the same options. She got it for \$1,500 using her .38 as a trade-in. We bought two extra clips and another box of ammo, and went home to switch cars.

The address of the drug house was on Penrod St. at Warren and Southfield. I noticed the 'Neighborhood Watch' sign as we turned onto Penrod, and the irony wasn't lost on me. Sure, the neighborhood watches their kids get mowed down with bullets and can't do a damn thing about it.

When we found the address of the drug house, I pulled the Geo into the driveway of the house across the street, hiding it from the street. We got out and knocked at the back door.

An elderly lady, small and frail and in perhaps her seventies, answered the door. We introduced ourselves and she let us in.

"Bless you both for carrying out God's work," she said, leading us to the livingroom. "I've prayed to Him every day to deliver us from the evil across the street. Hearing about what they did to that little boy just about shook my faith. But no, I will stand strong next to Him."

Laurie and I took positions on the couch, in front of the huge picture window. I looked through a crack in the curtains while Laurie talked.

"We'll need to stake out the house for the day. Hope you won't mind," Laurie said.

"Oh not at all! I would do anything to rid the neighborhood of that cursed house." She looked around her livingroom briefly. "I wish I could offer you something to eat or drink, but I haven't been able to do any shopping since they stole my car."

I turned from the window. "They stole your car?" I asked in disgust.

"Last week," she said, "two men just walked up my driveway in daylight, got in my car, and in ten seconds I watched them drive off with it."

Damn. These were some heartless, soulless bastards. I had an idea. "Laurie, take Mrs. Parker shopping." I handed her the last \$500 I had. "Get anything she needs, and get us some stuff too. We'll be here a while. Oh, and be quick in and out of the driveway. Don't let anyone see you."

With only a slight protest from Mrs. Parker, I watched through the window as they quickly pulled out of the driveway.

For the moment I was alone. I stared through the crack in the curtains at the house across the street. It was a two-story, and was probably a nice house twenty years ago. Now it looked old and dilapidated, and appeared a strong wind could knock it over. All the upstairs windows were boarded up, as well as some of the downstairs windows. Charred wood graced the backyard where the garage had long since burned down. I saw no one coming or going for two hours.

In a blink of an eye I saw the little Geo fly up into the driveway. In minutes, everything they bought was on the kitchen table.

"Laurie, look at this. A car just pulled up." A white 1993 Cadillac Fleetwood with 20" gold rims pulled into the drug house's driveway and parked in the backyard. Four black men got out and entered the house through the side door. Each carried two suitcases.

Mrs. Parker glanced out the window. "That Caddy only leaves once a week."

I continued to stare out the window. As nightfall set in, people began to knock at the front door of the drug house. Most did their transactions at the door. Some went inside, and left the house with one of the suitcases. So far, five suitcases had left the house. It didn't take long to realize this was a heavy operation.

By midnight, business was going strong. Three or four people per minute came and left the house. Two more suitcases went out. By three a.m. business had slacked off alot. By four in the morning, all the lights in the house went out.

"Got a plan yet?" Laurie asked. She hadn't left my side except for coffee and the bathroom.

"A vague outline. But I think we'll have to plan it as we go."

Laurie and I dressed head-to-toe in black clothing, ski masks and Isotoners. Guns, a flashlight and wire cutters were pocketed.

We left Mrs. Parker's house through the back door and crossed the street to the Caddy, still parked behind the house. I used the wire cutters to cut the valve-stems from all four wheels. In less than a minute, the hissing stopped and all four tires were flat.

We walked to the corner of the house and I found and cut the phone lines. I then found the electric meter with a glass cover. I cut the little blue tag and removed the electric meter from it's socket, cutting off all electricity to the house.

We climbed the fence and climbed onto the awning, which formed part of the roof. I found a second-story window whose board was loose. Laurie and I quietly peeled the board back and climbed in.

The room we were in, what use to be a bedroom, had burned long ago and was now empty. A cursory inspection of the upstairs told us the other three bedrooms were empty as well, save for one room that contained only a bare bed. As we stood in this room, I saw...or maybe sensed, someone run through the hallway, past the door to this room. In that same second I grabbed Laurie and we hid behind the bed, just before a silenced shot was fired into the room. I looked up in time to see the flash of the shot come from the right side of the doorframe. The moron was using the wall for cover. Little did he know, plaster is *not* bulletproof. I took out my .45, laser pointing at the wall, and PSSST! PSSST! I let off two quick and quiet shots into the wall and heard the thump as the body hit the floor.

Laurie and I jumped up, guns drawn, and looked into the hallway. The body was that of one of the men from the Caddy.

After listening for a moment, I came to the conclusion that no one else was awake, because I could vaguely hear the sound of snoring downstairs. We were still able to maintain the element of surprise.

With Laurie behind me, we crept silently downstairs. At the end of the stairs I looked around the corner and saw two men, each asleep on couches. Using the laser, I aimed at the first man's head. PSSST! One less snore. I aimed at the next head. PSSST! No more snoring. I hope Laurie never decides to silence my snoring the same way.

PSSST! Another silenced shot spit out, but it wasn't mine. I turned around and saw Laurie shaking. I thought she'd been shot till I saw the slumped body at the top of the stairs.

"Nice shot," I whispered.

I heard no other movement in the house. Four men were down, but were there more? From the end of the stairs I could see the last suitcase. It was open and sitting on the coffee table. Half was filled with cocaine, the other half with Sweet Lady Jane.

Before I could think another thought, a tall figure ran into the livingroom, snatched the suitcase, and ran to the back door of the house yelling, "Fuck you, fools! Yer not shakin' mah spot!"

Laurie, driven by adrenaline, started charging after him. I grabbed her wrist. "Wait up. I know where he's going."

I heard a car door close and the Caddy start up. I walked out the front door and got my gun ready. I knew I had plenty of time. The Caddy's motor was screaming at full-throttle, it's gold-spoked rims throwing sparks from the cement, as it pulled away from the house slower than a toddler on a tricycle.

I took aim and fired two quick shots through the driver-side window and into the driver's head. He slumped over the steering wheel and the motor quieted down to an idle.

I opened the car's door, reached over and grabbed the suitcase. I set it next to the front porch.

I walked back into the house, but Laurie wasn't where I'd last seen her. I reluctantly called out her name.

"Back here!" she yelled from the rear of the house.

In a bedroom in the rear of the house, Laurie had found a gold mine. The room was filled with things evidently traded for drugs. CDs, DVDs, DVD Players, TVs, cellphones, stereos, watches and jewelry.

But no money.

When I found my voice, I told Laurie to go get the Geo and park it backwards in the driveway behind the dead man's Caddy. In twenty minutes, Laurie and I loaded up the Geo with the stuff from the back bedroom suitcase of drugs I left next to the porch.

She and I searched the house, but never found any money. When we gave up I went to the kitchen, grabbed a bucket and some coffee cans from under the sink, and went outside to the Caddy. I cut the gas line with the wire cutters and filled the bucket and cans with gasoline. I flooded the upstairs with gas, making a trail leading to the front door. Laurie soaked the rooms downstairs, leaving a trail leading outside.

"You do the honors," I said, handing her my Zippo. With a huge grin, she happily lit the gas trail. We got into the Geo, but before I started the car, I stared at the Caddy in the rear-view mirror. I got out.

"Nick! Damrnit let's go!"

"Wait! I gotta check something."

I grabbed the keys from the Caddy, went to the rear and popped the trunk. I was oblivious to the roaring inferno as I stared in awe at the two metal briefcases in the trunk.

When I snapped back to reality, I grabbed the briefcases, put them on Laurie's lap, started the Geo and pulled quickly into Mrs. Parker's back yard.

We unloaded the contents of the car into Mrs. Parker's basement, leaving the two metal briefcases and the suitcase in the trunk. We sat on the couch and watched the blaze.

Mrs. Parker had long since gone to bed and was missing the deliverance for which she had prayed for so long.

Chapter Nine

By nine a.m. the firetrucks had reduced the blaze to a pile of smoldering ash. Most of the house was already gone before the trucks got there. I didn't see it, but I heard the Caddy explode.

I called Dwayne. "It's done. Tell everyone in the neighborhood to come over here and identify what was stolen from them." I was relying on the people's honesty for that task.

Afterwards I went across the street and approached a guy in a suit about my age, who was writing notes on a notepad. He introduced himself as Detective Jack Noble of the Detroit Police. Obviously I didn't give my name.

"This was one of those crack houses, wasn't it?" I asked, trying to sound ignorant.

"That's what we've heard," Detective Noble said. "Apparently it'd been causing the neighborhood some grief. I take it you don't live around here?"

"Oh hell no! I take piano lessons from the lady across the street," I lied.

Detective Noble stared at me for several seconds. He seemed to be trying to read something in my eyes, but my eyes gave nothing away. Finally he looked away and smiled. "I can't imagine I'd be able to figure out who did this. After someone killed that kid night before last, I guess anyone in the neighborhood could be a suspect."

"Sounds like your investigation won't take long."

"What investigation? Bad people kill bad people every day. Why waste the law-abiding citizen's tax money on them? That's just my opinion on it. Hell, I'd probably thank the arson if I could find him."

"I don't know what to tell ya, detective. Heroes are everywhere I guess."

He smiled again and looked back at the remains of the house. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card and handed it to me. "If you come up with any useful information, give me a call."

I looked at the card. "You're also a flight instructor?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes it's good to have a therapeutic job as well."

"And flying is therapeutic?" I asked.

"If you'd ever heard the engines of a Twin Beech H-18, you'd understand. Have a good day," he said, and started to walk away. He stopped and turned back to me. "By the way.. .I've known Mrs. Parker for years. She doesn't play the piano."

I guess I'd need to work harder on my lies.

I crossed the street back to Mrs. Parker's house, went to the trunk of the Geo and opened one of the metal cases. There were mostly stacks of fifties and hundreds, and just a few stacks of twenties. I grabbed a fat stack of hundreds, went into the house and made a phone call.

By now Mrs. Parker was wide awake and cooking breakfast. I told her to expect lots of company from the neighborhood today, and told her we were waiting on one more thing before we leave.

I heard the tow-truck dropping it's load in front of the house. The driver came to the door, and I traded him a stack of hundreds for a set of keys and the title. He counted the money and left.

I turned around to an understandably confused Mrs. Parker. I handed her the keys and the title and said, "I don't know what you drove before, but I hope this makes up for it."

She went to the door and looked to the street. She nearly passed out from shock when she saw her new Cadillac DTS parked at the curb. With tears in her eyes, she turned around to give her thanks, but we were already gone.

We got home at eleven a.m. Dad was up when we brought the briefcases in. He'd been asleep during the visit from Dwayne Burton and had no idea what we'd done. Laurie and I recounted the whole story for him before opening the cases.

"How much was the DTS?" Laurie asked.

"Thirty Grand. Cash up front can be very persuasive. But that hardly made a dent in our haul."

First, I put the suitcase of drugs on the coffee table and opened it.

"Augggghhhh!! Holy God!" Dad slobbered.

Inside were two very large bricks of Jane, weighing one pound each. Next to them, were six smaller bricks of cocaine, two and a half pounds each. None of us ever touch Coke, so Dad removed the two bricks of Jane and took the suitcase to our neighbor. He returned with \$5,000. We didn't know it yet, but our neighbor will be found dead later the next day -- not from a drug overdose, but since he snorted all six bricks in a matter of hours, he had an overwhelming and unexplainable desire to lick the inside of his toilet bowl. He drowned as a result.

After Dad counted his five grand, we opened the two metal briefcases. Each had a combination lock, but the combination was 0-0-0, to which it was already set. We stared in awe at the many stacks of hundreds, fifties and twenties that filled both cases. \$1,560,000. It took over an hour to count it all. The three of us divided it up, which was \$520,000 each. Thank God for Dwayne Burton!

Chapter Ten

Within two weeks our lives had changed. Dad now lives in a beautiful four-bedroom house in Farmington Hills, with Sadie by his side. Laurie and I found a smaller house in Southfield. She bought herself a hot pink 2005 Corvette, and I bought a black 2002 Pontiac Firebird. As much as I hated to do it, I dumped the Geo. For sentimental reasons, it was hard to drive the thing into the Detroit River, but it was what needed to be done. I first drained the gas and oil from it. The last thing the Detroit River needs is more pollution.

After furnishing the house, Laurie and I invited Alan and Andrea over for a barbecue. I called to invite Dad, but he said the neighbor lady was there to give him a 'very special housewarming present'. Since I could hear something loudly vibrating in the background, I hung up without asking questions.

When our guests arrived, Andrea was only able to say hi to me before Laurie dragged her into the bedroom. "Girl talk," she'd said.

Meanwhile, I gave Alan a detailed description of what had happened at the drug house that night. I didn't worry, Alan is my most-trusted friend.

"Damn, Nick! That was you?!" he said rather loudly.

"And Laurie," I said proudly. I'd guessed he'd already heard about it on the news. "How much did you get?" he asked.

"About a mill and a half."

"And how much is left?"

"After our little shopping spree, Laurie and I have about \$300,000 left." I didn't tell him a third of it went to my dad.

Alan jumped up from the couch with a wild look in his eyes. "That's it? You spent eighty percent of it?? Fuck, dude!"

I was slightly taken aback, both by his response and his relative quickness at calculating percentages. "Well ya know, that's not much money nowadays. Besides, Laurie and I make a great team, and there's plenty more money to be made."

Alan went to my fridge and grabbed a beer. He returned to the couch in the livingroom, cracked the can open and guzzled it.

Laurie and Andrea returned from the bedroom laughing. This was normal for Andrea, but Laurie has always had a melancholic side that kinda reminded me of Down Syndrome, and it always showed, even when she pretended to be happy. Tonight however, it looked genuine.

But the laughing stopped when Andrea noticed the Budweiser can in Alan's hand.

"Alan?" Andrea asked, "Are you drinking?"

Alan's eyes had been transfixed on the wall, but now they were locked onto her. He stared at her for several seconds, then dropped the beer can on the floor and stood. "C'mon Andrea, we gotta go."

Alan walked up to me, looked me in the eyes and said, "Sorry Nick. Things are all fucked up now." He grabbed Andrea's wrist and walked out the door.

"What happened, Nick?" Laurie asked.

I sat on the couch and she sat next to me. "I fucked up. He's pissed because I didn't ask him to do these jobs with me."

"And he takes something like that personally?"

"That's how we were. We did everything together. Especially getting into trouble! He's pissed because this would've been something big for us."

Laurie and I ate by ourselves that night. We didn't talk much. We smoked, and tried to forget this night ever happened.

Over the next two weeks Laurie and I forgot about that night, and concentrated on living the Good Life. Well...considerably better than the life we had before, anyway. The laptop I got from Moody had Microsoft Flight Simulator on it. What was that doing on there? I quickly got addicted to it. I was getting pretty good flying the Bell Jetranger, and I'd mastered the Lear jet. As it turned out, I could fly quite well while under the influence of my Sweet Lady Jane.

Laurie went shopping with Andrea a lot, though she didn't always return with bags. Sometimes she returned empty-handed, but when she didn't, she wouldn't show me what she bought. I didn't care. I'd just landed my Lear on a runway the size of a toothpick. But still I was curious.

Laurie came home from another shopping trip, this time with bags in-hand. "What'd ya get?" I asked.

"Oh, just some things for the house."

"Like what?"

She stared at me. Normally I didn't pry into her 'girls day out', but I sure as hell was today.

"Nick, you know if I tell you, you'll just say I don't need it, I wasted money, blah blah blah. I'm in a good mood, Nick. Let's not spoil it, okay?"

When do I ever say things like that? I walked over to her and put my arms around her. She dropped her bags to return the embrace. I looked down at the bags. Everything was in boxes. Damn! I'd have to try another tactic later.

She looked over at the laptop. "You're still doing that plane game?"

"It's not a game!" I said defensively. "It's a learning tool! Everything in it is exactly like the real thing."

"So then...you're gonna learn to fly a computer plane?" she asked with a pompous grin.

"No, I was thinking about taking flying lessons."

She pat me on the head. "That's nice dear," she said, and disappeared to the bedroom. Women just don't understand.

I shut down the laptop and went out to the car to retrieve the little trinket I'd bought earlier at Fairlane Mall. I walked into the bedroom, hoping to catch a peek at what she'd bought, but she'd already put it away.

"Laurie, I really need to show you something and get your opinion on it."

She looked up at me confused. I never really ask her opinion unless we're doing a job. Nevertheless, she followed me into the livingroom.

"So whaddya wanna show me?"

I got down on the traditional right knee and opened the box I'd bought earlier. Nothing says *I Love You* like diamonds. "Wanna wear this for a while?"

She looked away from me for a few seconds, then looked back, already with tears in her eyes. She threw her arms around me. I took that as a yes. In turn, I gave her a kiss that could rock the world. She drew away from me long enough to say, "It's about fucking time!"

When the initial excitement in the air faded, she said, "Wait here. I got something to show you too." She went into the bedroom, and came back, one hand behind her back. She took my hand and gave me what she'd been holding.

"Wanna wear these for a while?"

I looked down at my hand and found a pair of Nikes. How would I wear these? They're each two inches long, I'd never fit into...POW! It hit me like an anvil in one of those Warner Bros. cartoons. I think my knees gave out on me because I found myself on the floor with no clue how I got there.

When I came to my senses I asked the first thing that came out of my mouth. "I just want to know one thing: who did this to you?"

She looked at me playfully stern and said, "Uhh.. .YOU did!"

With a contented smile I said, "Damn straight I did!" I put my arms around her for the third time that afternoon and said, "Looks like Moody gets his wish for a Little Nicky." I suddenly remembered the Adam Sandler movie and decided I wouldn't be naming my son Nick.

That night as I laid by my partner-in-crime and wife-to-be, I had a dream. Maybe it was a premonition of my not-too-distant future. Laurie and I were married. We had three kids: the oldest a boy, and two girls. We were wealthy beyond anyone's idea of wealth. We had a much bigger house, and I owned a fleet of classic WWII aircraft and my own private airstrip.

As I sat back and gazed upon my lifelong accomplishments, something strange happened. Each of my aircraft caught on fire. They lit up brightly for just seconds, then disappeared altogether. When they were gone, I looked to my children. The youngest caught on fire, then disappeared. Then the next, then my son. Then Laurie went up in flames. Then I woke up.

And smelled smoke.

I sat up in bed to collect my thoughts. I expected the smell of smoke in my nose to fade as I woke up, but no, it was getting stronger. I got up and quickly put my pants, shirt and shoes on. I grabbed the doorknob, slightly burning my hand, and opened it. I was first smacked in the face by the intense heat, and immediately after engulfed in the thick acrid smoke.

I turned back to the bed to wake Laurie up, only to find she wasn't there. She hadn't been there when I woke up. I dropped to my hands and knees, crawled out of the bedroom, and through the hallway to the livingroom.

It was a surreal scene. There was nothing in the livingroom that wasn't on fire. The couches were lit up like torches. The TV, stereo, and my laptop were blobs of black melted plastic, and the walls and ceiling were coated with a layer of flames.

"LAURIE!!" I yelled, as I choked on the smoke. Either she didn't answer, or I couldn't hear her over the roar of the flames.

Past the livingroom was the kitchen, bathroom and the garage. I prayed, as I rarely do, that Laurie was not in the house, because as I watched in horror as my livingroom melted, the ceiling collapsed. Now, not only could I not look for Laurie in that half of the house, I was also trapped. As I continued to pray that Laurie had found another way out, I crawled back to my bedroom, busted the window out and climbed through.

Outside I continued to yell her name as I looked up and down the street for her. Several neighbors had come out to watch the domestic inferno, but Laurie was not among that crowd. In an attempt to re-enter the other half of my house, I ran over to the attached garage. Just before reaching for the door handle, a blast hit my entire body with a force that felt like I'd been run down by a freight train. There had been just enough time to realize Laurie's Corvette had blown up, before I faded into unconsciousness.

I awoke to the faces of two paramedics, as seen through the clear plastic of an oxygen mask. I glanced at the slowly brightening sky to the east and realized the sun was coming up. It took a few more seconds to realize I was still laying in my driveway. "Laurie..." was all I could manage to say.

I heard one of the paramedics yell out, "There's someone still in there!"

For the next two hours I watched in shock and horror as our little dreamhouse burned and crumbled to the ground, with each collapsing section bursting into a spray of glowing embers and suffocating ash. By the time the house was reduced to a pile of charred debris, my body and mind had gone numb, and hope faded away with my sanity.

I watched this scene from a wheelchair that sat behind an ambulance. The paramedics had deduced that I didn't need to go to the hospital, but they were checking me over anyway. Each time one of the firemen or paramedics walked by, I asked about Laurie and gave her description. Not only did they not answer me, but they couldn't even look me in the eye. I took this to be a bad sign.

I didn't fail to notice two paramedics wheeling a stretcher toward the charred remains of my house, nor did I fail to notice one carrying a folded yellow canvas. I'd watched enough TV to know this was a body bag. For as long as I could, I lied to myself by telling myself they probably just found someone else's body in my house.

As the paramedics laid the yellow body bag on the ground and unfolded it, I laid my head back in the wheelchair and closed my eyes. As much as I tried to prevent it, images of Laurie went through my head. I saw her standing before me, her .38 pointed at my head. I saw her sitting on my lap, her arms around me, telling me she felt like Queen of the World. Last, I saw her holding a pair of Nikes, changing my life forever. I didn't realize until this very moment how close I'd become to Laurie, and how quickly. Just a month ago I was going to leave her. Now I can't imagine my life without her, nor did I want to try.

"Mr. Stone."

I opened my eyes to find a paramedic standing over me, and the stretcher topped with a body bag next to him.

"Do you want to try to make an identification?" he asked.

Actually, no. No I didn't. Not now, or ever. I wanted to crawl into a hole and pretend everything was fine. As long as I didn't have proof otherwise, I could convince myself Laurie was alive and well and on her way home in her pink Corvette from another shopping trip.

But that's not what I said. Instead I nodded, stood up and walked to the stretcher. What I saw when the paramedic unzipped the bag horrified every square inch of my soul: charred bones, caked with soot, roughly laid out in the shape of a human, with a detached skull placed at the top.

"Where's the hand? I need to see her left hand."

The paramedic unzipped the bag enough to expose the hands. There, on the left hand, now covered in ash, was the engagement ring I'd given Laurie less than twelve hours ago.

Then something else caught my attention. With bile rising in my throat, I looked again at Laurie's skull.

"What do you make of this?" I asked, pointing at Laurie's forehead.

"That," the paramedic said, pointing at a round, quarter-inch hole in Laurie's forehead, "is why we've called in the homicide detectives and arson squad."

Fighting back the anger and rage that in an instant took over my mind, body and soul, I walked over to the Firebird, which had not been in the garage, and left.

Chapter Eleven

I don't remember how long I'd been driving or where I went, but when my brain came back to reality, I found myself parked at the curb in front of what had been the drug house Laurie and I had torched a month ago. I realized when I saw the bullethole in her forehead, with absolute certainty, that she'd been murdered. I was left with very little doubt that she was killed because of the money we stole from this house. But how could anyone have known it was us?? Did someone else slip out the back door that night? Or was there another player involved -- someone that wasn't there that night. Ughh. Too many maybes.

There was nothing left of the drug house now. Everything had been cleared away, including the burnt-out remains of the Cadillac. In a couple more weeks, the property my house was on will look the same: cleared away like it had never been there. Perhaps that can be done with charred wood and twisted metal, but memories will remain.

And so will vengeance.

I needed to find that Caddy.

The Detroit Police Impound was a giant parking lot of abandoned, stolen and trashed cars, trucks, motorcycles, etc. Its lot is lined with a twelve-foot-high chainlink fence topped with razorwire. I couldn't get in, but I could drive around the lot from the outside.

After a half-hour search, I found it in the rear of the lot next to the fence. I'd passed it twice because it hadn't looked like a Cadillac. It barely resembled a car. The doors were gone, the roof was crushed, and the interior was gutted. With the paint melted away, the entire hulk was the orange color of oxidized iron.

I recognized it because the keys were still dangling from the trunk lock where I'd left them a month ago.

And more importantly, the license plate was still there.

"What the hell happened to you?" Dad asked, when I finally made my way to Farmington Hills.

It was an understandable question. I was still covered in ash from the fire, and probably looked like a homeless person. Which was ironic, since I was.

"Someone killed Laurie and burned the house down."

I guess he thought I was kidding. First, a confused look passed across his face, then a look of horror, and finally anger. He didn't say anything. He turned and sat on the couch. Sensing something wrong, Sadie jumped up on the couch and laid her head on my lap. I stroked her floppy ears while recounting the events of last night. Dogs can be very therapeutic.

"So you think someone involved with the drug house killed her?" he asked.

"I don't think, I *know*. I have no clue how they knew who I was or where I lived. I used the Geo for that job, with a stolen plate. That car's now resting at the bottom of the Detroit River."

"What's your next step?" he asked.

"Revenge."

He thought about this for a moment. "Are you planning on coming back alive?"

"Dad, I proposed to her last night, right before she told me she was pregnant."

It took a minute for him to grasp this new information, and to realized I'd just answered his question.

"You're not coming back..." he said. It was no longer a question.

I shrugged indifferently. "I'll try. I need to make some phone calls." I took out my cellphone and called the Michigan DMV.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm Officer Phillips of the Detroit Police, badge #5987. I can't reach my dispatcher and I need you to run a plate."

"You want the name and address?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am, plate number 8DN-8H3."

I heard the clicking of a keyboard and, "Trevor Dixon, 822 Miller in Dearborn. Anything else, officer?"

"No ma'am, thank you," and I hung up.

I called Alan and reprised him of the situation. He didn't sound too happy to hear from me, but I couldn't blame him. His mood broke when I told him the bad news. He said he'd tell Andrea the news about her sister when she returned from their mom's house in Ohio. I couldn't help but to think Laurie would still be alive if she'd gone with her. Why didn't she?

Eight-Twenty-Two Miller is in East Dearborn. The neighborhood is very run-down and dirty, and looked like the kind of place you don't park your car without setting the alarm. Trevor Dixon's house was a small, one-story shack. No car in the driveway, no garage, and toys and trash littered the front yard.

I rang the doorbell, but knocked too, just in case it didn't work.

A tall, thin black lady answered the door. She looked strung-out, as though I'd interrupted her from her crackpipe.

"Good afternoon, are you Mrs. Dixon?" I asked.

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"I'm a private investigator," I lied. "I'm investigating a death your husband may be linked to."

With that, she turned to look back in the house, and walked out the door, shutting it behind her. Yep, she's cracked out.

"My husband's dead," she said when the door was closed.

"Yes, I heard about that. I just have a couple of questions about him."

"And why should I tell YOU anything?"

I thought quickly. "Because we're looking for the money your husband stashed away, and you'll be entitled to it once we find it."

Her attitude changed instantly. "Okay.. ."

"Do you know anything about his dealings with a drug house at Warren and Southfield in Detroit?"

Without so much as a pause, she said, "Yep, sure do."

"What was his job in this, uhh...project?"

"He ran it. His boys worked for him. Some kept the supply coming in, others ran security. Trev handled the money."

"Was he in partnership with anyone?" I asked.

"I don't think so. He didn't tell me much about that stuff. I got a new bruise every time I asked."

"Sorry to hear that. What about the money? Any idea where it might be?"

She shook her head. "Who knows? If Trev hid it, I'd never know. He never brought it home, obviously."

I took another look at the house and yard. It was obvious Devoted Husband Trev didn't bring a dime of it home.

"Since you haven't seen the money, wouldn't it be possible he has a partner? Or that he's working for someone else?"

She thought about it for a minute. "I suppose so. It isn't something he'd likely tell me."

"Did Trevor have any other jobs?"

"If he did, he didn't tell me. He was gone from this house from morning to night. Sometimes he'd be gone for days at a time. He could've worked for the CIA and I wouldn't know."

I was somewhat concerned about the legitimacy of the information she was giving me, so I dared to ask a personal question. "Mrs. Dixon, did I interrupt something when I knocked on your door?"

Realizing her suspicious behavior when she answered the door, she immediately took a defensive position. "Investigator, not all of us young black women are crack addicts. I have a four-year-old son in my livingroom who still doesn't know his daddy's dead. He's a smart boy, and an investigator coming around asking about his daddy might tip him off."

Hell, that both answered my question and put me in my place. "Well ma'am, thanks for your time," I said, and walked away.

"If you happen to find the guy that killed Trev," she said, and I turned back to her, "be sure to thank him for me."

Walking back to my car, my cellphone rang. Like I usually do in this situation, I answered it.

"Mr. Stone. I'm the homicide detective investigating the murder that took place at your house last night."

"How'd you get my number?" I asked.

"We'll discuss that later. Can you meet with me today to go over some things?"

"I guess so. But why is Detroit investigating a homicide from Southfield?"

"It's a multi-jurisdictional case, Mr. Stone. It might be linked to something else we're watching. We'll discuss that later as well."

"Alright, I'm not far from the station now. I'll be there in a bit," and I hung up.

I walked into the Detroit Police station and was greeted by an elderly black secretary who gave me directions to the detective's office. I found the door, knocked once, and a voice told me to enter.

Without looking up from some papers he was reading, the detective said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Stone. Have a seat."

It was when I sat down that he looked up at me for the first time, and with instant recognition, my heart froze with fear. I suddenly felt like a suspect in an interrogation room. Evidently he'd recognized me too, because he just stared at me without saying a word. The silence in the room became deafening till he spoke.

"C'mon, Mr. Stone," he said standing up, "let's go for a drive."

We took my Firebird, and I drove the direction he told me. He didn't say where we were going. In fact, he hadn't said a word since we left. He only pointed when he wanted me to turn.

Finally, he said, "Son or daughter?"

I paused. "Huh?"

The detective pointed at the Baby Nikes still swinging from my rearview mirror.

"Neither. Laurie was pregnant," I said somberly, removing the Nikes and tossing them to the backseat.

He didn't say another word. He simply continued pointing when he wanted me to turn. We ultimately ended up at a tiny square building at Eight-Mile and John R., called The Chili Bowl.

"You wouldn't know it to look at it," he said, "but the best chili in the world is made right here."

We sat down and ordered two large bowls of chili and two cokes. He still hadn't started talking, so I opened the topic.

"So Detective Noble, just how fucked am I?"

He looked at me puzzled. "Fucked? Hell, I don't think I'd know the answer to that one."

"Then why did you drag me out here?"

"For lunch," he said with a smirk. "When you told me that morning outside the burning drug house that Mrs. Parker was giving you piano lessons, I had a pretty good idea you were the one who torched the place."

"So why didn't you arrest me?" I asked.

He looked at me incredulously. "For what?! For ridding the city of more drugs and freeing an entire neighborhood from a domestic prison? Mr. Stone, I believe God would send me to hell if I arrested you. Besides, I have no proof," he said, giving me a wink.

I let out a sigh of relief. "Well, that's good news then."

The chili arrived and we started eating. He was right. This really was the best chili I'd ever tasted.

"Did you know impersonating a police officer is a felony?" he asked.

My heart started racing again. "Sure, I guess it is."

"That's how I got your number. The DMV gave it to me after your phone call inquiring about Trevor Dixon. They called us because Trevor Dixon is on our watch list. I take it you paid his wife a visit?"

"Uh huh," I said, still not sure where this was going.

"What did you find out?"

"Not much. I wanted to find out if he had a partner, or maybe a boss that might want to give me some paybacks. She didn't know."

Jack Noble leaned back, took out a cigarette and lit it. Realizing we were in a smoking section, I did the same.

"Do you know a Vincent Lucetti?" Jack asked.

I took a moment to think. "Sounds familiar. On the news maybe?"

"He owns the MGM Grand Casino in Detroit. He's also one of the biggest crime bosses in Detroit."

I waited for him to continue. When he didn't, I asked, "Okay, so what's this got to do with Laurie and me?"

Ignoring my question, he said, "Several of the casino's customers owed Lucetti large amounts of money due to gambling losses. They turned up with holes in their foreheads. Ballistics told us all the murders were committed with the same gun."

"Fine. How's this connected to me?" I asked. I was growing impatient.

"The bullet we pulled from Laurie Stephens came from that very same gun."

Now I was confused. "Why would Vincent Lucetti have any problem with me or Laurie?"

"One of Lucetti's many illegal business ventures was drugs. He ran a drug house in Southwest Detroit, one managed by Trevor Dixon, which you burned down a month ago."

My stomach tightened into an instant knot, and I started feeling lightheaded. I realized now all of the missing pieces to the puzzle were in place. I now knew who killed Laurie and why. I had a target for my revenge, and I'd soon have a face for my own personal Satan. I was already forming a plan in my head.

After Detective Noble picked up the bill, we drove back to the station. When we arrived, Noble didn't get out. He looked at me, as if to study my face. "Mr. Stone...Nick. You're going to let us handle this, right?"

I turned to him. "Jack...you do what you have to do, and so will I." Without another word, Jack Noble got out of the car, and I left.

Chapter Twelve

I drove till I found a payphone on Michigan Avenue. I called Directory Assistance for the number for the MGM Grand Casino. I wrote it down, then dialed it.

"May I help you?" the female switchboard operator asked.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Lucetti."

"And who may I ask is calling?"

"Trevor Dixon."

"One moment."

A few seconds later, a gruff voice with a New York accent came on the line. "Who da hell is this?" Vincent Lucetti asked.

"This's Trevor Dixon," I repeated.

"Ya bullshittin' me kid, Trev's dead."

"Oh! Okay, well...then I guess I'm the one who killed him."

Dead silence for seven seconds. I counted.

"Nice to meet ya Nick Stone, what can I do for ya?"

"For starters, you can drop dead of a painful sexually-transmitted disease."

"Ahh, Nick Nick Nick... you shouldna fucked with me, kid," and he hung up.

A little irritated, but still focused, I drove back to Dad's house in Farmington Hills. I pulled up in the driveway and popped the trunk. I went into the garage and pulled a box off the shelf that Laurie had put there over a month ago. Inside I found the remaining fourteen M-80s, the four cloned cellphones and the block of C-4. The plan I'd started forming earlier was beginning to take shape. This retaliation would have been sweet bliss, had my personal loss not been so high. This's for you, Laurie, wherever you are.

I drove to the MGM Grand Casino and into the underground parking garage. I parked on the highest level, right below the casino's main floor, and looked around. The infrastructure of the casino's main building was held up by four large vertical cement and steel beams, that reached from the lowest parking level to the top floor of the casino. I was parked next to one of those beams.

The four cellphones I had, all had a cloned SIM card, and thus all had the same phone number. I sat the four phones on the dashboard and called the number with my own phone. The four phones rang in perfect unison.

Using a small screwdriver, I opened each phone. I removed the tiny metal speaker that sounds the phone's ringer, leaving two bare wires that had been connected to the speaker. After cutting the C-4 into four smaller pieces, I taped one piece of C-4 to the phone with duct tape. I shoved the ends of the speaker wire into the C-4 and put the phone back together. I now had four cellphone bombs I could detonate from anywhere in the world.

I put my cellphone bombs in a cloth bag and got out of the car. I placed one on an I-Beam connected to the vertical cement pillar. While making sure no one was looking, I did the same with the other three.

Having finished, I went inside MGM Grand.

It was time to meet Satan.

I took the elevator up from the parking garage to the casino's main floor. I found myself in a large room filled with roulette, poker, blackjack and craps tables. Slot machines lined all four walls.

I took my time meandering from one table to another, knowing full well the cameras were watching me -- maybe even following me. I doubted these were the fake ones from Radio Shack.

It wasn't long before a short, barrel-chested man put his hand on my shoulder.

"Sir," he said, wheeling me around to face him, "can I see some I.D.?"

I showed it to him.

"Nick Stone. Okay, come with me."

I now found myself flanked by five more large men. Three black, two white. None Italian. I guess the Mafia supports affirmative action.

After a short trip in the staff elevator to the fifth floor, I was led to a huge office in which sat a very large and sweaty Mafioso greaseball.

"Hiya Nick, I'm Vincent Lucetti," he said, holding out his hand for me to shake. I ignored the proffered hand, and when he got the hint, he lowered it.

"So what can I do for ya Nick?"

"I just wanted to meet the antichrist himself," I said.

"Antichrist, huh? That's quite flattering, but there's no need for this kinda disrespect is there?"

"No, not if you were to drop dead in that chair."

Lucetti was becoming noticeably irritated. He stood from his desk and gave me a cold look. "Nick, do you realize who you're talking to? Do you understand I can make you disappear? Do you understand I can make your last day on earth very PAINFUL??"

I met his cold eyes with two of my own. "Do you understand I'm already dead? Do you understand you can no longer hurt me? There's nothing left for you to take from me. And I'm not afraid to die."

He stood from his desk and walked over to me. I was still flanked on both sides by his henchmen, and I had no escape. Not that I had any desire to.

I stared into Lucetti's cold, dead eyes. In that moment I felt I could see everything he'd done in his life. He'd killed many times before, and he loved it. I could almost feel what he wanted to do to me.

In a blur, his fist was buried in my stomach and I sagged to the floor. I found myself unable to breathe, not from the blow to the stomach, but from Lucetti's boot on my throat.

"Nothing left for us to take, huh? How 'bout that pretty little thing you're shackled up with?" he asked, grinning to his cronies. "Betcha we could do some things to her, huh guys?" he said with an evil laugh.

He looked down at me again. "We can always find her, Nick. And my boys here can do things to her that would make death seem like a delight."

He took his foot off my throat just before I passed out. His goons kept me pinned to the floor by standing on my hands and feet. I barely noticed the pain. Why was he talking about Laurie?

"You can find her at the morgue, asshole. She's dead," I croaked, my throat still raw.

He gave me a confused look. "Eh? Who's dead?"

"My fiancée! Your goon that torched my house killed her!"

He looked away from me, and off into nothing. He thought about this, then gave himself a small chuckle and smiled.

"Ohh, no shit. Dead, huh? Ahh, what a tangled web we weave.. ." Lucetti said, walking back to his desk. He waved his hand and the goons picked me up off the floor. "You should know how the game's played. Sometimes there are casualties of war. Sometimes people die, when they live the dangerous life you and your dearly departed lived. But I don't play dirty, Nick. I ordered my hitman to torch your house from the end of the house opposite your bedroom. I told him not to kill anyone."

"And I'm suppose to believe you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "The fuck do I care if you believe me or not? Either way, we got our revenge." A huge grin took his face and my blood boiled.

"Before this's over, all of you will die," I said. "Even if I have to die with you."

Once again he rose from his desk and approached me. This time he had a .22 in his hand. "You're half right, Nick. You *will* die." He raised the .22 to my head and the last thing I saw was the butt of the gun cracking me in the forehead between my eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

The first thing I saw when I woke up had missing teeth and a previously broken nose. He stared down at me with a huge grin and breathed on me with breath that smelled of old tacos. One of Lucetti's goombahs.

I turned my head, which was a feat in itself with a still-sore neck. I could feel blood on my forehead. It had already congealed and felt like rubber cement, so I knew I must've been out for a while. I could see I was laying down in the backseat of a car.

"Vito, he's awake," he said, still grinning.

I looked up to see who Vito was. All I could see from my viewpoint was the back of a chubby head in the driver's seat. He turned to look at me. "Do him easy, Tony. Gotta keep the car clean," he said with a deep voice, and turned his eyes back to the road.

I tried to reach my hand to my head, but found my hands were tied together, and around my waist. I looked up at Tony, who continued to grin.

"Got some aspirin?" I asked.

His grin turned to a frown. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a white bottle.

"Ibuprofen," he said, as he dropped two tablets into my mouth and gave me a drink from a bottle of Coke.

"What th' fuck you givin' him that for?" Vito asked from the front seat.

Tony's grin returned. "I want the only pain he's in to be caused by *me!*"

I had a feeling today would turn out to be one I'd never forget. I couldn't see where we were. While lying in the backseat, all I could see through the windows was a slowly darkening sky. That image didn't change until the car slowed, and we pulled into a huge warehouse. I knew then today would be my day to die.

Fine with me. Just let me take these assholes with me.

The car stopped and Vito got out. Tony opened his door and crudely pulled me out of the car, letting me fall to the ground. I got a good look at Vito. He reminded me of Jelly from *Analyze This*. Remember him? Goofy fucker. I looked around. The warehouse was nearly empty, save for a huge wooden chair, and hundreds of old rusty oil drums stacked against the wall. There was a familiar smell in the air I couldn't place. It reminded me of someplace I'd been before.

Tony led me over to the huge wooden chair against the wall. Several thick wires ran across the floor from the back of the chair to a wooden box, then plugged into the wall.

"Hey Tony, uhh...how long's this gonna take?" Vito asked, checking his watch.

Tony shot him a cold look. "As long as it takes! I wanna see if this thing works," he said, pushing me into the chair.

As Tony cut the ropes from my wrists and waist and strapped me in, he introduced me to the chair. "Mr. Nick Stone, meet the original *Old Sparky*. I bought it from a state prison in Texas. This chair's fried eight-hundred sixteen convicted murderers and rapists since 1932. I've never seen a real live execution. I can't wait!"

When I was strapped in, Tony walked over to the wooden box. I held my breath and hoped it wouldn't take long. I watched as Tony, with a huge, shit-eating grin, reached up and pressed a button on the box.

I instinctively cringed as the electricity began to flow through me, but I relaxed a bit when I realized it wasn't killing me. It barely even hurt. It felt like a vibration through my skull, and actually sort've felt nice. I opened my eyes to Tony's grinning face.

"That's the lowest setting. Watch this," he said as he cranked the dial up a bit.

Now THIS hurt. It felt like a jackhammer trying to pry my brain from my skull. Every muscle in my body tightened, and I couldn't move. I forced my eyes open again and saw Tony walking over to me.

"How's it feel, Nicky? Ya like it?" I barely heard him say. I said nothing in return because my jaw was clamped shut from the electricity running through my body.

"C'mon Tony, let's get this shit done!" I heard Vito yell from the car.

I watched Tony walk back over to the box. "Sayonara, sucker," he said, and unceremoniously cranked the dial to full.

My eyes slammed shut, but I could still see light. An orange and yellow strobe light flashed in my head. I could no longer feel my own body. It was as if my entire body had gone numb, but I could still feel the crushing pain in my head. The strobe lights were then replaced with tiny black dots that appeared in my vision -- a few at first, then more and more, like little black pixels filling a computer screen.

Then everything went black, and all at once the pain stopped. I still couldn't feel my body, and I feared if I opened my eyes again, Tony would turn the machine back on.

After a full minute, I dared to open my eyes. The view I saw before me should've shocked me, but for some reason it calmed my nerves. I still saw only darkness, but this time I saw a figure walking toward me.

Female.

She had long, raven black hair, smooth, olive skin, and...she looked familiar.

When she came into view, I was dumbfounded.

"Mom?!" I asked in disbelief.

"Hiya, sunshine. How are ya feeling?"

"I feel like...like I had a Buick parked on my head."

She laughed. "Ahh, still can't resist a punchline, can ya?"

"Am I dead?" I asked changing the subject.

She shook her head. "No Nicky, you're just dreaming. You're going to die a grandfather."

"Are *you* dead?"

She shook her head again. "No one really dies, Nicky. We just move on." She took a step toward me and gave me a hug. "Say hi to your dad for me. And don't forget to go see Arabella."

I opened my eyes, but Mom was gone. It was then that I noticed I had feeling in my body again, but I still couldn't see. I grunted from the pain I once again felt in my head, and the sound echoed in my ears. It sounded like metal.

I reached my hand out and immediately came in contact with a rough surface that felt a lot like sandpaper. I ran my hand across the surface and found it curved around me. My mind flashed back to the warehouse, and the hundreds of rusty oil drums. I was inside one of them.

It was then that panic struck me. I pounded several times on what I'd hoped was the lid of the drum. The echoing sounds pounded my brain, but I continued.

It was now getting harder to breathe. I took deep breaths, but it felt like a futile effort. Despite this, I continued to beat on the lid of the drum.

I stopped for a minute and listened. *Drip, drip, drip.* I felt around the side of the drum. Something was leaking in from outside. I touched my fingers to the liquid and smelled it.

My mind flashed back once again to the warehouse. This time, I recalled that familiar smell in the air. I use to smell that same putrid odor when I went to Elizabeth Park in Ecorse, right next to the Detroit River. It smelled like dead, rotting fish. The warehouse must've been next to the river.

The second wave of panic struck me with a new thought: Was I at the bottom of the Detroit River?? I tried desperately to conserve the remaining oxygen, but it was no use -- there was none left.

I pounded even harder on the lid of the oil drum. The water trickled at first, then started streaming from the lid. The bottom of the drum now had six inches of water. Using my simple knowledge of physics, I knew the pressure of the water outside the drum was holding the lid closed. Once the drum was completely filled with water, the lid would come off.

So I pounded harder. Now the water was up to my chin, and filling up fast. I took one last breath before my head went under water. I reached up and used the last of my energy to push on the lid.

And it came off.

I don't remember swimming. I was in a dreamlike state from oxygen deprivation, and I seemed to merely float out of the drum. I looked above me and barely saw light. It was my first time seeing anything since being electrocuted. I reached up and made an effort to tread water, but my energy was drained. I continued to float.

My head broke the surface after an unknown amount of time. It felt like an hour. I took several deep breaths and I could feel my energy returning and my head beginning to clear. I took my first look around. A steel river wall was about twenty feet away. I swam over to it and found a ladder that reached from water level to the ground, ten feet above me.

I climbed the ladder and found myself in an almost-empty lot, surrounded by a razorwire fence. In the middle sat a huge warehouse -- the same one in which I'd been executed.

After a cursory search, I found an old Ford pickup behind the warehouse. The ignition had already been broken open, so I started it using someone else's hot-wiring job. But who (besides me) would steal a 1978 Ford Ranger?? It's a sick world we live in.

I drove the truck through the fence and out onto Jefferson Avenue. I didn't care. Wasn't *my* fence. I looked at my watch, which showed 10:30pm. I watched the second hand to make sure my watch was still working.

If you thought for a minute I'd learned my lesson with messing with the Mafia, think again. I meant it when I said I was prepared to die, but I refuse to die without taking some of these assholes with me. I'd love to find out which one of them pulled the trigger and took Laurie from me. But all in due time I guess.

I walked into the MGM Grand parking garage by eleven p.m., and found my Firebird where I'd left it. I ditched the old pickup a block away from the casino. It would've stuck out like a sore thumb amongst these nicer cars, and I didn't want Lucetti knowing I was still alive. Yet.

I climbed into the Firebird, rolled down the windows (I still smelled like dead fish), and closed my eyes. I fought back the images of Laurie that hadn't stopped haunting me for the past 24 hours, and thought about my next move.

I'm not sure if I fell asleep or not in that parking garage, but I floated back to coherency when I heard voices. I looked over toward the elevator, forty feet away and saw Mr. Lucetti's henchmen. I counted seven so far, and yet more stepped off the elevator. By the time the elevator doors closed behind the group, I counted a total of twenty henchmen. Were there more?!

I watched the group pile into five white Lincoln Continentals. They pulled out of the garage, with my black Firebird taking up the rear.

I followed the convoy of Continentals down 1-75 to the Woodward Freeway, and into Southwest Detroit. After a twenty-minute drive, the group pulled into Zamboni's Italiano Ristorante. Zamboni? Isn't that the name of the machine they use to smooth the ice on a hockey rink? Ehh, anyway, it was midnight now, but Zamboni's had a nearly full house.

I pulled into the parking lot, and into the first parking space next to the driveway. I watched the twenty men pile out of the cars, and I recognized Tony and Vito taking up the rear. When the last one entered the restaurant, I popped my trunk and removed the bag of M-80s and a roll of duct tape. (If you can't duck it, fuck it!) Quickly and methodically I taped an M-80 to the gas tank of each Lincoln. These tanks were metal - not plastic, like the Maxima - so I could only hope it would still work. When I finished, I pocketed another M-80.

At one a.m., the lights inside Zamboni's went out, leaving only the streetlights to light the parking lot. The group left the restaurant, and as they piled into their cars, I ran over to the driveway and poured out an entire gallon of gasoline on the cement. On my way back to the Firebird, I pulled out the M-80 from my pocket and lit it.

"Fuck you, greaseballs!" I yelled, throwing the quarter stick of dynamite at the group of Lincolns, which landed on the trunk lid of one of them. The explosion blew out the rear window of the car, and screams could be heard inside as I jumped into the Firebird.

Before the men could react, I backed out and went for the driveway. I stopped in the driveway, opened my door, reached down and lit the gasoline with my Zippo. When the puddle ignited, I floored the engine, turning north onto Woodward. The Lincolns immediately followed, exiting the parking lot one by one, driving over the puddle of fire and igniting each M-80 strapped to their gas tanks.

I was doing 70 mph now, and the line of Lincolns were gaining on me. Before the first one got too close, it exploded in a beautiful fireball that I could feel shake the chassis of my car. The Lincoln skidded sideways and flipped. Before the other four cars collided with the flaming Continental carcass, they too exploded, one after another. The five balls of fire lit up the night sky and gave the illusion of daylight. Two of the cars flipped, while the others simply rolled into each other. I did a U-turn, going south on Woodward, and slowed to admire my handiwork, and to make sure none of the Goon Squad emerged from their fiery four-wheeled luxury coffins.

With step one of my revenge completed, I drove back to Dad's house.

Chapter Fourteen

All the lights in the livingroom were out, and Dad sat on the couch smoking a Lady. All I could see was the glowing tip of the Lady, and the room briefly glowed as he inhaled. This was a rather somber and downcast mood, especially for Dad.

"Hey. Are you alright?" I asked, sitting down next to him.

"No," he said, exhaling smoke. "I kinda miss my almost-daughter-in-law."

I didn't know it, but Dad had gotten use to having her around. Laurie had a way of growing on everyone. In a good way, of course.

"I know Dad. Things aren't gonna be the same. It kinda feels like it did when Mom died. But we pulled through that, and we'll make it through this." I knew I was lying.

"Did you find out anything today?" he asked.

"Yeah. I found out what it's like to be a worm on the end of a fishing line. Oh yeah, Mom says hi."

Before he could respond, I started telling him of my interview with Detective Noble, my visit to MGM Grand, and why I smelled like dead fish. For several minutes, neither of us said anything.

"Revenge is a funny thing," Dad finally said. "The person you're seeking revenge for is dead. They don't care about such things. You're seeking revenge only to satisfy yourself. And I mean it Nick, you won't feel any better when you're done. Especially if you're dead too."

"Well Dad, I can't sit here and let them win. I'll feel even worse. I know none of this will make me feel better, but it has to be done for me to move on."

From complete exhaustion I fell asleep on the couch. It wasn't a peaceful sleep, by any means. I had that same dream again: me, Laurie and our kids. But still in that dream I knew none of it was real, so I wasn't surprised when I saw everyone burst into flames again.

Final Chapter

I woke up. I wasn't particularly happy about that fact, but I opened my eyes nonetheless. I laid there on the couch thinking about the upcoming events of today. People were going to die today. Perhaps myself included. I'd try to avoid that if I could, but I wasn't really sure I'd try all that hard.

I made my way to the garage and retrieved the two .45s I'd stashed away so long ago. Mine and Laurie's. I loaded the extra clips and duct-taped everything to my legs. By nine a.m. I was ready to go. I grabbed my cellphone and got into the Firebird.

On the way to MGM Grand, I called Vincent Lucetti on his private line.

"Good morning, Mr. Lucetti," I said.

Dead silence. Then: "Nick???"

"It was a nice try, Lucetti. I give you an A for effort."

"Where are ya Nick?" he asked with suspicion.

"I'm calling from the bottom of the river. I get great reception down here."

He sighed. "Christ, Nick, you're like a disease, ya know that?"

"For which there is no cure!" I said. "Hey, how're my buddies Tony and Vito?"

"How are they...they're *well-done*! How do you think they are? I suppose I have you to thank for that?"

"Just an appetizer for what's coming next."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"I plan to hit you where it hurts," I said and hung up.

I pulled up to a payphone two blocks from the MGM Grand and made the call that started it all.

"MGM Grand, how may I help you?"

"Actually it is I, that wishes to help you."

"How's that, sir?"

"Because I have four bombs hidden in the casino, that I have every intention of detonating. Since I don't wish to kill innocent people, I suggest you notify security of this call and get everyone out."

A silent pause, then: "Are you yankin' my chain, sir?" she asked with skepticism. Why does everyone have a hard time taking me seriously?

"Would you like me to prove it by detonating it now?" I asked.

I heard her drop the still-connected phone and run yelling and screaming. Message well-received, so I hung up.

I parked a block away from the casino's parking garage. For several minutes, nothing happened. I started getting worried. Did the switchboard operator fall and hit her head before warning security? That would just suck.

Then a car pulled out. Quickly. Then three more. Then a barrage of gamblers flooded out of the garage in a cacophony of revving engines, honking horns and squealing tires.

After fifteen minutes, the owner was last to leave. A white limo, with a vanity plate that read 'Lucetti' pulled out of the garage and parked two cars ahead of me. I picked up the phone and called him again.

"Me again.. ." I said.

"Nick, you motherf..." Lucetti said as he stumbled over his words, then screamed, "You screw with my casino, you die a hundred deaths!!!"

"I told you, I'm already dead," and I hung up.

After a deep breath, I dialed the number for the cellphone bombs.

Half a ring... BAH-BAH-BAH-BOOOOOM!!!

A bright flash could be seen inside the garage from a block away. The ground shook. I could feel it even in my car, much worse than last night when the Lincoln exploded behind me. I couldn't see it from the ground, but the roof of the casino was the first to collapse. The weight of it collapsed the fifth floor, where I'd been last night, and each floor collapsed the next, and down into the pit that had twenty seconds ago been the casino's parking garage. The walls, which had still been standing, began cracking, and small chunks of it fell to the street. An entire five seconds passed, then all four walls collapsed into each other and fell into the rest of the debris. A demolitions team couldn't have performed a more precise drop.

Lucetti's limo pulled away from the curb with squealing tires and went around the corner to the 1-75 freeway ramp. Since I'd nothing better to do that day, I followed.

It was a rather long road trip. We took 1-75 North for only seconds, then took 1-94 West. From there, I followed the limo for almost a half hour, through Dearborn, Allen Park, Taylor and Romulus, past Detroit Metro Airport.

I followed a quarter mile behind. I wasn't too worried about being spotted. My Firebird could easily outrun and out-manuever his limo, but I still liked to have the element of surprise.

My curiosity of our destination didn't last much longer. Once we took Exit 186, I knew where we were going. There's nothing out here in this rural part of Ypsilanti except Willow Run Airport.

The limo made it's way to the west entrance of the airport, and through a security gate requiring a four-digit code. Since I didn't know the code, I continued driving this stretch of road around to the south side of the airport. Normally this road would be blocked by a tiny gate with a 'Restricted Area' sign, but this gate has always been open, as it is now, blocking the view of that very sign.

I drove out onto the tarmac, this time with increasing speed. I drove down the taxiing strip, past Zantop Shipping, over to the tarmac full of private jets. That's where I found Lucetti's limo parked, doors and trunk open and empty.

It was time to be spotted. I floored the gas over to the limo, and screeched to a halt as the Lear Gulfstream IV began a slow roll to the taxiway. I jumped out of the car and ran to the plane. Planes don't taxi but 3mph -- I could've caught the plane with a brisk walk. They must've spotted me, because the roar of the jets increased, and the plane rolled faster as I reached out and grabbed onto the rear-right strut attached to the landing gear. Immediately I decided this wasn't the best place to be during takeoff. I looked up and noticed a door where the wheel retracts. I opened it and climbed in. I found a small passageway, which I followed.

At the end of this passageway, I found myself inside a small cargo hold. The only light that found it's way in came from underneath a door that led to the front of the plane. From this light I could see only a few suitcases and an old steamer trunk. I could feel that the plane was still taxiing, so I sat down against the rear wall and braced myself for the inevitable brute force of takeoff.

Moments later I felt the plane make a 45-degree turn, to line up on the runway. It stopped for just a few seconds, then everything began to shake, including my brain, as the engines were throttled up to 100%. Seconds later the brakes were released, and then began that ever-pleasant feeling of being pressed into the wall behind me. Twelve seconds later I felt the Lear Gulfstream IV leave the ground and bank to the right.

When the plane leveled off, I untaped one of the .45s, a silencer and an extra clip. Laurie's gun. I call that Poetic Justice.

I assumed the door in front of me led to the main cabin. I opened the door just a crack and saw the row of seats on the left. It was disheartening. Most of the seats were full, so I assumed the seats on the right were too. I estimated about twenty bad guys. What gives?! Did Vincent Lucetti have some kinda henchmen farm? How many did he have?! Ahead of them

was a door I assumed led to the cockpit. Was the pilot armed too? I suddenly felt in way over my head.

I closed the door, as well as my eyes. Me, against more than twenty armed assailants wouldn't be easy. In that dark little cargo hold, I thought to myself, *How would Bruce Willis handle this?* He'd go in firing like a cowboy at anything that moves, while smoking a cigarette and spouting catch-phrases. I thought about that for a minute and grabbed the other .45 from the arsenal strapped to my leg. Seventeen bullets each. Thirty-six total against twenty henchmen.

With both guns drawn and crouched down on one knee, I opened the door slowly with my foot. In a slow and methodical sweep, I fired bullet after bullet into the backs of the seats, aiming at where I guessed each person's heart was. Because I had used the silencer, I had already taken out most of Lucetti's army before anyone caught on. The remaining five stood up and drew their guns to shoot, but before they could pull their triggers I put a bullet into each of their chests. I closed the door and put my body against it. A few shots rang out on the other side of the door, but the steel wall and door was no match for the .38s I noticed they were using.

Then POW! Something hit the door much harder. No way that was a .38. Back in the crouched position, I flung the door open and quickly shot at the two human forms standing in front of me. A bullet went into each of their chests, and I slammed the door closed, and put my gun in the handle to lock it.

I realized by the uniforms, that I'd just killed the pilot and copilot, sealing all our fates. There was no one left to land the plane now, which was fine with me! We'll all die today. I sat against the rear wall and closed my eyes. If the plane was running on autopilot now, we'd simply fly till we ran out of fuel. But that could be hours! I wanted to make this happen now, and I wanted us all to die by my hands.

My morbid thoughts were interrupted by yelling from the cabin. "They're dead! They're both fucking dead! How do we land??" I heard a voice ask.

In between the yelling voices, I heard a thump. We weren't in any turbulence, and there were no other sounds in the cargo hold.

Thump. There it was again, louder this time. I looked to my left and saw only the old steamer trunk.

Thump.

It was coming from inside.

I popped the latches on the trunk and opened it. In that instant, time slowed down. Maybe even stopped. My chest felt cold, my ears started ringing, and I couldn't breathe. My sick, morbid thoughts of crashing the plane had vanished and were replaced by a number of emotions.

I looked into the trunk to see if I were imagining what I saw. But I wasn't.

I sat back on the floor, talking to myself. "How did you do it, Lucetti? How the fuck did you do it??"

I reached into the trunk and slapped her face. "Wake up Laurie! Wake the hell up!"

She slowly began to stir, and she sat up. She opened her eyes, blinked a few times, then looked up at me. Perhaps she needed a few seconds to realize who I was, because that's how long it took for her to jump from the steamer trunk.

"NICKY!!!" she yelled, tackling me like a highschool quarterback. We sat there in each other's arms for what felt like an eternity. She finally looked up and locked eyes with me, and asked, "What the fuck took you so long??"

"Nick!" I heard a familiar voice yell from the front of the plane. "I know it's you Nick. Couldn't be anyone else. How 'bout you come out here and we have a little talk?"

My bride-to-be and I were both well-armed now. Laurie's gun was hidden in her right jeans pocket. I opened the cargo door, gun drawn, Laurie's hand in mind, and we stepped into the main cabin.

The scene before me failed to register in my head. I knew what I was looking at, but I didn't know why. The man standing before me was not Vincent Lucetti. He was there, sitting in a seat toward the front, eyes trained on me, but he wasn't the man standing in the aisle, with a .22 pointed at my chest.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

He glared at me with fierce, angry eyes. "Shut up Nick, and sit down."

Laurie and I sat in the rearmost seat on the plane, putting plenty of space between us. I knew his .22 would barely even draw blood from that distance.

"So you must be Lucetti's lapdog," I said.

"Are you shittin' me?" he said with a disgusted look, then turned to Lucetti and fired a slug into his chest. "Screw Lucetti! He wouldn't be where he is without me!"

"So what did that have to do with Laurie?"

He moved a bit closer to us, and I gripped my .45, ready for him to attack. Instead, he sat down a few seats closer.

"I've been in love with Laurie ever since that night at the Spotted Dog," my best friend Alan said. "That night, Laurie kept talking to you, and Andrea wouldn't stop talking to me. Those two had already decided which of us they wanted. You got the fun, laid-back, easygoing sister, I got the boring, stuffy, never-let-me-have-any-fun sister. When Lucetti gave me the order to torch your house, I put a bullet in Andrea's forehead, switched her corpse for Laurie's still-breathing body and put the engagement ring on Andrea's finger."

I felt Laurie's hand tighten in mine, and I knew she was feeling that thirst for revenge I felt earlier. Thankfully I restrained her from grabbing her gun.

"Where were you planning on taking her?" I asked.

"I got a little place in California. I would make Laurie mine with the help of a doctor friend and some...*creative* brainwashing techniques. Really pisses me off you had to go and knock Laurie up first, but I was planning to have that taken care of in Los Angeles," he said with a smirk.

The idea of anyone - especially my so-called best friend - killing my unborn son (or daughter), sent a burning pain through my body. My hands started shaking and I didn't realize I was grinding my teeth. I wanted Alan to bleed! I wanted to kill him over and over. I took a deep breath to calm myself. Diffusing this situation and coming home alive was more important.

"Which brings us to this," I said. "Now what?"

He stood. "Well, I don't know dick about flying. You, on the other hand, have been flying a plane just like this one on your computer. You even bragged about how well you could land it. Something about a...toothpick? Well, you know what I'm getting at." He waved us over. "C'mon Nick, get up here and land this thing."

Laurie and I walked hand-in-hand to the cockpit door. As we passed Alan, he grabbed her away from me and said, "And I'll keep her for a little insurance."

I turned to him. He had his .22 at her head, but I wasn't worried. I knew he would grab her. Though I stared into Alan's eyes, I could see through my peripheral vision Laurie slowly pull out her .45 and aim it behind her.

"Damn, Alan. That was a bit predictable, don't you think?" I asked.

"Huh? The hell are you talking about?"

"You've watched too many movies! The bad guy *always* grabs the girl and refers to her as 'insurance'. That's why Laurie brought her gun."

Alan looked down to Laurie's side and saw her blue 45mm Desert Eagle pointed at his crotch. Before he could react, she squeezed the trigger. The slug pierced his...ya know, causing him to scream like a girl, lose his grip on Laurie and fall to the floor, still conscious. As Alan made a valiant effort to raise his .22 to Laurie, she kicked it from his hand, leaned over and put her .45 to his head. Again she squeezed the trigger and, at such close range, the shot took off the top of his head, spraying brain matter and bone fragments all over the cabin floor.

Laurie slowly stood and looked from Alan's twitching corpse to me. "Is that it? Is it over?"

"It will be when we land the plane," I said, turning to sit in the pilot's seat. Laurie took the seat next to me.

"This's almost identical to the one in the game," I said.

"I thought you said it wasn't a game?" she asked with a grin.

"Bite me, sweetheart," I said, returning the grin.

I hit the autopilot button, which beeped twice, informing me I had control of the plane.

"So where are we?" she asked.

Damn. That was a good question. I looked out the window. All clouds. I looked at the altimeter. 28,000 feet. "We're somewhere in the air," I answered her with dripping sarcasm.

"Funny. How 'bout using the radio?"

"Okay. See that panel over there with the bullet hole in it?"

"Uh huh."

"That's the radio."

Recalling as much of the flight simulator as I could, I dropped the throttle from 75% to 50% and nosed the Lear downward, to a pitch of -5 degrees. We descended into the cloudcover below us. For several seconds we were flying blind. When we broke free of the clouds at 16,000 feet, the view wasn't very promising.

I could see small square patches of land, tiny roads, rivers and trees. And nothing else. I looked at the flight clock. We'd been in the air an hour and forty-five minutes. The compass indicated we were flying due west, a perfect 270 degree heading. I had an idea.

I turned the yoke and banked the plane, starting a slow turnaround, to a heading of 90 degrees due east, and throttled back up to 75%.

"If we stay on this course and heading, then in an hour and forty-five minutes we should be back where we started."

We flew on in silence. We hadn't seen any identifying landmarks, and it'd been an hour and a half since we turned around. As I was thinking about changing course and landing somewhere else, a patch of blue caught my eye as it came over the horizon. What I thought to be a small lake, turned out to be a very large one.

"Isn't that Lake Erie?" Laurie asked, pointing.

"Think so. If it is, then Willow Run should be right over there," I said, pointing out the left window.

I dropped the throttle to 75% and nosed down for the descent to 3,000 feet, making a wide U-turn over the Detroit River. Doing 120 knots, a hair above stall speed, I lined up for Willow Run's secondary east-west runway, #2L. Gear down, flaps full, call the ball! The wheels touched the runway, and I cut the throttle and tapped the brake. I taxied off 2L toward my black Firebird and the white limo. When the plane stopped I cut the engines, set the brake and closed my eyes.

"Hey Nick?" Laurie asked. "How 'bout we stop doing odd-jobs for a while?"

"Then how're you gonna buy a new car?"

"What happened to my Corvette??"
"Blew up."
"Figures..."