

R.G.K.

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Chapter 1: "The Scene"

Detective Case was not your average detective. First of all, he didn't even *own* a trench coat. Tonight for example, he was performing his duties in a black shirt, black jeans, and black sneakers, sharply contrasted on top with a white jacket. At the age of twenty-six, he had put away fifteen high-profile murderers during a career which spanned five years. Most didn't think much to look at him, an innocent pair of wise, blue eyes, convening below a crop of short, brown hair, but at the end of the day he always seemed to get the job done. Lately though, he had been a little distracted at work. For one thing, he was engaged to Gina Keller. That alone could put a strain on anyone's work ethic. However, the majority of Case's colleagues had attributed his recent behavior to one thing and one thing alone, his drinking habits.

The victim was a young girl. She was in her early twenties, well-dressed, and had brown hair. She may have been attractive, but it was hard to tell at the moment. Detective Case narrowed his eyes as he measured a hole in her face. It had a diameter of four inches. It was just big enough to consume every feature from her mouth to her eyebrows. He curled his index finger over his top lip. He tracked a blood waterfall down her chin and across her white sweater with his eyes. It was dark red in the middle, eased to a soft amber hue, and became a fuzzy orange color towards the edges. He turned his attention to bits of skull that were stuck in her brown hair. They stood out like little snowflakes. Case looked at a row of ropes that bound her to a brown recliner across her chest. He imagined how she would have felt, struggling in despair to free herself.

"Sledgehammer?" Sergeant Paloni speculated.

Detective Case looked up. "No, thanks, Sergeant," he replied. He slowly stood, then walked into the kitchen.

“We think her name was Francine Carlina,” Gary the forensics guy reported holding up a purse. Case snatched the purse from him and had a look inside. He removed a college student ID and studied it. “We can’t be sure it’s her,” Gary continued, “because her face is all smashed in, but I’m pretty sure it’s the same girl.”

“What would we do without you, Gary?” Detective Case inquired with a grin. He walked to the refrigerator and looked inside. “Alright, she’s got my brand.” He pulled out a beer and turned to Gary with a goofy smile.

Gary looked up. “You see there, Sergeant Paloni?” he yelled towards the living room. “Now there’s a face only a mother could love!”

“Hey, toss me one of those, Case!” Paloni called back.

“Sorry, man,” Case replied. He cracked open the beer and had a sip. “Last one.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Case!” Paloni yelled back. Case exited the kitchen, moseyed across the living room, and wandered through the front door. “Case?” Paloni demanded. “Get back here!”

“Drinking on the job, eh?” Captain Ford remarked as Detective Case passed him outside.

Case looked up. “Hey, Captain. Finally made it in, I see.”

“You know, one of these days you’re going to get canned,” Captain Ford remarked.

“You guys wouldn’t make it one day without me, Cap,” Detective Case assured him. He wandered across the street, shut himself in a brown, ‘80s style car, and fired up the engine. He did a U-turn in the middle of the road, pulled up next to the sidewalk at the front of the yard, and rolled down his window. “Hey, have the guys send everything to my desk as usual,” Case demanded. He took a drink of beer.

“Right, sure,” Captain Ford replied. “Case...a little piece of advice?” Case bobbed his

head up, then had another swig of beer. “Don’t work so hard. Might drive you to drink.”

“Oh, come on, Cap,” Case replied. “Are you going to start in with this again?”

“That’s all I have to say, Case,” Captain Ford told him. He turned and walked into the crime scene. Detective Case sat there for a moment. He watched the fat man wander through a couple of strands of police tape and into the crime scene.

“*Prick*,” he muttered as he drove away. Once on the freeway Case thought about going straight home and getting himself a good night’s sleep. He glanced at the clock on his radio and grinned. “Forget *that*,” he said. He turned on his right blinker and got ready to exit onto Blair Avenue. “It’s only nine o’clock. Let’s go have a screwdriver.” Detective Case exited off the freeway and pulled up to a small, red-brick building. It was basically in the middle of nowhere. He swerved onto a tiny parking lot and parked in a spot far from the building. He killed the engine, stepped out, and glanced across a row of pink letters, illuminated above the door. They read “Richie’s” in an old-fashioned, cursive handwriting style. It was his favorite hangout. Case patted his door shut and dropped his keys in his pocket. Then, he strode up to the door and breezed through like he owned the place.

Stale cigarette foulness, clinking of glasses behind laughter, and old rock music hijacked his senses as the door swung closed behind him. He grinned, looking around. The whole place glowed with red light that poured from lamps across the ceiling. Near the ceiling along the walls, there were different types of lighted signs, all denoting different brands of booze. Some were lit up red and blue; some were white; some were pink; and there was an occasional green and orange one here and there. As was typical at Richie’s, there were a couple of bikers shooting pool in the back, doubling up with their girlfriends for the night. One of the bikers was fat and bald. Rolls of chunkiness flapped out beneath a black t-shirt under a leather vest. The other was

skinny, a blue dew rag knotted atop his head. A crop of long, black hair cascaded around his rough, dark-eyed face. He had a black, handlebar mustache.

There was one person sitting at the bar. She was a younger girl in her mid-twenties. Her long, dyed-red hair swished down the back of her black fur coat as she fidgeted in her chair. Her coat had white fuzz with a black spots around the collar and wrists. She wore a pair of black gloves on her tiny hands. “*Probably a pro*,” Case whispered. Being in his mid-twenties himself, Case would ordinarily have no problem taking a girl like that out back and showing her who the *real* pro was. However, tonight he ignored her, twirling an engagement ring about the third finger of his left hand.

“Hey, Louie!” Richie yelled. “You wanna chot of bourbon tonight, eh?” Richie had a thick Latin accent which had a way of rearing its ugly head whenever he spoke.

“Your bourbon sucks, Richie,” Case replied as he wandered over and had a seat at the bar. “You know that. Hook me up with a screwdriver, like I always get.”

“You got it,” Richie replied. He turned and began making Case’s drink. Detective Case turned to his right, and his eyes met with the young lady he had spotted earlier. Apparently, she wasn’t having a very successful night. She had already scooted over and sat next to him.

“Hey there, dollface,” she remarked.

Detective Case grinned and greeted her with the kind words, “I’m a cop.” As her grin faded, he added, “engaged, too,” and showed her his wedding band.

“Oh,” she replied. “Well, when she dumps you, and when you get laid off, give me a holler, baby.” She dropped some cash on the bar and walked out.

“Who was THAT?” Case asked as Richie set his drink down.

“That was my wife, pinché,” Richie replied. Case made an “o” with his mouth. “I just

kidding, Case! Damn.”

Detective Case took a drink of his screwdriver. “How’s business?”

“You know, Case,” Richie began, “no matter how bad it is out there, it’s always booming in here.”

“I’ll bet,” Case replied as he took another sip of his screwdriver.

“You hear about that girl, Case?” Richie inquired. “I heard chee got her head chopped off.”

“Mm,” Case began, finishing another drink, “someone took it upon themselves to put a big, old hole in her pretty, little face.”

“Damn. Some cockroach gonna treat a girl like that. He uh pizza chit, man.”

Detective Case grinned. “He’s a murderer, alright.” He took another sip. “You know how many murderers I’ve put away?”

“Nah, how many?”

“A lot, Richie,” Detective Case assured him behind another sip. “A whole bunch.”

Chapter 2: “Stay Away”

With the door to Richie’s closed behind him, Detective Case adjusted his white coat, then paused to have a look at the sky. He took a moment to find the constellation Orion, and he noticed that the right shoulder was unusually red tonight. He thought about that for a moment. He remembered hearing somewhere that Betelgeuse was closer to the Earth than it had been in some number of years. Then, something else caught his eye, the planet Venus. It appeared brighter and bluer than usual, and he remembered that it *too* was closer to the earth than it had been in some time. Detective Case grinned, noting the two anomalies. According to certain studies, he knew that crime rates actually went up during such astrological events. It was a statistical fact.

He studied the heavens a bit more, then popped a cigarette in his mouth. No sooner had he done so, he jerked his head to the right at the sound of empty cans and bottles clanking by the side of the bar. He wandered over to investigate and quickly found himself surrounded by filthy, stinking dumpsters. They were the really ugly, off-green kind, bits of paint missing here and there where rust poked through. One of them had something highly offensive spray-painted on it. “Who’s *that*?” Detective Case demanded as he lit the cigarette hanging from his lips. After a couple of seconds, Captain Ford emerged from between two of the trash receptacles.

“What’re you doing?” Case inquired. “Spying on me?”

“It was a croquet mallet,” Ford replied.

Case took a drag of his cigarette and removed it from his mouth. “*Do what now?*” he asked, hoarsely.

“The murder weapon,” Captain Ford explained, “she was killed with a croquet mallet.”

“Hmm,” Case remarked as he exhaled smoke. “You know, that’s just what I was

thinking this morning when I was sitting on the pot. I was thinking that what we *really* need around here is a croquet mallet killer.” Case took another drag. “*Anything else?*”

“Not a thing,” Captain Ford responded. “Not a damn thing.”

“Well, you’re just not looking hard enough,” Case assured him. “Look harder.” Captain Ford stood silent for a moment. His receding white hair danced atop his head in a slight breeze.

“Stay away from this case, Case,” he warned. “Something’s bothering me about it.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “*I’ll* find something. Don’t worry about it.”

“Seriously,” Ford added. “Stay away from this one.”

Detective Case grinned. “Is that an order, Captain? You want me to take a vacation because ‘something’s bothering you’?”

Captain Ford was silent. “Trust me on this one.”

“Did you send any evidence to my desk, like I asked? Did you at least do that?”

“Gary’s got it all,” Captain Ford replied. “Get some sleep, Detective. You look like Hell.” Captain Ford turned and walked away. Case watched him wander all the way through the parking lot, plop down into his white, unmarked car, and start the engine.

“Maybe he’s right,” Case began as the Captain drove away. “Maybe I *should* leave this one alone.”

“*Why?*” a little voice asked in the back of his mind.

“Because,” he began. “The nature of this crime– It suggests someone...” He waved his hands out in front of him, searching for the proper words. “I mean there’s something...just not right about this one.” Case turned to his left as if someone was standing next to him. “You know what I mean?”

“*Yeah.*”

Case found his keys and walked to his car as he took another drag of his cigarette. “We’re going to go back to the station anyway,” he continued with a smirk, “just so we can have a look at some of that evidence.” Case fired up his engine, backed out of his space, and quickly skidded through the parking lot. Then, he merged back onto the freeway. “Something’s bothering me about it,” he remarked. “Something’s bothering me about it.” He popped some music in the player and cranked it up. Then, he flicked what was left of his cigarette out the window and had a sip from a whiskey flask he kept in his glove box. “That prick. He doesn’t think I can handle it? After all the people I’ve put away.”

As freeways go, Case’s hometown freeway was somewhat lonely during the night. The majority of the city’s working class were at home, tucked away in their warm, cozy beds. It was desolate. The freeway was comprised of ten empty lanes of pavement, painted up nice and pretty, waiting for somebody to drive on it. “Oh, there goes someone,” Detective Case remarked, pointing at an oncoming eighteen-wheeler. He looked around at some of the businesses that dotted the road here and there. Some of them were smaller, like the pawn shops and the antique stores. Some of them were larger, like an electronics store that spanned two blocks. The parking lot was like a town in and of itself. Perhaps the loneliest business he spotted along his journey was this tiny, little yellow brick store that sat at the end of Raulin Street. Case had no idea what it was. There wasn’t even a sign out front.

Case leaned over the steering wheel, craning his neck as he looked at the stars again. He shook his head, grinning at the size and brightness of both Venus and Betelgeuse. “Amazing,” he remarked. “I’m telling you, something really...strange is about to happen. Something...BIG.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” he imagined someone in the next seat saying

to him.

He turned to face the empty seat. “I’m serious! I’ve read about this kind of stuff. Something’s going on up there.”

“*Uh-huh...*” the voice trailed off. “*Whatever.*”

Chapter 3: "The Lead"

"What the hell are *you* doing here, Case?" Paul the attendant asked. He was sitting in a booth at the front gate of the police station parking garage. "I heard Ford gave you the night off."

"Shut-up, Paul," Case replied with a smirk. He slid a card through a keypad next to his driver's side door. A red and white striped post arose in front of him. He drove through, screeching to a halt at the first empty parking spot he could find. He killed his car and strode into the police station through a door near the entrance of the parking garage. Gary sat at his desk in the main office, facing the entrance. He was examining a picture of tonight's guest of honor, Francine Carlina. He studied the enormous hole in her face before placing the picture into an evidence envelope. He interlocked his fingers above his head and stretched his arms as he yawned. "What are *you* doing here?" he muttered as Case walked in. Case had a seat next to him at his own desk.

"What am *I* doing here?" Case asked. "It's after five. What are *you* doing here?"

"Your job," Gary replied.

"Well, isn't that sweet of you," Case responded. "Are you going to hand me that evidence bag, or what?"

"Dammit, Case. Go home."

"At least tell me there's some prints."

"All the victim's," Gary told him.

"Hairs or fibers?" Case inquired.

"All the victim's," Gary responded.

"Footprints?"

“Yes.”

“Really?” Case asked with an interested look.

“Of course they all belonged the *victim*,” Gary replied.

Case pounded his fist against the top of his desk. “Gary, give me something.”

“Go sleep it off, Detective Case.”

“Did you find the murder weapon?” Case asked.

“No,” Gary replied. “We only know it was a croquet mallet.”

“There, you see? Now, how do you *know* that if you don’t even have the croquet mallet with you?”

“Splinters,” Gary explained. “We ran an analysis on some splinters we retrieved from her face.”

“Well, that’s a hell of a hole for just being a croquet mallet.”

“Maybe this guy’s a body builder,” Gary replied with a smile.

“Maybe,” Case replied. “Or, maybe he used something to swing it. Like a machine or something.”

“A croquet mallet swinger,” Gary replied. “Of course!” He stretched his arms over his head with another yawn. “*We got...no...leads...*”

“*Yes*, we do,” Case responded.

“What?” Gary inquired in disbelief. “How do you figure?”

“We’ve got time of death at least. She has a college ID.”

Gary stared at him. “How’s that time of death?”

“We can figure out what time she got out of class yesterday and go from there, right?”

Case pointed out. “We might even figure out a suspect or two while we’re at it.”

“One of the classmates, huh? Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because that’s logic, forensics boy,” Case remarked, sarcastically. He stood to leave.

“Why don’t you stick with what you know...like examining splinters.” Gary smirked, bobbing his head up at him as he wandered out of the office and back into the parking garage. Another trip down the lonely freeway later, and Case was closing the front door to his apartment. He skidded past the kitchen and down a white-tiled hallway to find his fiancée sitting on a blue sofa in the living room. As usual, she had on an interesting outfit. It consisted of a long-sleeved, white dress shirt and a black skirt with white polka dots. Her curly brown hair swept down past her shoulders. “Gina,” Case remarked as he tore off his white jacket and hung it over the arm of the sofa. “What’re *you* doing still up?”

“I’ve got a test tomorrow,” Gina replied. “I’ve got to study.”

“Oh yeah?” Case inquired. “What class?”

“Psychology,” Gina told him.

Detective Case looked around. “I don’t see no *books*.”

“Yeah, I’m probably going to fail,” she remarked. She smiled at him, drumming her bare feet on the blue carpet.

“Well...you need to get to work then, huh?” Case asked with a sly smirk. He walked to a table at the other side of the sofa, picked up a bottle of scotch, and poured himself a glass.

“Oh, Lou...” Gina moaned. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just taking a break.”

“Well, you just take so many breaks, you know?”

“And where’ve YOU been?”

“Oh, yeah,” Case replied, “a girl was killed tonight...college girl. I guess we’ll both be going to school tomorrow.”

“Oh, how romantic,” Gina remarked. “You think it was one of the students?”

“The killer?” Case asked as he took a drink. “Who else? Maybe *you* knew the victim. Her name was Francine Carlina.”

“Fran?” Gina inquired. “Fran’s dead?”

“You *did* know her, huh? She a friend of yours?”

Gina paused. “Well, no. We didn’t really know each other. She was in a couple of my classes, though. She was so young and...and pretty. Who would do such a thing?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” Case took another sip of his scotch, then headed for the hallway. “I’m going to bed, honey.”

“Hey, don’t forget—”

“*Wedding rehearsal!*” Case called from the stairs. It was a town house apartment. “*Day after tomorrow!*”

“Damn, right!” Gina yelled back. “Don’t you FORGET!”

Chapter 4: “Hangover”

“*Oh, God...*” Case moaned as he slapped a shrieking alarm beside his bed a few times.

“Tell me it’s not the morning, yet”

“Are you still in bed?” Gina called from the restroom. “Get your ass up! You’ve got to go to work, honey.”

“Bah!” Case shrieked.

Gina wandered over and stood beside the bed. “You were going to go up to the school with me today, remember?”

Case threw his hands over a pair of ringing ears. “Ah, shut the hell up!” he screamed back. Gina smacked him over the head with her hairbrush. “Ow!”

“Don’t tell me to shut-up,” she remarked. “Can I get you something?”

“Aspirin,” Case begged, rolling onto his side to face her. “Get me an aspirin, babe.” As Gina walked downstairs, Case flipped onto his back and sat up. It felt like the whole room moved with him. He rubbed his eyes as a sharp pain pierced his forehead. Then, he hopped out of bed, dashed into the restroom, and threw up last night’s shame into the porcelain savior. It wasn’t from the stomach. It was one of those horrifying, spasmodic wretches from the bowel. He finished that unfortunate business, then collapsed on the bathroom floor.

“Here,” Gina called from the doorway. “I got some of those tablets that bubble when you put them in water. That okay?” Case opened his eyes. He was staring at Gina’s feet. She had one set of toenails painted red, and the others were painted black. He lifted his dizzy head off the white tile floor and held out his hand.

“Yeah, let’s have it,” he remarked. Gina handed him a glass, and Case sucked it down.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked. “You don’t look so good.” Case squinted,

staring up at her as he handed the glass back to her. She was wearing a red dress with black polka dots today. There was a black band around the middle that held it tight against her waist.

“I’m fine,” Case replied before clearing his throat. “Everything’s fine.”

“You got anything to say for yourself?”

“Yeah, give me a beer,” Case replied. Gina took his hand and helped him to his feet.

“Get in the damn shower,” she ordered. “Now! You’re going to make me late.”

Case tore off his shirt and tossed it over her head. “Hurry up and get me some clothes while you’re not doing anything.” He smiled, turning and flicking on the shower real quick so he didn’t have to listen to her response.

Lightning tore through the sky followed directly by a shattering crackle of thunder just as Detective Case and Gina arrived at the university. It was one of those dark and eerie mornings. The moment Detective Case exited the vehicle, he was greeted with a nice, cold shower. It was just too perfect. It just made the headache and stomachache that much worse. He tilted his heavy head back and looked at the sky. It was filled with black clouds, menacing and hideous. “*It’s going to be one of those days,*” he whispered before giving his eyes a bit of a rub. He leaned back into the car. “Good luck with your test, honey,” he remarked.

“Thanks, pookie,” Gina replied with a kiss on the lips. He re-emerged from the vehicle and slammed the door shut. He looked around at all the buildings. There appeared to be thousands of them, all constructed with different colors of bricks. He had no idea where the hell he was even going. He shrugged and ran up to the one directly in front of him, assuming that *it* must be the main building.

As soon as Detective Case was inside, he knew he’d made a mistake doing all that running. He clutched his forehead in dismay and belched a few obscenities. After a long

moment, his head stopped throbbing, and he took a moment to try and get his bearings. He was standing at the beginning of a long hallway that seemed to stretch for miles in front of him. He slowly looked down the wall on the right, arriving at a single door at the other end. Then, he slowly looked from the end of the left wall all the way back to where he was standing. There were well over a thousand doors he figured, each with a different sign that might as well be written in another language because none of them seemed to tell him anything.

“Office of the Registrar,” Case whispered looking at one sign. *“Department of Accounting,”* he continued, his eyes glazing over yet another. *“Career Services...”* he moaned. He threw his hands out at his sides. “Where’s the office?” He crossed his arms over his chest as he tried to gather up his erratic thoughts. The door smashed open behind him, and a rather large lady stepped through. Case just about jumped through the ceiling at her sudden appearance. She was tugging a suitcase behind her that rolled on wheels.

“Uh, ma’am?” Detective Case inquired.

She looked at Detective Case rather inquisitively. “Yes?”

“I don’t suppose you could tell me where the main office is.”

“Well, what do you *need*, sir?” she asked, a bit of impatience in her voice.

Detective Case thought for a moment and realized that Gina might still be walking through the parking lot. *“Maybe you could catch her,”* he thought. “Never mind,” he replied. “Sorry to trouble you.” He crashed through the double doors, through the rain, and back to the car. Naturally, Gina was nowhere to be found. He had no idea what room she was in or what building. He curled his finger over his top lip, pondering that quandary for a moment. He turned to the school once again. “This can’t be that HARD,” he remarked, wandering to the back of the car and unlocking the trunk. “I mean...people do this every day, right?” He shuffled through a

few things in the trunk before coming up with a black umbrella, which he promptly unfolded and flung open over his head. He slammed the trunk closed and fetched a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. As he placed a cigarette in his mouth and put the rest back up, he dared to gaze upon the labyrinth of buildings once more. Still studying it, he pulled out a lighter and fired up his coffin nail. He began to feel dizzy and nauseous.

“My head is killing me,” he remarked. “Maybe I should just take the day off. You know...stay AWAY from this case, like the captain said.”

“*Don’t be a wuss,*” a little voice inside his head told him. “*We can find the office... surely.*” Detective Case had a long, drawn out drag of his cigarette. He looked the buildings over, attempting to make sense of what he was looking at.

“Let me finish this here smoke,” he remarked. “Then, we’ll move out.” After a couple of drags however, Case’s stomach began to churn once again. That little foaming glass was threatening to come up. He held up his smoke, looked it over with a pair of irritated eyes, and tossed it aside. Then, he hurried back towards the buildings. He stopped the first person he ran into along the way.

“Excuse me, miss. Where’s the restroom?” he inquired.

She had a narrow-eyed look at him before turning to go inside. “Follow me,” she replied. She handed the door off to Case, and he followed her inside. This was a different building than the one before. As soon as they walked through the door, she pointed to the first door on their right. “There you go,” she remarked with a smile.

“Thank you,” Case almost screamed. Once through the door he made his way through the first door on the left and found himself in a restroom. He barely made it through the first stall before vomit erupted from his mouth. His first wretch made it into the pot all the way from

the stall door; it was epic. He managed to kneel down in front of the toilet before the second bit of it came up. It dribbled out, splashing a little water onto his face. The door swung shut behind him. Case leaned against the door and grabbed a nice, long breath. “*Son of a bitch!*” he gasped, clutching a cramping abdomen. He lay there for a minute or two before retrieving his umbrella from the floor and hobbling back to his feet to flush the john. It wasn’t until he emerged from the stall that he discovered his careless mistake. There were two girls standing by the door. They had their hands cupped over their mouths as they giggled at him uncontrollably.

Detective Case shrugged, smiling back. He twirled his umbrella around his finger by the hook, staring back. “Ladies...” They laughed as they turned and headed through the door. Once the door shut behind them, Case looked at the wall by the sink and noticed a tampon dispenser. He pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head as he exited the restroom. He looked towards the end of the hallway. There was a water fountain on the wall next to him and a men’s restroom at the other end. He turned to his right, making his way through the first door and finding himself in the main building again. He looked around. This time he found something a bit more familiar, classrooms. The hallway was filled with students, all grouped together in a cluster of confusion as they made their way to their various classes. “*Yeah,*” Detective Case mumbled, shaking his pointer finger. “*THAT’S more like it.*” Detective Case turned to the first student that walked through the door.

“Where’s the office?” he demanded.

He shrugged. “You mean the Registrar’s office?”

“Uh...” Case began. “Where would I go to get a schedule printed out?” He got nothing but a puzzled look from the kid.

“You can do that on the Internet,” he told him.

“Yeah– I’m needing a copy of somebody *else’s* schedule; you know? Where would I get that from?”

There was a pause. “Well, I don’t know. I always printed *mine* off the Internet. I never went to the office before.”

Detective Case’s head began to hurt. “Do you know Gina Keller?”

He narrowed his eyes, looking around the crowd. “Yeah, there she is over there,” he replied, pointing her out. Case turned and spotted her. She was up against a tan brick wall with one of the girls from the restroom earlier.

“Hey thanks, buddy,” Case remarked, patting him on the shoulder. He hurried over to his fiancée as fast as he could. He didn’t want to lose her again.

“Lou?” Gina inquired as he approached her. “What’re you doing? Did you get your schedule or whatever?”

“Uh...” Case trailed off.

“Hey, that’s HIM!” the girl standing beside her remarked, pointing at him. Case smirked, glaring at her through a pair of narrow eyes. *She* looked like an interesting person. She had chin-length, black hair and brown eyes. She wore a green blazer, a pair of blue jeans, and a pair of black flats.

“This is the GUY?” Gina asked with a smile.

“Yep,” she replied.

“Ha-ha,” Case sarcastically remarked, and he turned back to Gina. “Honey, do you have any idea where I need to go? Where’s the office?”

Gina thought for a moment. “You mean the Registrar’s office?” she asked.

“You see? I don’t know what that is,” Case replied. “You know where it is, right? *Take*

me there.”

“Honey?” the girl inquired. “You two married?”

“Engaged,” Gina explained.

“Holy crap, you’re ENGAGED to this guy?”

“Who *are* you?” Case demanded.

“This is my friend, Tiffany,” Gina replied.

“Tiffany,” he repeated. “Do YOU know where the office is?” Tiffany shook her head.

“He’s a detective,” Gina explained. “He’s looking into Fran’s death.”

“Fran?” Tiffany inquired. “That skank BITCH?”

Case smirked. “I take it you knew her.”

“Yeah, I knew her,” she told him. “Found her fucking my boyfriend in the bathroom over there.” She pointed a thumb at the bathroom down the hall. “Sure am glad she’s dead,” she finished up with a nice smile.

“Okay…” Case trailed off. “I want to talk to *you*, for sure. You and this boyfriend of yours.”

“Wait, I’m not a suspect, am I?” she asked.

Case shrugged. “I didn’t accuse you of *anything*. Just want to have a chat…when you get the time.”

“Well, question us separately,” Tiffany warned him. “Because I might end up *killing* him if you get us together.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “He’s a real DICK!”

“Alright then, Tiffany,” Gina remarked, shoving her along. “Why don’t we get to class, hmm? Take that test?”

Tiffany flashed a crooked smile at him as Gina pushed her on by. “Nice meeting you,

Detective Casey.” she remarked.

“Tell him you’re gonna kill him!” he heard Gina shout as they disappeared into one of the classrooms. Detective Case chuckled as he turned to walk away, but then he realized that he still had no idea where he was going. He stumbled down the hall a bit more in his half-drunken stupor and ran into the large lady from before.

“YOU again!” she shouted.

With a grin, Detective Case retrieved his billfold from his coat pocket and showed her his badge. “I should’ve just done this from the start,” he told her. “I’m a little sick...not thinking so straight.” He cleared his throat. “I need a copy of a student’s schedule so I can ask her classmates a few questions.”

“Not that Francine girl?” the lady asked him.

“Yes,” Detective Case replied. “The one that was murdered last night.”

“Oh, dear,” she continued, “I thought that was just so terrible when I heard about it a while ago. Well, if you need a student’s schedule, you’ll need to go to the Registrar’s office.”

“Figures,” Detective Case replied. “That was the other building, right?”

“Yes, sir,” the lady answered. “You can’t miss it. It’s the door that says ‘Office of the Registrar’.”

“Thank you,” Detective Case remarked with a pat on her shoulder. “Miss...”

“Dr. Swan,” she replied. “I teach Psychology over here.”

“Oh, are you about to give a test right now?”

“Yes,” she replied. “How did you know?”

“I’m engaged to Gina Keller,” he explained.

“Oh, that pretty, young lady,” Dr. Swan replied. “She is so smart. She’s always the first

one with her hand up any time I ask a question.”

“Yep, that’s Gina,” Case replied.

Dr. Swan smiled. “Well, I’m going to go try to stump them all now. Nice meeting you, Detective...Case, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. He turned and made his way back down the hall for another smoke. Once outside he flicked his umbrella open and wandered to the car. He turned to face the university again. He stared at it through sheets of rain as lightning crackled overhead. He whipped out his cigarettes, popped another one in his mouth, and fired it up as he sized up his enemy one more time. It didn’t look so intimidating now that he understood things a little better. There weren’t a *thousand* buildings. There were maybe twenty or so. “Let’s get this schedule and get the hell out of here,” he remarked.

A few minutes later, he made his way into the first building. This time, there didn’t seem to be so many doors, either. Nothing seemed as confusing anymore. The hangover was letting up, it seemed. He glanced up the right wall of the hallway and found the Registrar’s office, but something else caught his eye on the left...marbles. There was a pile of marbles on the floor in front of one of the doors. “Hmm,” he muttered, looking at the door. It said “Janitor” on it. He looked to the right of the janitor door and noticed that there were two lunch tables lined up against the wall. There was also a painter’s stepladder standing to the right of the tables with a full can of paint sitting on top. Detective Case looked above the tables and noticed a shelf hung on the wall with a single sports trophy on the left side.

Out of curiosity he walked up to the door and tried the knob, which turned right over. However, when he tried to push the door open, it would hardly budge. Something heavy was in front of it. Case drew his police-issue pistol after thinking about it for a moment. He knew what

that soft, heavy something was...a body. He backed up and smashed the door open with his shoulder. The body was that of the janitor. Case watched as the body lurched forward and listened as a bunch of bowling balls began rolling around the floor and smashing into the walls. He noticed a barstool sitting in the middle of the closet, cemented to the floor with some kind of epoxy. Detective Case stared at the janitor and got a good look at his face; it was smashed to pieces.

Once again he felt it, that overwhelming urge to throw up. He spun around and dashed through the doorway. It was only when his feet began sliding out from underneath him that he remembered the pile of marbles at the foot of the door. "Shit!" he cried as his gun slipped out of his flailing hands and crashed to the ground. He slipped to his left and crashed into the first table; the first table crashed into the second table; the second table fell to the ground and smashed into the stepladder; the stepladder spun upwards, tossing the can of paint through the air; the can of paint smacked the right side of the shelf; and finally, the trophy fell off the end of the shelf. Lying on the floor in pain, Case looked up with a horrified gaze, as the trophy came tumbling down and landed right between his eyes.

Chapter 5: "A Dream"

Detective Case drove down a long and winding road. He was moving at a high rate of speed as if he was driving a car, but looking down, he discovered that he was actually driving some kind of go-cart. It seemed odd; he didn't feel any wind blowing past his face. Case looked to his right, taking notice of a guardrail that ran beside him at the edge of the road, and he realized that he was driving down a mountain. He began to think of mountains and suddenly thought of volcanoes. No sooner than that dreadful thought had entered his mind, there was a loud explosion. He looked towards the top of the mountain and discovered that it was now smoking like Mount Saint Helens. He was driving down a volcano, which had just begun to erupt!

As if that wasn't enough, he faced forward and realized that he was about to collide head-on with a semi-trailer truck. Case tried to scream and turn the wheel, but he was unable to do either. He was paralyzed and powerless. As fear and despair set in, he slammed into the grill of the truck, sending him flying through the air. He soared higher and higher, gaining velocity rather than losing it. He eventually found himself in the brilliant, blue sky. He began to drift along more easily as opposed to roaring through the air like a cannonball. He was gradually joined by bits of puffy, white clouds here and there. He felt at ease as he floated further and further into the gentle, soothing setting. The further he drifted, the larger the clouds became. With time, the mountains of gathering clouds began to darken as well. They also began to pick up in speed as they increased in ferocity, pouring in from all sides. Before long they were pitch black. Lightning and thunder crackled and twisted through the air around him. He now felt as if he were *flying* through the air rather than floating. It began to make him feel sick and uncomfortable.

He dropped from the sky and was instantly battered with sheets of rain and hailstones of biblical proportions. Detective Case tried to scream, but he was too terrified. Inevitably, he smashed into the ground. Rather than being utterly pulverized though, every bone in his body shattering to pieces, Case instead began to plow through the earth's crust. He simply began to surge into it, sinking deeper and deeper into the jagged ground, soaring faster and faster. At first everything was dark, but then everything began to brighten up. The glow was a brilliant hue of orange. He realized at once that he was heading straight into the bowels of Hell. Case smacked face-first into a hot, sandy surface, where he lay for a good while, recovering from the pain.

After a long, drawn-out moment, Detective Case's head lifted off the ground. Sharp particles of glassy, hot sand were stuck to his sweaty face. He opened his eyes, and a circle of flames erupted from the sand and surrounded him. He watched them rise higher and higher, eventually reaching far higher than his eyes could see. Just as quickly as they had arrived, they vanished. Case looked around. He was not alone. Everywhere his sights dared to gaze were the occupants of Hell. He stood and watched as two lesbians shared a double-ended dildo between blood-drenched ass-holes. One of them glared at Detective Case through a pair of narrowed, green eyes. They literally glowed with ecstasy.

"*Ass to ass, baby...*" she moaned. Case looked to his left and watched as a group of gangsters beat a helpless young girl to the ground with baseball bats. They finished that up, then ran a train on her.

"Gonna KILL you, bitch!" one of them yelled.

"She already dead, dawg," another remarked. "*We all* dead!"

A rather peculiar group of girls caught his attention next. They appeared to be a bunch of giggling psychos. He shook his head as they chased down a geeky looking guy with glasses.

They wrestled him to the ground, tore his clothes off, and slashed him to ribbons with box cutters. Case cringed at his horrifying, blood-curdling screaming. It was the most awful racket he had ever heard. They finished, then hopped up and ran away. Case decided to have a closer look. He crept up to the poor guy, his eyes darting around as he skidded closer and closer across the sandy ground. The little psycho girls had really done a number on him. His nose and both ears had been sliced off; his eyes were both gouged out; his chest was littered with bloody lacerations; his bowels were hanging out; his fingers were all cut off; and his genitals had been slashed off and tossed onto the ground beside him.

After a moment though, things got a little more interesting. He wasn't sure if he was seeing things right at first, but after a couple of minutes, he was certain of it. The missing body parts had nearly re-materialized, and the kid was beginning to stir back to life. "*So, I guess that's how it works down here,*" Case whispered to himself. "*Eternal suffering.*" No sooner had those two words hopped from his lips, the geeky guy's head twisted to the side. He glared at Case with a pair of eyes, wide as saucers. Case could *feel* his gaze. It was as if he were looking upon his soul.

"PRETTY boy!" he squealed in a high-pitched, nerdy voice. He pinched his eyes shut and sniffed the air. "Smells like fresh meat!" Detective Case patted his coat for his gun, but he did not have it. The nerdy guy shrieked with irritating laughter as he hopped to his feet. He began to creep towards him, a sadistic grin twisting across his pimple-coated face, eyes the size of dinner plates behind a pair of cracked lenses set in thick, black frames. "Ever had your fudge packed?" he asked. "A little *old* for me, but I think I can make this work." Case backed away and became entangled in an eager set of arms. It was one of the psycho girls from before.

"He's ours, NERDY BOY!" she screamed.

“Get bent, Poindexter!” another one screamed, holding a bloody box cutter to Case’s throat.

“No...” Case squeaked.

“*What is this before me?*” a voice bellowed, deep within the catacombs that surrounded them. Case was instantly freed from the girls and the nerdy kid. Everyone except for him went limp, floated into the air, and suddenly flew away. “*Aaaaaaaah...*” the voice eagerly groaned. “*Detective Louis Case.*” Wherever the voice was coming from, it surged with energetic vigor, emanating from every corner of Hell. It rumbled through mile-high stalagmites and shook jagged, rocky walls. Case had a feeling he *knew* who’s voice that was. He was about to meet the devil himself. “*I’ve awaited this moment for SOME time now. It looks to be...twenty-six years.*”

Case swallowed hard, and that’s when he smashed up through the sandy ground. It was official; Satan had arrived on the scene. He was enormous, nearly three times the size of a mere human being. Case’s eyes bulged out of their sockets as he stared into his paralyzing face, the face of a goat. His face bled constantly, soaked and wet. Warm crimson poured from its entirety, eternally. Case had difficulty fathoming it. The hideous goat head bled and bled and bled. It *never* stopped. A horn stuck straight up out of either side of his face, jagged and twisting, also leaking blood incessantly. Lucifer smirked as he stretched out a mile-long arm and jabbed a ragged index finger between Detective Case’s eyes. “*You now belong to me!*” he shrieked, flames firing from his bleeding nostrils as he spoke.

“This is a mistake!” Case screamed back. “I-I don’t belong here.”

“*Bwah! Ha! Ha!*” the devil chuckled. “*But, of course you do. You belong HERE...with us! Six hundred and sixty-six feet underground. You belong in Hell, sinner. Welcome to my domain.*”

With those kind words, the box cutter was at Detective Case's throat again. "Gotcha!" the girl who'd grabbed him up before screeched in his ear.

"No..." Case moaned. He felt his flesh being sliced and peeled away, layer by agonizing layer by several box cutters all at once. The little psycho girls were giving him the same treatment they had given the nerdy guy moments earlier. The pain was beyond unbearable. It was...Hellish, for lack of a better term. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't move. Completely paralyzed and unable to fight back, Case began to submit to the pain, slowly crumbling to the ground, burning with clean, metallic slices and dripping with thick, warm blood. His eyes darted about, taking in snapshots of his terrifying, flame-kissed surroundings. Orgasms, bloody beat downs, peeled flesh, shattered bones, chattering teeth, pulsating entrails, and blackness filled the sticky, humid air and consumed his soul. Detective Case could feel the black as it poured inside of him, filling his heart and poisoning his mind.

His eyes popped wide open, staring up at a gigantic, ghost image of his fiancée, Gina. It was cast overhead as if on an invisible projection screen. She was joined by her friend Tiffany. The two of them stared down at Case through pairs of glowing, yellow eyes. Their eyelids were made up with heavy, black eye shadow, which tore down their faces in long, black streaks. Case focused on their ruby lips as they thinned out and twisted into evil grins. Blood leaked from their gums and teeth, dripping down their chins. They dropped their jaws and unrolled forked tongues, which crept towards one another and became tied together. As their tongues weaved together, Gina and Tiffany shared a sinister, forked-tongue kiss.

Gina and Tiffany tore away from each other, glaring down at Case through bright, yellow eyes once again. "*What's wrong, sweetie?*" Gina requisitioned in a condescending tone through blinding box cutter pain. She and Tiffany belched evil laughs. Their bare tits pressed against

one another and began to bleed. From the blood appeared a gash, which ran around both sets of knockers, eventually spreading open and revealing sets of floppy, pointed teeth. Their tits were now Venus flytraps. They too unrolled forked tongues. Then, both of their honkers opened up wide and shrieked with high-pitched squeals like tea kettles.

“SHE fucked my boyfriend, too!” Tiffany screamed, patting Gina on her bare back.

“Bwaaaaaa!” Case screamed. He began to squirm and managed to snag a couple of handfuls of hair. He twisted his fingers through and pulled the carotene strands tight. Two of the girls stopped slicing him, screaming in pain, and Detective Case managed to snatch up one of their box cutters. He sat up and sliced at the rest of the girls’ faces, prompting them to jump away. Case scrambled to his feet. He began tossing the box cutter from one hand to the other with wide eyes and a bloody face.

“Alright, bitches!” he screamed. “Which one of you gets it next? Come here, I’m gonna cut your gizzards out!” One of the girl’s faces lit up with sinister excitement. She raced towards him, screaming as she slashed her box cutter from side-to-side. Case managed to get a hold of her wrist. He swept her legs from under her before slashing her throat a few times. Warm, bright red blood splashed him on his healing face.

“Like that, you slut?” Detective Case inquired. He glanced at the others. “Alright, who’s *next?*” He tossed the box cutter from one hand to the other, staring at them, wandering with his blazing eyes from face to face to face. This time, *two* of the psycho girls dashed towards him, box cutters drawn. Case kicked the one on his right in the stomach as he clothes-lined the one on his left. After they had fallen to the ground, Case leaned over and grabbed the one on his right by the hair. He lifted her off the ground and began swinging her around over his head. The one on the left made it back to her feet and was kicked in the face by the one that Case was hurling

through the air. She fell on her back, her head smashing into the one with the slashed throat's head. At that Case let go of the girl's hair. She flew twenty feet through the air and collided with the other two girls. All three of them fell to the ground in a heap.

Case looked down and realized that the girl whose throat he had slashed was beginning to stand. Her wounds had already healed. He kicked her in the face, sending her flopping onto her back again. Then, he took it upon himself to stomp her brains out. He did not stop until her face was squishy and unsatisfying. Detective Case raised his fists at his sides, glaring into the blackness above. "I need a beer!" he exclaimed. "Anybody got a beer?!" Suddenly, he was smashed over the head from behind with some kind of pipe. Pain screamed down his tingling spine, and he fell to his knees. He breathed heavily through his nose, then soared to his feet as quickly as he could recover. He spun around to face his attacker. This time, he found himself face-to-face with the janitor he'd found in the closet earlier.

"You...desecrated my body," he remarked.

Case just stood there. "Desecrated? Why would you use that word... 'desecrated'? That's no word for a janitor to be using."

The janitor held the pipe at the right side of his smashed-up face. "Because I'm not really a janitor," he replied. He dropped the pipe on the ground. "I'm a doctor."

Case tossed his box cutter aside and curled his index finger over his top lip as he thought. "Dr. Lebowitz," he concluded, with a snap of his fingers.

"Yes, Louis," Dr. Lebowitz replied with a kind smile. "I was your doctor when you broke your leg that time."

Case turned to his right, struggling to pull the doctor's face out of his exhausted brain. "I remember. I was nine, and I fell out of my tree house." Detective Case turned back to Dr.

Lebowitz. His face was no longer smashed up. “*That’s* it,” Case remarked. “I thought I recognized you. But, wait a minute. What are you doing cleaning college campus toilets?”

“Lost my license,” Dr. Lebowitz explained. “I was, uh— I got caught stealing some morphine.” Dr. Lebowitz turned away, rubbing the back of his black hair-covered head.

Detective Case looked behind him and realized that he was standing inches from a curb on a long and winding road. He remembered being somewhere else only a moment ago, but he couldn’t quite recall where that was. He shrugged and had a seat on the curb.

“Yeah, I remember reading about that a few years back, now that you mention it.” He plucked his pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket, popped one in his mouth, and sparked it up. “Don’t give me none of your cancer bullshit, doc,” he warned.

Dr. Lebowitz smiled. “Your drinking will kill you first,” he told him.

Detective Case looked up, exhaling smoke through his nostrils. “How did you...”

Chapter 6: "Told You So"

"Bah!" Detective Case bellowed as he sat up. "What the f..." He looked around, realizing he was in a hospital bed. He was joined by a few familiar faces: Gina, Gary the forensics guy, Sergeant Paloni, and Captain Ford, naturally. Even Gina's friend Tiffany had managed to make it in to see him. "Jesus!" Case blasted as he laid back down. "It was...just a dream. My *God!*"

"Shut-up, Case," Captain Ford ordered.

"I know, I know," Case replied. "You told me to leave the case alone, and I didn't. You're a tad infuriated, I suppose. A bit angry, perhaps."

"I'm PISSED!" Ford assured him.

"And you have every right to be," Case agreed. "You know, I've been thinking. Maybe I should just go ahead and take a vacation. You know...take a couple of weeks...clear my head."

"You're fired," Ford told him.

"What?!" Case demanded. "You've got to be kidding me! After everything I've done for this damn department?" Captain Ford chuckled, and Case sat up in bed, crossing his arms across his chest. He looked down and noticed for the first time that he was in a white hospital gown with blue polka dots. "You are an EVIL man," Case remarked. "Very evil, indeed."

"You're not fired," Ford told him. "But I *am* giving you a direct order right this minute. I want you to stop your drinking, immediately."

"Dammit, Cap! I didn't drink this morning."

"You did last night," Captain Ford replied.

Case narrowed his eyes and looked across the room at him. "I was off-duty, sir."

“That’s exactly what you are as of now,” Captain Ford told him. He pointed a thumb at Paloni. “Sergeant Paloni will be handling the R.G.K. case. You’re primary objective, as of right now, is to get off the sauce. I don’t care HOW you do it. Just do it.”

A puzzled look washed over Detective Case’s face. “ ‘R.G.K.’?” he repeated “The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Captain Ford turned to Sergeant Paloni for an explanation. “We found the initials R-G-K written in blood on the back of the janitor’s door,” he clarified. “We would assume it had something to do with the Carlina murder last night, but we didn’t find any initials *there*.”

Case turned back to the captain. “You don’t think they’re related?”

“Coincidence, looks like,” Paloni replied.

Case placed his face in his hands, shook his head, and looked up again. “Well, who’s got the Carlina thing, then?”

Paloni turned to Captain Ford. “Well, I...”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ford interrupted. “YOU’RE off-duty, remember?”

“Oh come on, Cap,” Case returned. “You can’t even tell me who’s got the Carlina case?”

Captain Ford flashed a very condescending smile at him. “I only give out that information to ON-duty cops,” he told him. “My sincerest apologies. Sober up.” Captain Ford stood to leave. Sergeant Paloni and Gary followed suit.

“Captain!” Detective Case shouted after them.

Captain Ford stepped aside as Paloni and Gary exited the hospital room, then closed the door behind them. “Case?”

“You don’t think they’re related? Seriously?”

Ford looked him in the eyes. “I think you know the answer to that question, Detective

Case.”

Case’s expression went flat as he bobbed his head up at him. “And, you know what *I* think.”

“I know you damn well,” Ford replied. “So, sober up.” Captain Ford turned to Gina and Tiffany. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

“Afternoon, Captain Ford,” Gina remarked. Ford was a bit puzzled by a salute from her friend Tiffany, but he stepped through the door and closed it behind him without any further comment. Case collapsed against his hospital bed, forearm thrown over his face. After a moment to sort things out, he popped back up, hands out at his sides.

“And, what are *you* doing here?” he demanded.

Tiffany smiled. “You wanted to talk to me, right?”

“You heard Captain Dick-head,” he replied, pointing towards the door. “I’m off-duty.”

“So?” Tiffany demanded.

“So,” Case began, “if the captain finds out...”

“He doesn’t even know who I *am*,” she explained. “None of them do. All they know is that I’m Gina’s friend. No one but you has tried to question me.” Detective Case grinned. He faced forward and curled his index finger over his top lip. Then, he turned back to Gina and Tiffany.

“Hey, did they happen to get a copy of Fran’s schedule? I never *did* make it to the Registrar’s office.”

Gina reached into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. “You mean *this* schedule?” she asked. Case snatched the schedule from her with a quick kiss on the lips.

“I KNEW I proposed to you for a reason.” He turned to Tiffany. “What about your

boyfriend?”

“EX!” she screamed. “Ex! Ex! Ex!” She stomped her foot on the tile floor with each declaration.

“Oh-kay...” Case remarked, turning away with a pair of widened eyes. “Right, how rude of me.”

“Yeah, I called the bastard,” Tiffany continued. “He’s supposed to meet us tonight for dinner.” She turned to Gina. “I *still* think this is a stupid idea. I HATE that cocksucker!”

Case turned to her with a puzzled face. “Are you going to kill him?” he asked in hesitation. She had threatened to earlier, after all. Tiffany’s face twisted up with an evil grin. It was the same fiendish grin she had shot him at the college that morning as Gina had dragged her away to class.

“May-be...” she told him. She held her hands in front of her, tapping the tips of her fingers together. “You know what? Let’s don’t question him at all.” She dropped her hands at her sides and leaned in. “Let’s BEAT it out of him!”

“Honey, you hungry?” Gina asked, changing the subject.

Case looked down and placed his hand on his stomach. “Well, yeah,” he replied. “I guess I finally sobered up a little.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Gina asked. “You’ve got a concussion.”

Detective Case put his hand to his temple and realized that his head was wrapped with a bandage. “Awe, crap,” he remarked. “I’ve got to be more careful. And...what’s with all this R.G.K. stuff? I didn’t see no ‘R.G.K.’ at the *first* crime scene.”

“What were you dreaming about, Lou?” Gina interrupted.

“Huh?”

Gina leaned towards him. “When you woke up before, you said you were dreaming.”

Case looked forward and smacked his palm against his forehead, remembering Dr. Lebowitz. “Oh, yeah!”

“What?” Gina asked.

He turned to his fiancée. “Dr. Lebowitz,” he remarked.

“Huh?” Case’s eyes lit up with excitement. He shook his pointer fingers through the air.

“The janitor! He’s really a doctor.”

“A doctor?” Tiffany questioned.

“He’s a doctor, Tiffany!” Case threw his hospital blankets onto the floor. “Where’s my clothes?” he demanded.

“Lou!” Gina spat. “Get your ass back in that bed.”

Case looked at Gina with a half-puzzled, half-smiling face. “What is that like... flashback humor?”

“What?” she asked. “Flashback humor?”

Case tried his best to explain. “Well, *you* know— This morning you were telling me to get *out* of bed, and now...” He stopped, waving his thoughts away. “Never mind. Let’s get out of here.” Tiffany cupped her hand over her mouth, snickering. “What’s *your* problem, psycho girl?” he demanded.

“I TOLD you,” Gina repeated, “get your *ass* back in bed!”

Case stared at her blankly. “I’m sorry— I’m not getting it.”

Gina leaned forward, clutching her stomach as she bellowed with laughter. “I can see your *ass*...you ass!” she managed to spit out.

Case turned and realized that the back of his hospital gown was wide open. “Oh, GOD!”

he shrieked. He quickly jerked it shut. “I *thought* I felt a draft. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I *did!*” Gina screamed back.

“Oh, man,” Tiffany remarked. “He found the fatal flaw!”

“I’ve got to find my *clothes*, Tiffany,” Case told her. “Where in the hell are my clothes?”

Chapter 7: “The Boyfriend”

“What’s your name?” Detective Case inquired.

“Chad Harris.” Gina and Tiffany were making their way inside behind them, and Chad turned to them with a smirk.

“Shit-head,” Tiffany remarked.

“Dildo,” he kindly replied. Tiffany grimaced, crossing her arms over her chest. She glared at him. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark shades as usual.

“You know, it’s past seven,” she pointed out. “You can take those things *off*, now.”

A greeter appeared at a podium that stood before them. “Table for four?”

“Yes, sir,” Case replied.

“Smoking or non-smoking?”

“Smoking,” Case told him.

The greeter led the four of them through a maze of tables, finally stopping at an empty one way at the back of the restaurant. “Here you are,” he remarked, holding his hand out. “I’ll get your waiter.”

“Thanks,” Case returned. It was one of those booth tables. One side of the table and seats were directly against a short wall decorated with vertical, wooden paneling. Chad sat next to the wall and Case piled in after him. Naturally, Tiffany sat across from Chad and Gina took up residence across from Case. Tiffany snatched her menu off the table and pretended to look through it for a few seconds before slamming it down on the table.

“Chad!” she spewed. “Do you have to sit across from me?”

Chad smashed his fist into the table and pointed at her. “Tiffany, don’t start your crap!”

“Okay!” Gina butted in. She hopped to her feet, motioning for Tiffany to slide back out.

“YOU sit on the outside.” Tiffany scooched out, Gina took her place, and Tiffany plopped down on the outside of the bench.

“You don’t have to move her,” Chad remarked. “I’m not scared of the little...”

Case smashed *his* fist into the table. “Who’s bright idea was this?” he demanded.

“Just ask your questions, honey,” Gina replied.

“Right,” Case began, turning to Chad. “Now, you and Fran were lovers?”

“Were,” Chad keyed in. “Dumped *that* chick a couple of months ago.”

“*What a shock,*” Tiffany mumbled under her breath.

“Shut-up, bitch!” Chad screamed back.

“She catch you cheating on HER, too?”

Detective Case smacked himself in the chest with the palm of his hand. “*I’ll* ask the questions around here, thank you very much.”

“Nope,” Chad told her. “I only ever cheated on *you.*”

“What would you guys and gals like to drink?” their waiter inquired.

“Iced tea,” Gina replied. “Sweet.”

“Cola,” Chad calmly stated.

“Water!” Tiffany grumbled.

Their waiter finished writing, and he turned to Case. “And, for *you*, sir?”

“I’ll have a beer,” he replied.

Gina smacked her lips. “Lou!”

Case turned to their waiter with a reassuring nod. “Yep, definitely a beer.”

“You’re supposed to be sobering up.”

“I can come back,” their waiter suggested.

“Sure, come back with a beer,” Case told him. Their waiter finished scratching Case’s drink order down, and he wandered off. “Now...Chad,” Case continued, smoothing out his white jacket. “How long were you two together?”

Chad looked at Tiffany. “About a month before *she* dumped me.”

“Uh!” Tiffany squealed. “A *month*? You were screwing her a whole MONTH before I caught you?” Detective Case turned to spark up a cigarette. No sooner than he had plucked it from his lips, Tiffany yanked the cigarette out of his fingers, leaned her head back, and dropped it on her tongue.

“Bleh...” Chad remarked. He turned to Case. “You see? *That’s* what I’m talking about. I can’t stand this...damn chick.”

“Alright, Harris,” Case replied. “That’ll do.” He turned to Tiffany. “Tiff, why did you do that?”

“Light up another one of those,” she told him, tossing the cigarette underneath their table. “And, I’ll stick it up your ASS! Got it?”

Case held his palms up at his sides. “We’re in the smoking section, Tiff. What did you *think* I sat us over here for?”

She slammed both of her fists on the table. “Stop calling me ‘TIFF’!” she shrieked. “It’s Tiffany! Tiffany!” She planted her elbows on the table, bowing her head and squiggling her fingers through her black, chin-length hair.

Detective Case narrowed his eyes, staring at her as their waiter arrived with their drinks. “Your tea,” he remarked, setting Gina’s tea down in front of her. “Your water,” he said, setting Tiffany’s water down beside her planted elbows and shaking head. “Your cola,” he continued, handing Chad his cola. “And your beer.” He handed Case a bottle of beer. “And, are we ready

to order?”

Detective Case cracked his beer open. “What about a beer, Tiff?” he asked. “Can I at least have a beer?”

Tiffany looked at him through a pair of menacing brown eyes. “I just told you not to CALL me that!”

Chad shrugged and sipped his drink. “See what I mean?” Tiffany planted her forearms on the table, reaching across with her leg and stomping on Chad’s foot. “Ow!” he shrieked.

“Um...I can come back in a few,” their waiter remarked.

“Give us about ten minutes,” Gina told him. She watched as he walked away.

“Smash my FOOT!” Chad yelled. He reeled back and kicked Tiffany in the shin.

“Bah!” Tiffany cried. She hopped to her feet. “That’s it! I’m gonna kill him!” She leaned in and planted her fists on the table, eyes locked with Chad’s. “Come on out, faggot! Come *get* some!”

The greeter from earlier popped up next to their table. “Is there a problem?” he inquired.

Case nervously showed him his badge. “We’re, uh— We’re fine, sir,” he assured him. “Won’t happen again.” The greeter quickly looked his badge over before walking away, a bit of uncertainty in his face. “Tiffany,” Case remarked, pointing across the table at her empty seat. “Sit back down.” She crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at him with a look of frustration. “Look, I’m sorry about the cigarette, alright?” Tiffany scoffed and turned her head to the side. “And, you know, that little kick from Chad over there you kind of deserved.” He turned to Chad. “Tell you what, if he touches you *again*, I’ll throw his ass outside.”

Chad turned to him. “If she don’t jack with me, I won’t jack with her.”

Case looked up at Tiffany again, holding his hand towards her seat. “Please, won’t you

join us again, my dear?" he kindly asked with a warm smile. He could see Tiffany hiding a smile behind the hair hanging down in her face. He had found her soft spot. She didn't say anything. She just slowly slid back into her seat, keeping her head down so that no one could see her grinning face. Case slouched into his seat and had a swig of his beer.

"Will you guys please figure out what you want?" Gina demanded. Tiffany, Chad, and Detective Case had a quick look at their menus.

"Got it!" Chad shouted.

"Ready!" Tiffany followed up. Detective Case looked first at Chad, then at Tiffany before returning to his menu. After half a minute he flipped it closed.

"Okay," he said. Their waiter reappeared to take their order, and after that the table was eerily silent.

Finally, Chad spoke up. "So, what else did you need to ask me?"

Case had another drink of his beer. "I need to know who her friends are. What kind of people did she run around with?"

Chad thought a moment. "The party-hardies, mostly," he replied. "She was always going to dorm parties and stuff like that. I probably could give you a list of some people to talk to if you want."

"I could, too," Tiffany added.

"Alright," Case returned. "Now we're getting somewhere. What else?" Chad and Tiffany just sat there. "Well, don't all raise your hands at once."

Chad turned to him. "Well, there *was* this one guy."

"And?"

"And..." Chad continued, "he'd had a few drinks. He grabbed her up and started trying

to make out with her.”

“Oh...” Case moaned. “Then what?”

“I threw him out of a window.”

Detective Case tapped his pointer finger on the table. “Well, I want to talk to *that* guy. He may still have a chip on his shoulder.” He had another sip of his beer. “You know how those drunkies can be.”

“Ha!” Chad exclaimed. “Yeah, really.”

“What else?” Case asked. Chad shrugged. “Come on,” he begged, turning to Tiffany. “A drug dealer? A friend of a friend? Something...”

“Well, that Greg guy’s her drug dealer,” she told him.

“Yeah!” Chad added, his face lighting up with excitement. “Greg– Greg– Damn, what’s his name?”

“Greg Sanders,” Tiffany replied with a snap of her fingers.

“That’s it,” he agreed. “Greg Sanders. Yeah, he deals a lot to the students at the university.”

Case reached inside his jacket, pulled out a notepad, and scratched a few things down. “What kind of drugs?” he asked.

“Ecstasy,” Chad told him. “Yeah, lots of ex up in *that* place.” Case stopped writing and shot Gina an angry glance.

“Hey, news to ME!” she shouted back.

Case finished writing. “So,” he began, “we got a drug dealer and some drunk guy. Anything else?”

“Don’t think so,” Chad replied.

“Nope,” Tiffany agreed. “Anything else I could do for you?”

Case looked at her. “No, you two just make me a list of Fran’s friends. That would really help me out.” He sat there a moment before putting his notepad back up and standing to leave. “Now, if you’ll all excuse me,” he remarked on his way out, “I’ve got to go take a smoke break.”

“Thank you!” Tiffany called after him.

Once outside Case popped another cigarette into his mouth and looked at the sky. It was pretty clear, even though it had been cloudy and raining earlier that morning. He found Betelgeuse and Venus once again, and amazingly they appeared even bigger and brighter than the night before. He shook his head, retrieved his lighter, and fired up his stogie. “We’ve got a girl with a hole in her face and a doctor slash janitor smashed to pieces with a bunch of bowling balls.” He took a drag of his cigarette, sucked it through his teeth, and exhaled with a sigh.

“It’s totally whack!” he imagined Tiffany saying back to him.

Detective Case smirked with interest, turning and picturing her standing beside him. “Isn’t it?” he asked her. “The only suspects I’ve got are a drunk and some drug dealer...ecstasy dealer at that. They’d have just slashed her throat or shot her. They’re not going to smash her face in with a croquet mallet. And, where does this janitor fit in?”

“The drunk would’ve sexually assaulted her,” imaginary Tiffany added.

“Right!” Case conceded. “And Fran’s murder was most certainly not motivated by sex.” Case curled his index finger over his top lip.

He imagined Tiffany turning to him. *“What’s with the bowling balls?”*

“I know, right?” Case inquired. “I mean what the f...” He stopped talking and took another drag of his cigarette as some couple walked up and entered the building. Once the door

closed behind them, he began again. “I mean what’s with the bowling balls? This is one sick, twisted freak we’re dealing with here. Not your average one-timer.” He took another drag of his cigarette.

“*Hmm,*” imaginary Tiffany remarked, tapping her finger against her lips. “*Maybe there’s something to those friends of hers.*”

“Maybe,” Case agreed. “And, I’ve got her school schedule. I could always go check out her classmates if need be.”

“*You should still check out the drunk and the drug dealer, though,*” imaginary Tiffany suggested.

“Oh, of course,” Case replied. He took another drag of his cigarette. “But, it looks like we’re stuck here. I mean if one of her friends turns out to be the devil himself, that *might* be our guy. I’m just not seeing it.”

Imaginary Tiffany smiled. “*Hey, why are you thinking of ME?*” Detective Case exhaled smoke through his nostrils. He looked up, grinning at her imaginary form.

“I don’t question these things,” he told her. “I just go with the flow.” He was silent for a moment as a group of teenagers walked up to the restaurant and made their way inside. He held his cigarette up for her to see. “I’m sorry about the smoking,” he continued once the door had closed behind him. “Why does it bother you so much?”

“*I guess you’ll have to get to know me better,*” she replied with a shrug.

“I guess I will,” he concluded. He dropped his cigarette butt on the ground, stomped it out, and made his way back into the restaurant.

Chapter 8: "The Drop-Off"

Case, Gina, Chad, and Tiffany stood outside the restaurant. Case patted Chad on the shoulder. "I appreciate your time, sir."

"Sure, Detective Case," he replied. "I hope I helped you out."

"Oh, you did."

"Nice meeting you, Gina," he said to Gina.

"Good-bye, Chad," she replied.

Tiffany shot him a twisted smirk. "So long, douche!"

"Have a nice night, slut," Chad kindly returned.

"Okay!" Case shouted. He and Gina began shoving Tiffany towards the car.

"Ass-hole!" she screamed. They opened the rear, driver's side door, shoved her inside, and closed the door.

"Well, that went swimmingly," Case remarked to his fiancée.

"Did you even get anything out of them?" Gina asked.

"Nope," he replied. "I'm going to have to go back to both of the murder scenes. I've got to be missing something."

"What about that guy at the dorm party and the drug dealer?" Gina asked. "What about her friends?"

"Well, I'll check all of them out tomorrow," Case replied, "but, I'm not going to find anything, there."

"Lou!" Gina shrieked. "You're not even supposed to be working on this case."

"*'Lou!'*" Case mocked. "*'You're not even supposed to be working on this case'.*"

Gina scoffed. "You can't go back to the murder scenes, honey. You're off-duty,

remember?”

Detective Case grinned. “Watch me,” he replied.

Gina shook her head. “You’re going to get canned.”

Case rolled his eyes. “Let’s just drop her off. Then, you can drive us home, and I’ll take the car out to check on a few things. It won’t take but just an hour or two.”

Gina looked him in the eyes. “You’re drunk, honey. You’re supposed to be sobering up.”

“Oh, good God!” Case replied. “I had one beer. It wasn’t even that strong.”

“Ugh!” she spat as they climbed inside, Gina in the driver’s seat and Case in the passenger seat. Gina started the car and began to follow Tiffany’s instructions to a friend’s apartment.

“Yep…” Case began with a sigh a few minutes into the drive. “This one’s a real toughie. I might have to pull an all-nighter on this one.”

Gina turned to her fiancé. “Do you even know what tomorrow is?”

“Wedding rehearsal,” Case replied. “I know.”

“Two o’clock!” Gina yelled.

“I *know*!” Case shouted back. “I’ll BE there.”

“Damn right you will,” Gina assured him.

“Make this left,” Tiffany instructed. Gina turned into the parking lot of Tiffany’s friend’s apartment complex. She drove over a speed bump and coasted a bit before Tiffany asked her to stop. Gina threw the car into park. “See you tomorrow, Gina,” Tiffany remarked, hopping out. She leaned back in, gripping the open door in one hand and the door frame in the other. “Good night, Detective Case.”

Case smiled at her with a wave of his hand. “Night-NIGHT!” he replied. She stared at him blankly, then slammed the door and went about her merry little way. Gina made her way back out of the parking lot, down the street, and back onto the freeway.

Case turned to his fiancée. “Okay, what’s with your little friend, Tiffany?” he demanded.

Gina looked at him with a smile. “She’s not so bad.”

“She’s *screwed* UP!” Case shouted back. “The girl needs...professional help!”

“Oh, come on. She does not.”

“Gina,” Case returned, “she snatched my cigarette out of my hand and stubbed it out on her tongue! Who DOES that?”

“Yeah, she doesn’t like people smoking,” Gina told him. “She punched some guy in the nose one time because he lit up a cigarette around her.”

Detective Case sat there. “Damn, you could’ve mentioned that. She got a bit of a temper, does she?”

“You never noticed?” Gina replied.

Case widened his eyes and cocked his head to the side. “I see your point.”

“I think she’s had kind of a rough life.”

“Abuse?” Case inquired.

“I don’t know,” Gina replied. “I never asked. Why are you so interested in her?”

Case turned to her. “Think she’s a killer?”

“Tiffany?” Gina asked with a smile. “No way!”

“You know how Fran was killed?”

Gina turned to him. “No.”

“With a croquet mallet,” he told her.

“Really?” Gina asked.

“Left a four-inch hole in her face.”

Gina turned to him. “Yikes! Who would do something like that?”

“Right,” Case replied. “And the janitor was killed with a bunch of bowling balls.”

“Bowling balls?” she repeated. “What *is* this guy, some kind of psycho?”

“A psycho...” Case re-iterated. “Exactly. Remind you of anyone? AND...Fran was sleeping with *her* boyfriend.”

Gina thought for a moment. “I see what you mean.”

Case shook his head. “Who knows? Maybe she did it, and maybe she didn’t. Either way, she’s got some serious problems.”

“Yeah,” Gina agreed. After a few more minutes, Gina arrived at their apartment and parked the car. “Alright,” she said as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “You better stay out of trouble, mister.”

“Oh, Gina,” Case replied, stepping out of the car.

“Here, take my cell phone,” she remarked, holding her phone out to him.

Case smacked his lips. “You KNOW I hate those things.”

“I don’t care,” she returned. “Take it!”

Case snatched the phone from her. “Alright, but you better not call me.”

“I’ll call you whenever I damn well feel like it,” she responded. Case rolled his eyes, hopped into the driver’s seat, and shut the door behind him. “Hey!” Gina shouted.

Case rolled down his window. “Yes, dear?” he asked.

“No drinking.”

“Oh, come on!” Case replied through a grin.

“Promise me,” she demanded.

“Gina...” Case trailed off, shaking his head.

“Promise!”

Case looked up. “Okay, I promise.”

Gina crossed her arms over her chest. “You promise *what?*”

Detective Case lifted his right hand. “I promise I will not drink.”

“Fine,” Gina said. She leaned down and kissed him on the lips. “Good-bye.”

“Bye,” Case replied. He backed away from the building and drove to the end of the parking lot. Once there he lifted his left hand, holding up a pair of crossed fingers. Case snickered with evil intentions as he made a right and headed for Richie’s.

Chapter 9: "Return"

"Case!" Richie yelled from the end of the bar. "It's so good to see you! Come for a bourbon today, eh?"

"Screwdriver," Case instructed. He had a seat at the bar and set Gina's cell phone in front of him so he could see it light up if she called.

"Bourbon on thee rocks," Richie remarked, turning to gather a few things. "Coming right up." Case snagged a handful of pretzels from a bowl on the bar and popped them in his mouth. Then, he turned to his right. To his surprise the woman from last night was sitting beside him. She leaned towards him. Her bright, amber eyes met Case's cool, teal eyes.

" 'sup, cop!" she remarked with a smile.

Case smiled back. "Not much, hooker."

"She dump you, yet?"

"Nope," Case answered. "Still copping it, too."

"That's not what I heard," Richie butted in as he set Case's screwdriver in front of him. "I heard you got canned."

Case slammed his fist on the bar next to his drink. "How do you always know these things?" he demanded.

"I got ears, Case," Richie explained. "What am I supposed to do, not hear nothing?"

"So, you're *not* copping it tonight!" the hooker exclaimed, turning to Case and throwing her arms around him.

"I didn't...get canned," Case assured her as he wriggled free of her grasp. "I've been taken off duty, that's all."

"Oh, off duty," Richie repeated. He snatched up Case's drink. "So, that means you

cannot afford no *screwdriver* then, huh?”

Detective Case jerked out his pistol and aimed it right between Richie’s dark brown eyes. “Put my DAMN drink back down!” he screamed.

“Chin-ga!” Richie blasted, holding his hands up at either side of his face. “I just kidding, Case.” He set Case’s screwdriver back down.

Case holstered his pistol, then dusted his coat a bit as he sat back down. “Sorry,” he replied, “you just shouldn’t mess with a man’s drink like that. I’m not without pay. I’m like...on vacation.”

“Oh, I see,” Richie said.

“Jeez, man!” the girl from the other night remarked. “You’re out of your God damn mind.” She slapped some cash down on the bar and hopped up. She retrieved her fur from the back of her stool before throwing it over her shoulders. “You might not have been fired yet, but you will be soon enough.” She turned on a pair of shiny, red high heels and made a quick exit.

Case gazed at Richie through a pair of curious eyes. “Who *is* that, Richie?”

“Well, she’s not a hooker,” Richie assured him. “She wouldn’t take MY money.”

Detective Case cackled as he took a drink, nearly choking on his screwdriver. “That doesn’t mean she’s not a hooker, Richie.”

“Hey!” Richie replied, pointing his thumb towards the door. “How’d you like to take a hike there, Mr. Detective Casey?” Case laughed. He planted his face on the bar and crossed his arms over the back of his head. Then, he sat back up, still smiling.

“Maybe you’re just not her type, you know?”

“If chee were a hooker, then every guy would be her type,” Richie pointed out.

Detective Case laughed and nearly choked on his screwdriver again. “Alright, Richie,”

he said. He checked Gina's cell phone and realized it was 9:18. *"I've got one hour,"* he mumbled under his breath. He set the phone back down on the bar and finished off his first screwdriver. Once he was good and loaded, Detective Case stepped outside and took out his cigarettes. He looked at the sky and checked on Betelgeuse and Venus again. He fished out a smoke and popped it in his mouth. Tonight, he noticed that the moon was nearly full as well. "Huh," he remarked, dropping his cigarettes back into his coat pocket and rummaging around for his lighter. He stopped though, overcome with a grin. He plucked the cigarette from his lips and crept to the side of the building. *"Think he's over here again?"* he asked quietly.

Case wandered down the side of the building and checked around the dumpsters, but Captain Ford was nowhere to be found tonight. With a look of boredom washing over him, he made his way back to the main parking lot and looked around at all the vehicles. "You know what? Good!" he aptly stated. He put the cigarette back to his lips. Then, he smacked around on his pockets, found his lighter, and lit his stogie up. He jerked his keys out of his jeans pocket and made his way to his car. "Let's go find us some evidence," he remarked. "We'll start with the old janitor's closet since it's closer."

"Yeah!" a voice sang out inside his head. Case opened the car door, climbed inside, and started the engine. He threw his brown automobile into drive and headed for the freeway. Luckily, the university was still open. Case *figured* that it would be until about eleven or twelve, but he hadn't known for sure. He got out of the car, shut the door, and made his way to the building with the janitor's closet. *"You know,"* he whispered, *"this is the third time today I've gone inside this building."* He marched in and found the janitor's closet to his left. The door was closed, and it had yellow police tape over it. The marbles were nowhere to be found which immediately struck Case as odd. *"Where's the marbles?"* he muttered under his breath. *"They*

didn't preserve the crime scene?"

"There's no tape outline of them, either," the little voice whispered back.

Case turned, as if facing somebody. *"I know."* He slapped himself on the forehead. A sobering look of deeper understanding wiped his face clean. *"They weren't there, anymore. Someone came by and picked them up before the cops got here!"*

"The killer?"

"Probably," Case told the voice in his head. *"They must've thought I stumbled and fell over because I was drunk, but I was just hung over!"* Case turned and jumped back, realizing for the first time since he'd arrived that the tables and shelf were *also* gone. "My God, man!" he shouted. "They didn't even know I slipped! They think I just passed out, drunk. I've got to call Gina." He reached for her cell phone, but could not seem to locate it. "What the f..." he began, patting around on his jacket and jeans. Then, he realized what he had done, and he reached up and smacked himself in the forehead again. *"Um...slight problem,"* he remarked.

"You left her phone at Richie's, didn't you?" the little voice inquired.

Case grinned. *"I'll have to pick it up on the way to Fran's, I guess. Hope she doesn't call."* His head was filled with a hazy image of the owner of this mysterious voice inside of his head. He imagined a look of reassurance on his face.

"She won't." Detective Case usually carried around a couple of pairs of latex gloves just in case, and it was at that moment that he removed a pair from the right pocket of his jacket and snapped them on. He opened the closet door, flipped on the lights, and weaved through the police tape, stepping inside. There *was* at least a tape outline of the janitor, so he knew he hadn't completely lost his mind. The bowling balls were gone though, and there was no tape in *their* place either. Detective Case shook his head, throwing his arms out at his sides.

“He walked right over me!” He began to wonder what time of day the janitor had been killed, but he knew he would probably be unable to come about *that* bit of vital information. “Must have been right before we got here this morning,” he guessed. Case began to focus on the centerpiece of the closet, a simple barstool. “Now, what’s with THIS thing?” he inquired. The barstool troubled him. It sat in the middle of the room, glued to the floor with some sort of epoxy. He knelt beside it to have a closer look. After a moment, he stood and kicked it a few times. It was rock-solid. “Must not have been able to get that out of here in time,” he surmised. Case stared at the stool, curling his index finger over his top lip. Then, he shrugged. “What does it *mean*?” he demanded. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered. He imagined Captain Ford standing beside him. He just kind of popped into his thoughts all of a sudden.

“*Stay away from this case, Case,*” he ordered.

Detective Case looked at him. “Shut-up, chunky-butt!” He stood on the stool and was very intrigued at what he found on the ceiling above the door. “Little holes,” he remarked, pointing them out with a smile. They were arranged in a circle. “A casual observer would have likely missed them.” He wanted that to somehow make sense out of everything, but instead his discovery only filled him with more questions. He still couldn’t see the whole picture.

“*Something’s bothering me about it,*” imaginary Ford remarked.

Detective Case narrowed his eyes and looked at him. “Thought I told you to zip it!” He whipped out his notepad to scratch down a few questions before he forgot them all. “*What time was the janitor killed?*” he wrote. “*What was the stool used for? Why are there little holes in the ceiling by the door?*” Detective Case stopped writing, overcome with a smirk. He stepped back through the police tape and looked around. He walked to his left and stopped below a camera. However, his smile quickly faded as he stared at the camera. The lens had been painted

over with a dash of black spray paint. He turned and snapped his fingers. “Bummer.” Case wandered back into the closet and shut the door. He took a moment to study the cryptic letters that had been left on the back of the door, written in the janitor’s blood. “R-G-K,” he read aloud. “What in God’s name is R.G.K. supposed to mean, you freak?”

“Maybe it’s someone’s initials?” the voice suggested.

Detective Case turned. “I was actually thinking of something more traditional. You know, like B.T.K. and the like. Bound, Torture, Kill.”

“So...what’s ‘R.G.K.’ stand for?”

“Well, I *would* say something like ‘Rape, Gag, Kill,’ but our murderer neither rapes nor gags his victims. He just seems to want to kill them.”

“Why not just ‘K’?” the voice inquired.

Case smiled at that thought. “Yeah, really. That would be SO much easier. I have a feeling this one’s not going to be quite so simple, though.” He looked around the closet but came up with nothing more than empty shelves. “The guys would’ve taken everything else with them. Bet they don’t find anything, though.” Detective Case flipped off the lights, weaved back through the police tape, and closed the door. Then, he headed for the door to the main building. “Let’s go see if we can find Gina’s cellular.” A little later, Case was back at Richie’s.

“Your fiancée called,” Richie reported with a smirk.

Detective Case sat down at the bar, and Richie set Gina’s phone in front of him. “Damn the luck,” Case replied. “You didn’t tell her where I was, did you?”

“No,” Richie replied. “I told her you was at a tittie joint.”

Case’s eyebrows drew down in the middle. “I’ll kill you, Richie!”

Richie laughed. “I told her you was HERE, Case! I’m not gonna lie to her.”

Detective Case stared at the phone. “Stupid cell phones,” he remarked, shaking the phone in his hand. “I *hate* these stupid things! What’d she say?”

“Chee was very upset,” Richie explained. “Chee said for you to call her back when you returned.”

“Alright,” Case sighed as he began to dial the phone.

“I’ll get you another bourbon,” Richie told him, turning around to gather up the necessary ingredients.

“*Hello?*” Gina said over the phone.

“Gina!” Case replied.

“*THERE you are, you DICK!*” she screeched. “*What are you doing down there at Richie’s? You promised me...no drinking!*”

“Bah!” Detective Case barked. “I just had one beer.”

Gina smacked her lips. “*Richie tells me you had six screwdrivers a while ago.*” Case put his hand over the phone. He looked at Richie with squinted eyes and an open mouth.

“The hell did you tell her THAT for?”

Richie set a screwdriver in front of him. “She asked, Case,” Richie replied with a shrug. “I’m not gonna lie to her.”

Without taking his angry eyes off him, Case snatched up his drink and had a sip. “Baby,” he began, “Richie tends to over exaggerate.”

“*I don’t care!*” Gina shouted back. “*You said before you left you wouldn’t drink.*”

Case smiled as he took another drink of his screwdriver. “Don’t worry,” he told her, laying a pair of crossed fingers on top of the bar, “I won’t drink anymore, tonight.”

“*Lou Case, get back...*” Case cut her off, slamming the phone shut.

Richie looked at him. “You gotta go home?”

Case blew a breath through his lips. “Shut-up, and make me another screwdriver.”

A little while later, Detective Case stood outside Richie’s once again. He had another look at the sky. The wind had picked up, and the starry sky was beginning to fill in with clouds. He decided he’d better get a move-on. He glanced at Gina’s phone. The little screen on the front read “3 missed calls.” He stared blankly at it, then dropped it in his coat pocket. He rummaged around for his smokes. He brought *them* out, popped one in his mouth, and retrieved his lighter. Case stopped and watched as a flash of white lightning ripped across the sky. He counted three Mississippi before thunder belched from the heavens. He smiled as he made his way to his car, lighting his cigarette along the way. He was headed for Fran’s.

“What are you going to do when you get home?” the voice asked as he turned onto the freeway.

Case shrugged. “She can kiss my ass.” He popped some music in the player and cranked it up. It wasn’t long before Detective Case was at the door to Fran’s house. It too was taped off with police tape. Case snapped on another pair of latex gloves, crossed his fingers, and reached up to turn the doorknob. To his delight the door was unlocked. A grin shot across his face. “They’re making this too easy,” he remarked, throwing the door open. He moseyed past the police tape, stepped inside, and smacked the door closed. He made his way through the living room, skipping right over it completely, and directly into the kitchen. Case flipped on the kitchen light and wandered over to the refrigerator.

“What are you looking for?” the voice asked as he opened the door.

Detective Case sighed. “Well, I was hoping for a beer, but I already drank the last one, huh?” He closed the refrigerator and looked around. “We must’ve missed something.” He

began to slowly walk along the walls, searching them. Then, he turned to the dining table. He looked the top of it over thoroughly before pulling out the table's four chairs and looking around the legs. Case slid his fingers along the bottom of the table searching for something...anything.

"Find anything?" the voice asked.

"Not yet." Case turned around and looked at the cabinet underneath the sink. Something struck him as odd about it right away.

"What is it?" the voice inquired.

Detective Case looked to his left as if turning to someone. "I don't know," he answered. "That cabinet looks funny." Then, it hit him like a ton of bricks. A smile crept across his face. "I remember seeing those cabinet doors when I was here before," he remarked.

"So?" the voice asked.

"So," he continued, "I *don't* remember the inside." He knelt down, flung the doors open, and was shocked at what he found on the inside of the left-hand door. "R-G-K," he read aloud.

"You've got to be kidding me," the voice remarked. He imagined the voice's owner staring at the bloody letters on the door with him.

Detective Case turned to his left. "Guess they're not unconnected anymore."

"How did that happen?" the voice asked.

"We MISSED it," Case explained. "It happens." Detective Case pulled out his smokes as he stared at the bloody letters on the door.

"Still doesn't tell us anything, though," the voice remarked.

"Nope," Case replied. He lit his stogie as he turned off the kitchen light. "No it doesn't." He wandered into the living room and flipped on the light in *there*. He looked at the tape outline on the recliner in which Fran had been found. He could still see her there, bound

with ropes, blood pouring from a huge hole in her face like a waterfall. He recalled the little bits of skull in her brown hair. They stood out like little snowflakes. Detective Case took a drag of his cigarette, then exhaled through his nostrils as he pored over the ceiling above the recliner. His face twisted into a grin. He noticed little holes like the ones he had seen earlier in the janitor's closet.

"And how did THAT happen?" the voice asked.

Still grinning, Case looked to his right. *"I missed that one,"* he confessed. *"Still doesn't tell us anything."*

"What ARE those, anyway?"

"I think they're nail holes," Case replied, having another drag of his cigarette.

"Why are there nail holes in the ceiling, there?"

Case turned to his right. *"Must've been some nails there."* He smiled at his sly reply. *"I think the killer hung the croquet mallet up there and rigged it to smash her in the face, but that's just a guess."*

"Like a booby trap," the voice surmised.

Case took another long drag of his cigarette, laughing as he exhaled. *"I don't know."* He bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. *"Maybe."*

"Same thing with the bowling balls?" the voice asked.

"Looks like it," Case replied. *"Doesn't make any sense, but it looks that way."*

"What NOW?" Detective Case had a good, long look at Fran's blood, which was soaked into the brown chair. He took another drag of his cigarette. *"I've got to have a look at the evidence they collected,"* he finally said. *"We've got to go back to the police station."*

"Oh, God..." the voice moaned.

Detective Case turned around and made his way towards the front door. “Yeah, no kidding,” he remarked, flicking off the light on his way out.

Chapter 10: “The Evidence”

“Detective Case,” Paul remarked from the booth at the entrance to the police station parking garage. “How wonderful to see you again.”

“Paul,” Case replied with a nod of his head. “*You* still workin’ here?” Case slid his card through the keypad. However, the keypad light flashed red, and the gate did not rise up this time.

“Having trouble?” Paul asked with a big grin.

“What the f...” Case began before trying his card again. He was denied access a second time, and he looked up at Paul. He was still grinning like an idiot.

“That card appears to have been disabled,” Paul informed him. “Why don’t you go on home to your wifey-poo?”

Detective Case narrowed his eyes, glaring back. “Easy to say from behind six inches of protective glass. Come out *here* and say that, bitch!”

Paul’s grin faded. “Hey, any time you wanna throw down, Detective Case, I’m ready,” he assured him. He whipped out a nightstick and tapped it against the glass. Detective Case was not amused. He produced a weapon of his own, his state-issued pistol. He held it up and unloaded a clip right at Paul’s face. All eight rounds bounced off the protective glass, and Paul dropped out of sight. Detective Case cackled as he dropped an empty magazine into the passenger seat, then popped a fresh one in its place from the glove box. Paul’s head reappeared at the bottom of the protective glass. “That’s not funny!” he shrieked, waving his pointer finger at him. “I’ve got it all on tape, too. Your ass is *mine*!”

Case smiled at him. “What, *that* tape?” he asked, and he popped another cap in the camera. Sparks dropped down from the security camera, and sparks began spraying out of some

of the computer equipment in Paul's booth as well.

"Oh...shit!" Paul shouted, scrambling for a fire extinguisher.

Case threw the car into reverse and peeled out all the way back down the entry ramp.

"Hee! Hee! Hee!" he laughed as Paul frantically sprayed his computer instruments. He threw it into drive and peeled out all the way to the end of the block, making a left. "*Douchebag*," Case muttered to himself. He opted for an empty spot at the edge of the sidewalk that ran around the police station, instead. Then, he stumbled out of the car and looked at the fire escape. "I didn't know the old station was four stories," he remarked as he made his way across the grass. He stopped and checked Gina's cell phone. It was already past eleven.

"*It's getting late*," the voice remarked.

Case grinned, reaching up and pulling down the ladder to the fire escape. "Whoops," he replied. "Better hurry up." He began to make his way up to the roof, but he stopped about two stories up when he realized the whole fire escape felt as though it was shaking. "Whoa..." he groaned. "Better slow down." He laughed, patting his pockets for his cigarettes. He pulled out his pack of cigarettes and flipped it open. There were only four cigarettes left. "Oh, NO!" he yelled, smacking the side of his face. His eyes were wild and intoxicated. "Almost out of coffin nails!" He put his cigarettes back in his pocket and looked up through the weaving metal of the fire escape. It seemed a mile high. He watched as another flash of lightning screamed across the sky. He grinned in anticipation, and thunder soon followed. It roared like a bomb going off.

"Wahooooo!" Case howled, stretching his arms out to the sky. Once the thunder had ceased, he dropped his arms at his sides, skipped up the rest of the fire escape, and hopped onto the roof of the police station. "I don't even know if this thing is open," he remarked as he headed for the door to the stairs.

“Can’t we just go through the front door?” the voice asked.

Detective Case stopped at the door and looked to his left. “We’re not even supposed to be here,” he replied. “They’ll make me sign in at the door.” He crossed his fingers and reached for the door handle. To his surprise the knob turned. He grinned as he walked through.

Detective Case crept down to the first floor and up to a door where he stopped. He peeked through a window on the door and was not too surprised to see a couple of detectives at the other side of the room discussing something. He looked around at the twenty or so desks in the room and found Sergeant Paloni’s desk. He waited patiently. It was not long before both of the detectives grabbed their coats, flicked off the lights, and walked out.

Case crept through the door and snuck up to Paloni’s desk. He flicked on Paloni’s desk lamp and yanked on the middle drawer, but it would not budge. *“Locked!”* he whispered. He made his way over to his own desk and unlocked it. “Got a skeleton key in here somewhere.” He rolled out the middle drawer and rummaged through a few things. He retrieved a fresh pack of smokes. “Hell yeah!” Case brimmed. He pocketed it as he continued to search for his trusty skeleton key. At long last he held the key in front of his face with a twisted grin. *“Mwuh-huh-ha-ha-ha!”* he chuckled in an evil tone, sneaking back to Paloni’s desk. He jammed the skeleton key into the lock in the middle of the drawer and popped it open with a couple of shakes. It was filled with papers and whatnot.

“Good God, man,” he whispered. *“What a slob!”* After a few minutes of rummaging around, he opened the top, side drawer and found even more of Paloni’s junk. There were three old phonebooks, a bunch of highlighters, and even *more* papers scattered all over the place. Case tilted his head back, holding his palms out at his sides. He managed to sift through it all but still came up empty-handed. He slammed the drawer shut and opened the bottom, side drawer. “Ah-

ha!” Case screamed, holding up his pointer finger in a state of victory. He had found a large paper sack with the name “Carlina” written on it. He eagerly jerked it out and threw it on top of Paloni’s desk before rifling through it. Inside, he found some of Fran’s personal belongings. Case looked back in the drawer and found Fran’s case file as well. He grinned, pulled it out, and slapped *it* down on Paloni’s desk as well before kicking the drawer shut.

He locked Sergeant Paloni’s middle drawer back up, returned the skeleton key to his desk, and locked his *own* middle drawer. Then, he snatched up the Carlina evidence and switched Paloni’s lamp back off. “He won’t mind if I borrow this for a while,” Case remarked, walking through the door to the stairs. He patted his pockets, found his cigarettes, and popped a smoke in his mouth before slowly making his way back up the stairs. Detective Case moseyed through the door to the roof and was greeted by a rather unexpected visitor. There was also a shower of blue and red lights. They alternated, blinking and reflecting off everything around him. They came from the road below.

“Good evening, Detective Case,” Captain Ford remarked holding out his hand. Case stood there, holding the paper sack and case file in his arms. He cocked his head to the right, fidgeting the cigarette between his lips.

“Evening, Cap,” he replied.

“*I’ll* take that,” Ford told him.

“That’s quite alright,” Case assured him. “*I’ve* got it.”

“Detective, I’m not gonna ASK you again!” Ford shrieked. Case reluctantly dropped the paper sack and case file into his captain’s hands. Then, he casually began to rummage around for his lighter. Captain Ford set the sack and file beside him and came back up with his hand out again. Case removed the cigarette from his lips.

“That’s all I’ve got, Cap!” Case assured him, throwing his arms out at his sides.

Captain Ford got a big, happy grin on his fat, ugly face. “Badge and gun,” he demanded.

Detective Case dropped his hands. “What for?”

“Well, let’s see.” Captain Ford threw his hands behind his back, turned, and walked to the side of the building. With his arms folded on top of the short wall that ran around the top of the building, he turned back to Detective Case. “You’re drunk as a skunk...” he began. Ford raised his hand at his side and flipped out his thumb. “You shot at a police station parking attendant...” Ford continued to flip out fingers as he listed things. “You destroyed a police station parking lot camera...”

“Can you PROVE that?” Case demanded.

“You broke into a police station...” Ford continued. “You stole evidence in a pending police investigation– Would you like me to mail you a list?” Detective Case patted his pockets for his lighter before whipping it out, lighting his cigarette, and replacing it. He plucked the cigarette from his mouth with his first and second fingers, inhaled through his teeth, and exhaled a white mist.

“Yeah,” he replied with a nod. “Break out the list.”

Captain Ford walked back to Detective Case and held out his hand. Detective Case looked away, pulled out his badge and weapon, and dropped them into Captain Ford’s hand. Then, he walked back to the fire escape. “Quit drinking, Detective,” Ford told him. “Then, you can come back.” Case stopped at the wall around the edge of the building and looked over the side. There were two black and whites parked at either side of his car, strobes flashing. Captain Ford held a walkie-talkie to his mouth. “Let him go,” he ordered. Case watched. The lights on the two police cruisers flicked off, and they drove away. “I *told* you to stay away from this one.”

Detective Case turned to face his captain. “I’m going to solve it,” he told him. “I am so close.”

Captain Ford grinned. “So is Sergeant Paloni.”

Detective Case also grinned. “Sergeant Paloni doesn’t even know about the marbles, the tables, the shelf, the bowling balls, or the trophy. He didn’t look under the sink, either.”

Captain Ford stared at him through a pair of narrow eyes. “Huh? What in the world are you babbling about?” Detective Case took another drag of his cigarette, then hopped over the wall and commenced the long, twisting journey down the fire escape stairs. He didn’t even flinch as another flash of lightning sliced the sky in two. He was on the grass again before thunder began to crackle in the distance. That’s when he flicked out his keys. Case was inside his car and driving away just as rain began to pour from the swirling, grey chaos above.

“Now, what?” the little voice asked.

Case smiled. “Well, there’s an old tradition I have for times like this.”

“What’s that?”

Case looked at the empty passenger seat. *“You’ll see,”* he replied.

Chapter 11: “Mushroom Trail”

Detective Case screeched onto Highway 000 from the freeway and headed south for a few miles, eventually becoming surrounded on both sides by the woods. The freak rainstorm had put up a pretty good fight, but it hadn’t lasted long. After a couple of minutes, he arrived at mile marker 598, and he pulled off the road, sliding into the grass below and killing the engine. This part of Highway 000 cut through the middle of the woods. So, standing directly in front of his vehicle were trees from left to right as far as the eye could see. “This is an old hangout from back in the day,” he said to the empty passenger seat. “It’s great. You can park your car right here, and no one can see it from the road.” He hopped out and headed into the woods, wading through tall grass. It was dark out, but the distant city lights reflected off the clouds so well that it was almost like daytime. Detective Case walked for a while, then arrived at an old trail that cut through the forest.

“*What’s THAT?*” the voice asked.

Detective Case turned to his right. “That...is the old mushroom trail,” he replied. “That’s why we’re here.” Not far down the trail, he stumbled upon what he was looking for...a patch of magic mushrooms. Around these parts, psilocybin mushrooms grew wild in the woods. Case had found them as large as four feet tall in the past. “Holy crap,” he remarked. He knelt below a tree and pulled one out of the dirt that was the size of a small child. He sat down with the shroom in his lap. “Probably weighs about thirty pounds.” Case turned abruptly at the sound of leaves rustling behind him. “Who’s there?” he demanded. There was no answer. “I’ve got a gun!” Case shrieked, throwing his hand inside of his jacket. “Come on out, or I’ll blow your head off!”

A young girl flew out from the brush behind him, eyes wide, hands held high. He had

said the magic words. “Whoa, don’t shoot me, man!” she begged.

Case studied her with a curious face before revealing an empty hand from his white coat. “Sorry,” he told her. “I didn’t know you were just a kid.” He looked at where she had come from. “Anyone else?” he inquired. “Hmm?” A young boy about her age also emerged, hands thrown over his head. He slowly waded through tall grass and joined his friend. Case smirked, looking the two of them over. They looked to be fourteen or so. *She* was endearing, her long, brown hair cascading around a pair of bright, blue eyes. She wore a white sweater, black jeans, and a pair of black boots. *He* was rather rough-looking, sideburns creeping down either side of his face from a gathering of short, black hair on top of his head. He wore a black leather jacket, dark shirt with two horizontal, light stripes, blue jeans with a hole in one knee, and a pair of red sneakers. His eyes were dark and mysterious.

“I...don’t really have a gun,” Case confessed.

The girl sighed, throwing her arms down and crossing them over her chest. “Thank *God!*” she gasped.

“What are you doing out here, man?” the boy demanded, throwing his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

Case curled his finger over his top lip as he pondered that question. “Hmm...Probably the same thing *you* two are doing.” He turned, retrieved his mushroom, and picked it up to show them.

“Is *that* one?” the boy inquired. “We’ve been trying to figure that out all night.” The girl threw her hands over her mouth and laughed.

Detective Case sat with the mushroom in his lap. “Yeah, this is one,” he replied, patting it on the cap. “Took *us* a while to figure it out, too.”

“Cool,” the girl remarked, holding her hand out. “What’s your name?”

Case took her little hand and helped her sit down next to him. “I’m Lou,” he told her, “and *you* are?”

“Gabrielle,” she replied, as her friend sat down next to her.

“I’m Adam,” he remarked, holding his fist up. Case smiled, reaching over to bump knuckles with him. Adam turned to Gabrielle with a satisfied smirk. “Yeah, he’s cool, man.” He turned back to Case. “So, are you going to SHARE that thing or what?” he demanded, taking Gabrielle’s hand in his. Case gazed at the two of them through a pair of narrow eyes. It was an intriguing proposition, not the kind of thing that comes along every day. On the one hand, he really didn’t feel right about getting all hopped up on hallucinogens with a couple of kids. On the other hand, he and *his* friends used to come wandering through the old Mushroom Trail all the time when they were their age. Plus, he wouldn’t mind the company.

“How old are you guys?” he asked.

“Uh...” Gabrielle trailed off, turning to Adam.

“Twenty-one,” Adam assured him with a smirk. Case glared at him.

“Fourteen!” Gabrielle sighed. “Is that okay?” Case turned and looked up the trail. He hopped to his feet and dusted himself off. Then, he reached down, helped them up, and snagged the mushroom in his arms.

“*Follow, me,*” he grumbled under his breath, turning to head a bit further down the trail.

“Cool, man!” Gabrielle remarked as they caught up and began to walk beside him. Case looked down at Adam on his left before turning to look down at Gabrielle on his right. She smiled at him, waving hello. “Where are we going?”

Case shrugged, facing forward. “Me and my friends had this old shack out here back in

the day. It's not much, but it'll keep the rain off of us."

Adam squinted. "You think it's still there?" he asked. "I mean, how long ago was that?"

Case turned to him. "Hey, man! I'm not *that* old." Gabrielle began to cackle. "Besides, I came out here a few months ago, and it was still there."

"Ah," Adam remarked.

"So, how old *are* you?" Gabrielle asked. Case laughed. "Hey, we told you *ours*, now you tell us *yours*."

"Twenty-six," Case told her with a pat on the head. "Okay?"

"Alright," Gabrielle replied.

Adam looked at Case. "So where *is* this place?"

"Not far," Case assured him. "A few minutes walk, maybe." He looked from Adam to Gabrielle. "Have you guys ever shroomed before?" They shook their heads. "Have you guys ever done *any* drugs before?"

"Smoked pot a few times," Adam replied.

"Yeah, me too," Gabrielle returned.

"Hmm," Case mumbled. "That all?" They both nodded. Case shrugged.

"Are we going to eat that whole thing?" Gabrielle asked a little further down the trail.

Case shook his head. "You could trip for a whole month off of this...if you could keep it that long. Probably only last a few days in the fridge. Then, it turns into this blue, liquid stuff." Case eventually led the two of them through an opening in the trees. "Through here, guys," he remarked. "It's not far now." They crept through a few more trees, passing a critter or two along the way. And, at long last they arrived at the shack. It was still in decent shape, too. "Just like we left it," he remarked. He wandered through the door he and his buddies had put up

followed by his two new acquaintances. Case had a quick glance around. It was a simple little structure, four walls and a roof, built mostly of wood. Case had no idea what kind. He and his friends had built it, but they had built it to last. One of his buddies was a carpenter's son.

The whole place was about the size of a living room. There was a window beside the door, square with a white tin frame around the outside and white tin across the glass in the shape of a plus sign. On the opposite wall, there was a matching window. They were still intact. "That's cool," Case remarked, setting the giant, hallucinogenic mushroom on an old card table in the center of the room. "No one's come by and thrown rocks through the windows, yet." He picked up a lantern and dusted off the top of the table. He held out his hand, motioning for Adam and Gabrielle to have a seat in a couple of old, rusty steel chairs that were scattered around the table.

"Wow, this place is cool!" Adam said, looking around. He plopped down in one of the chairs and scooped out another out for Gabrielle. "Needs a giant screen T.V., though." He spread his hands in front of him, picturing one on the opposite wall as Gabrielle had a seat next to him. "Right THERE," he remarked. "Be perfect!" He looked at Case, who was lighting up the old lantern.

"And a real light," Case added. He set the lantern next to the shroom, then turned and eased the door shut. It squealed on rusty hinges.

"Yeah, this was a good idea," Gabrielle remarked as Case sat down next to her. Case looked around. Half-erased, half-embellished flashbacks flowed through his thoughts, most of them good but some more twisted and unpleasant.

"I like it," he told her.

"So, now what?" Adam inquired. "How do we get this started?"

Detective Case turned to him. “Now, we eat it.” A black scorpion dropped onto the table, and Gabrielle shrieked. “Oh,” Case said with a smile, “I see we have a guest.” He picked up the scorpion by its tail and held it in front of his grinning face. The scorpion snapped its little pinchers at him.

“Ah!” Gabrielle shouted. “Kill it!” Adam laughed.

Case dropped the scorpion into his mouth, still holding it by the end of its stinger. He bit it off halfway down the tail, chewed it up, and swallowed it. “Little trick I learned,” he remarked.

“Whoa, man!” Adam yelled with a grin. “That’s the coolest shit I ever seen! He reached up and bumped knuckles with Detective Case.

“That’s the *sickest* shit I ever seen!” Gabrielle screeched. “*That’s* gross!”

Case uttered a single laugh, pointing at the big, fat mushroom lying on the table. “No, that *mushroom’s* the sickest shit ever,” he told her. “Wait’ll you get a taste of that...piece of crap.” He chucked the scorpion’s stinger over his shoulder, grabbed the mushroom by its stalk, and broke off a big chunk of it. “The stalk,” he continued, “contains the majority of the psilocybin.” He crumbled it into a few pieces on the table. “This little pile right here’ll probably do the trick.”

“Yeah?” Gabrielle inquired.

“Yes,” Case answered. He popped the largest piece into his mouth and chewed it up.

Gabrielle picked up a smaller piece, tossed it in her mouth, and chomped it up a bit. She turned to Case with a look of disgust and utter disappointment, throwing her hands over her mouth. “Oh my GOD!” she gagged.

Case snickered. “Told you.”

Adam had a piece as well. “That sucks,” he agreed, choking back a gag reflex on the back of his throat. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever *tasted*.”

Case shrugged. “Helps to dry them out a little, first.”

“How long does this stuff *take*?” Gabrielle asked.

Case pointed at the behemoth mushroom. “Oh, **THAT** one won’t take long,” he assured her. “It’s already hitting me.”

“Already?” Adam asked. Case turned to him. Adam’s face looked as though it were breathing.

“From handling it,” he explained. “Carrying it over here.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Gabrielle began, “who are you, exactly? What are you doing out here in the woods in the middle of the night?” Detective Case looked her in the eyes. The blue in her irises glowed bright in the dim light of the lantern. They seemed brimming and far brighter than they had when he had first met her. His face contorted into a silly grin.

“You really want to know?” he asked, shaking his funky facial expression away. Gabrielle smirked, observing his curious behavior. She placed her little hand on his fidgeting shoulder.

“Yeah,” she replied with a nod. “You seem kind of...out of place, to me.”

Case rubbed the back of his head. “I got fired tonight.”

“Bummer, dude,” Adam told him.

“Where did you work?” Gabrielle inquired, snagging another piece of shroom off the table.

Detective Case had to really focus and wipe the grin from his face. “Hmm...” he trailed off, curling his finger over his top lip. “Promise you won’t freak out?”

Gabrielle narrowed her blue eyes. “What do you mean?”

He turned to her, very serious now. “I’m a cop.”

Adam scooted his chair back and hopped up. “Gotta go!” he shrieked, dashing for the door.

“Adam, sit back down!” Case gasped through an overwhelming cackle.

Adam slowly retreated from the door and sat down across from him. “Nah, you’re cool though, right?”

“Uh, well...” Case began, folding his fingers on the table. “I work in homicide. Um, at least I used to.”

“So you’re a detective?” Gabrielle inquired.

“Yes,” Case replied. “I’m a detective.” Adam began to laugh, hysterically. Case looked at him with a ghastly grin. “Feeling alright there, buddy?”

“*Yeah!*” Adam squealed through laughter. He wiped an unruly expression from his face and cleared his throat. “Yeah, I’m alright.”

“You see a lot of dead bodies and stuff?” Gabrielle asked.

“Uh...” Case began with a twisted face. “Yeah, there are certain topics we probably should *avoid* right now, okay?”

“Oh,” Gabrielle replied. “Oh!”

“Yeah,” Case continued. “Let’s try to think...pleasant thoughts.” Case popped a cigarette in his mouth and dropped what was left of that pack on the table. “And– What are YOU two doing here?” he demanded. “You didn’t *walk* all the way out here, did you?”

“Our ‘friends’ drove us out here,” Adam explained, making quotes with his fingers at the word “friends.”

“What do you mean?” Case asked, turning to crack the window to his left.

“They ditched us,” Gabrielle told him. Adam began to laugh uncontrollably again.

Case looked at him with another funky grin as he lit up his smoke. “Good stuff, huh?”

Gabrielle started to laugh uncontrollably. “Oh my God!” she remarked once she had stopped. “That– That’s not even funny.” Case took a drag of his cigarette, inhaled it slowly, and puffed out a couple of smoke rings. He looked at the top of the table, narrowing his eyes as he studied it with blinding intent. He smacked it with his hand. The surface of the table appeared to ripple out from where he had smacked it. It looked as if it were made of water.

Adam looked curiously at the table. “What do you see?”

Case looked at him through a pair of hazy eyes. “Ripples...”

“Cool,” Adam remarked. “Hey, I don’t suppose *I* could get one of those.”

“Adam!” Gabrielle screeched, turning to him with a grimace.

Detective Case stared into his rippling face. “One of what?”

Adam turned to Gabrielle, then back to Case. “One of them there smokes you got, there.”

“Ah. You’re kidding, right?” Case inquired. “You smoke, *too*?” Adam started to laugh uncontrollably. Detective Case worked up a puddle of spit on the middle of his tongue, then reached up and put the cigarette out in it. Adam and Gabrielle got grossed out looks on their faces.

Chapter 12: “Mushroom Dream”

Case found himself surrounded by a rich blue backdrop, decorated with puffy, white clouds. It seemed familiar, but he didn't know why. He felt completely at ease as he floated further and further into the gentle serenity of his surroundings. But, after a while things took a turn for the worse. The clouds began to darken, gradually easing from harmless white to hideous black. As they dimmed in color, they began to produce lightning, surrounding Case with thundering chaos. The feeling of floating turned to a feeling of flying, and he began to feel more like a jet than a man. Detective Case struggled to scream, but he could not utter a sound. He fell from the sky, slicing through the darkness. He was battered by torrential rain and giant hailstones with little spikes of ice sticking out of them. He was certain he would be beaten to death as he fell through the heavy precipitation.

He fell faster and faster towards the earth. He crashed into the ground and plummeted through, headed straight for the bowels of Hell. At first everything was black, but then everything became saturated with a bright orange glow. Case slammed face-first into a fiery-hot pit of sand. He lay in pain for a while before sitting up and looking around. He shook jagged dirt from his face and hair. No matter how he tried, he couldn't shake the odd feeling that he had been here before. He watched as two young men about 16 years of age began circling this older man, wielding baseball bats. The older man turned from one kid to the other, pleading with them. Case could not make out what he was saying. The teenagers belched hideous laughter in his face, then bashed his brains in. Case's eyes popped wide open.

“Uh...” he squealed. “Yeah! I've been here before!” Case hopped to his feet, fists raised and ready to fight. It was a good thing, too. It wasn't long before others took notice of his presence. The first group that approached him was a bit familiar, a group of four gangsters. He

remembered watching them run a train on some poor girl the last time he was here.

“Yo, dawg!” one of them beckoned. Case perceived that particular one to be the leader. He looked him in the eyes, and to his surprise his face rippled.

“*Oh, damn...*” Case muttered under his breath. “*I’m shrooming.*”

“Hey, you little white bioch!” another gangster screamed, flicking open a knife. “I’m gonna slice your balls off and stick ‘em up yo ass!” The four of them began to encircle him. The leader lunged at him, but just as before everyone near Case suddenly floated into the air and was jerked away by some hideous, unseen force.

“*Detective Case...*” a voice growled from the depths of Hell. “*So nice to see you again!*” It was as if Hell itself spoke as *he* spoke, the entirety of it rumbling and crumbling and threatening to come tumbling down. Case cringed, dreading yet another visit from the black pope. Satan appeared directly in front of him, twisting up through the sandy floor like a colony of 666 ants. At three times Case’s height, he rose high above. Sand poured from his blood-dripping goat face and furry body. He threw his massive fists on his hips and gazed down into Case’s hazy, blue eyes. Detective Case could *feel* his stare, literally feel the blackness emanating from him as he gazed upon his soul. He hadn’t missed that blood-dripping stare one bit. He had hoped never to see it again. Lucifer stuck his index finger right in Case’s face again. “*You’re mine, Louis Case!*” he bellowed, flames dashing from his nostrils as he spoke. Case winced at that word “mine.” He had seen its color. It was the color red.

“*Synesthesia...*” Case mumbled.

“*Are you...SHROOMING?*” Satan demanded. “*See? You’re one of us after all.*”

“I know,” Case timidly replied.

With a Hellish puff of smoke, a piece of paper appeared in the devil’s massive left hand.

He jerked it towards his eager, yellow eyes to look it over. *“Mwah-ha-ha!”* Satan laughed with satisfaction. *“Says here you even gave mushrooms to a couple of kids you met out in the woods tonight.”* He sent the paper away with a similar puff of smoke as before. *“CHILDREN!”*

Case swallowed hard. “Th-That’s correct,” he admitted. “I was also fired tonight.”

The devil raised his enormous left hand and made a fist. *“For being a drunken bum,”* he grumbled. *“I’ll slaughter your SOUL!”* Case looked at the ground, overcome with shame. *“And what of the one you call ‘Gina?’ ”* he continued. *“You broke your promise to her as well. Your PROMISE! That is the evil of all evils. That is more evil than evil itself. Now, we’re going to tear you apart...”* With those encouraging words, Lucifer sank into the sand. The four gangsters reappeared and encircled Case once again.

“So, wudda you want, cracka?” the leader asked. “Wanna suck my dick, or get that fudge packed?”

“Yeah, you heard the big man!” one of the others remarked. “We gonna fuck you up, dawg!” Case turned to him. He had a red dew rag tied around the top of his head. A fiendishly scarred-up face dangled from underneath. His scars wouldn’t have been made down *here*. His face would’ve had to have been scarred up before he died. Case felt that black feeling on his soul again. It was like a mouth full of bees, a bowel full of broken glass. His ears began to ring. It was like feedback from a thousand microphones. One of them lunged at him with a knife, and Case stomped him in the knee, popping it inside out. As *that* gangster shrieked, the other two that weren’t the leader hopped on Case’s back. Case struggled for a moment, then flug them over his head. He swung around and knocked the leader down with a fist hammer to the side of the head.

The sandy ground appeared to “breathe” the leader in as his limp body fell. Case swung

back around just in time to sweep the one with the broken knee back to the ground. Then, he turned to one of the ones he had flipped over his shoulder. He stuck him with a three punch combination followed by a quick clothesline. The other one swung a fist at his face. Case caught it, swung his arm to one side, and used the force from that swing to flip him the other direction. The leader got Case around the throat from behind. “You gonna DIE, moe-sucka!” he shrieked. Case threw his legs in front of him, wrapped his arms around the top of his head, and fell on his butt. The leader’s jaw smashed into Case’s shoulder, knocking some of his teeth out. He crumbled to a heap on his back. Case hopped up, whirled around, and looked into his eyes.

“Where’s that knife at?” Case beckoned. He glanced around and found it lying on the ground beside the gangster with the crooked knee. “Ah-ha!” He snatched it up and turned back to the leader. “I’m about to gouge them pretty little eyeballs out of your ugly little *face!*”

The leader began to shuffle away through the sand, shaking his head. “Nah, dawg!” Case dropped onto his chest and jabbed the knife into his right eye. The leader filled the air with a hideous cry.

“Yeah, scream, bitch!” Case spat, reeling his head back with a maniacal cackle. He jerked the knife out and began stabbing him in the face. “You’re gonna look just like your little buddy over there!” Case was tackled from behind and pinned on his chest.

“My turn, *pretty* boy!” a sickly girl’s voice screeched in his ear. Case felt a hand on the back of his head, and his face was pressed into the sandy ground. He tried to scream, but it was muffled by thousands of tiny, little grains, imbedding into his flesh. His lungs burned with pain. They felt as though they may burst. He mustered up the strength to flip his attacker to the side, then quickly rolled on top of her. With his knees at her sides, he flipped her onto her back and grabbed her around the wrists.

“And, who might *you* be, sweetheart?” he demanded. “Huh?!” Her face twisted up with a ghastly grin as she belched a blood-curdling scream. Case jerked the knife out of the leader’s face. He clenched his new acquaintance’s hair tightly in his fist, then reached down and sliced her throat from ear to ear. He was greeted with a warm, thick splash of bright red blood in the face. He gritted his teeth. Case reeled his head back and swung it forward, smashing his forehead into hers. He did it a second time, then a third. He bashed her brains in with his thick skull, smashing her head further and further into the sand until it was completely buried. Case arched his back, wincing with pain as his head began to throb. He placed both of his palms against his forehead and sucked air through a set of blood stained teeth.

Case jerked his hands from his face. Now, he was on his knees in the middle of an empty street. He looked from side to side, finding concrete guardrails. The street was on a bridge, he surmised. He looked around. It was filthy. Crumpled papers, discarded chip bags, and the like blew past him in a slight wind that continually rolled down the road. It blew across the street with an unsettling whistle. Case plowed to his feet and walked in the direction he was facing. He realized he could only see so far. It was as if there was a fog preventing him from seeing any further. He turned around and realized that the other direction had the same property. Case looked to the right and left and noticed that there was nothing but grey over the sides of the bridge as well.

He continued to walk, but the more he walked the more he felt like he was going absolutely nowhere. He just found more street, more trash, and more whistling wind. It was like he was stuck in a loop or something. “Hello?” Case called out. “HELLO?!” His second hello began to echo. The echo rose in timbre, continuing into an infinity as it shrieked back at him in a high pitched, whiny voice.

“HELLO?!” it screamed. “HELLO?!” Case plugged his ears, dropping to his knees as the voice increased in volume. He felt as though his head was going to explode. “HELLO?!”

“AAAAAAA!” Case yelled, leaning forward and pinching his eyes shut. “Shut-up!” The echo ceased. Case unraveled himself and stood back up. He patted his pockets. He found a pack of smokes, popped one in his mouth, and sparked it up. He continued, finding only more street and more trash. Each footstep felt lonely. They echoed little snapping sounds up and down the bridge. Case took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled it. He was interrupted by a newspaper that came tumbling down the road in the wind. It flew up and slapped right over his face. Case snatched it aside in an angry fist and looked it over. The headline read, “Detective All Washed Up.” Case’s eyes narrowed as he read the article. It read “Blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah. Blah blah blah Detective Case was fired for being drunk. Blah, blah blah blah blah.” It went on with nothing but “blahs” from there.

Case chucked the newspaper to his right and had another puff of his cigarette. He walked further into the fog with his hands in his coat pockets. The further he walked, the lonelier he felt. He began to feel so alone that the idea of jumping off the side of the bridge suddenly popped into his head. He stopped mid-stride and took one last drag of his cigarette, which was down to a nub. He stomped it out, walked to the side of the bridge, and looked over the concrete guardrail. His brown car was on a street below, parallel-parked against a sidewalk. There were two police cars parked beside it. Their strobes alternated between blinding red and blue flashes. Case turned around and was startled to find the janitor standing right behind him. He grimaced, gazing into his hideous, smashed-up face.

“Louis,” he remarked.

“Dr. Lebowitz,” Case kindly returned.

Dr. Lebowitz walked over to the guardrail, and he and Case watched the commotion going on below. “Pigs,” Lebowitz remarked.

“I know,” Case replied.

Dr. Lebowitz turned to him. “What are you going to do now?”

Case turned to Lebowitz with a shrug. “I don’t know.”

“No clue, huh?”

“Nope.”

Dr. Lebowitz sighed. “Are you just going to let my killer get away?”

“Oh, come on!” Case spat. He and Dr. Lebowitz looked down at the cars again. The two police cars drove away. “I’m not giving up just yet.”

“Good,” Dr. Lebowitz replied. “Now, go make your friends.” Case turned to Lebowitz again. His face rippled. Case smirked, then hopped onto the guardrail and did a swan dive over the side. He fell for what seemed like forever. A gnawing feeling of his guts floating into the back of his throat filled him with unbearable uneasiness. He fell and fell and fell until he was suddenly sitting in the driver’s seat of his car. It happened just like that. One minute he was falling, and the next he was sitting in his car. He reached around the steering wheel and turned the ignition over. He threw the car into drive and peeled away from the police station into a ferocious rainstorm. Unlike in real life, the rain had an unnatural quality to it. Case leaned forward to check it out, and he began to understand why. It was as if someone had added black dye to the water. He could scarcely make out the road. Case only managed to avoid getting in a wreck thanks to a brilliant flash of pink lightning that scorched the sky every so often, always followed seconds later by a rolling, metallic thunder.

Detective Case rolled his window down and stuck his head out. “Wahooooo!” he

screamed, waving his arms. It wasn't long before he was soaked with the murky water. He narrowed his eyes at a couple of shadows on the side of the road. He pulled over to the sidewalk to see who it was and was elated to find his new buddies Gabrielle and Adam.

"Louie!" Gabrielle called out, waving.

"Miss Gabrielle," Case greeted her. "Mister Adam. You guys need a lift?"

"Sure," Adam replied. He and Gabrielle made their way to the other side of the car. Detective Case had a look around expecting rain for some reason, but he wasn't sure why because there was no rain to be found.

"Where are you guys headed?" Case asked as Adam slid into the backseat next to Gabrielle and shut the door.

"Our friends' house," Adam replied.

"Ah," Case returned, and he began to drive. "Not the ones that ditched you."

"Yep," Gabrielle replied. "The ones that ditched us."

Case adjusted his rearview mirror. "Alright, then." He didn't know where their friends' house was, but his train of thought was interrupted by a question from Gabrielle.

"Can he have a cigarette?" she asked.

Case looked at her in the rearview mirror with a smile. "I thought I made myself clear about that a while ago." Gabrielle and Adam turned to each other with a snicker. Case continued to drive. Then, he remembered he needed to ask them where their friends' house was. He started to ask but was cut off by Gabrielle giggling.

"Adam!" she screeched. "Not NOW!"

"Hey!" Case belched with a squinty-eyed glance at the rearview mirror. "The hell is going on back there?"

“Oh, nothing, man,” Adam assured him with a guilty grin.

Case half-smiled, half-frowned. “Mm-hmm,” he muttered back. He whipped out a cigarette and popped it in his mouth before searching for his lighter. Then, he remembered he needed to ask them where their friends lived again. He was distracted by something in the road, though. Captain Ford was waving him down on the side of the road with a flashlight. Case slammed on his brakes, threw his door open, and hopped out to meet him.

“Detective,” Ford remarked.

“Cap,” Case returned.

“Got a real winner, here.” Ford knelt down and lifted a white sheet that lay over a body on the road. Case was not surprised to find Francine Carlina underneath. She looked as she had in her home, four-inch hole in her face, chunks of skull in her hair, blood running down her white sweater. “Look’s like a croquet mallet.”

“Yeah,” Case replied, lighting his cigarette. “You already told me.” He remembered he needed to ask Adam and Gabrielle where their friends were, but when he turned to ask them, they had vanished from the backseat of his car. What’s more, the car was now parked on the side of the road. That’s not where he had left it. Case turned back to his captain with a puzzled face.

“Something wrong, Detective?”

Case snagged a hold of Captain Ford’s brown jacket. “Yeah,” he replied. “I’m dreaming.”

Ford pushed him away. “You’re shrooming,” he returned. “I can tell. You’re FIRED!” His face twisted into a grin, and he bellowed with laughter.

Detective Case looked him square in the eyes, dropping his cigarette on the ground and

stomping it out. “You’re fucked!” he screamed. He dove to the pavement and swept Ford’s legs from underneath him. Ford shrieked and fell to the street as Case hopped back to his feet. Ford writhed in pain on his back. Case reeled back and kicked Captain Ford like a soccer ball. He flew twenty feet away, plummeting to a rolling stop on the street. Detective Case sprinted up to him and continued his brutal assault. “*You’re* fired!” he screamed, smashing him in his pudgy face. “You hear me? I’m gonna KILL you, you chunky bastard!” He smashed his face to a bloody pulp, then leaned back to catch his breath.

He remembered that he was dreaming, and he hopped to his feet. “Lucid dream,” he remarked. “Lucid dream!” He threw his arms up and launched into the sky like a rocket. He flew further and further into the sky until he was in outer space. His eyes popped wide open, staring at millions of tiny dots of light. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Every one of them was a different color. Every single one. “BAAAAAAA!” he shouted, flipping upside-down and rocketing back to the earth. He plummeted faster and faster, eventually smashing into a lonely, trashy street. He lay there for a good while before shaking away the pain and hopping up to have a look around. There was a concrete guardrail on either side, and his vision was limited on all sides by a thick, grey fog.

“*This seems familiar,*” he whispered. He turned around and was startled to find the janitor standing behind him.

“Louis,” Dr. Lebowitz remarked.

Case stared into his smashed-up face and was overcome by a grin. “We already did this,” he returned. “Don’t you remember?”

Dr. Lebowitz smiled. “Did you figure out what you’re going to do yet?” Detective Case walked over to the guardrail, folded his arms on top, and had himself a bit of a think. He thought

about several things. He thought about his life as it stood at the moment. He thought about Gina. He thought about getting trashed on mushrooms tonight. But, most of all he focused on his career as a detective. He recalled some of the cases he had solved. Eventually, he stumbled upon the R.G.K. case, and everything became remarkably clear. He turned back to Dr. Lebowitz.

“You got it,” Lebowitz said.

Detective Case smiled and nodded. “I got it.”

Chapter 13: "Time for a Change"

Detective Case awoke on the floor of the shack in a puddle of his own puke. A putrid scent hung in the damp air, consisting of one part stale sweat, one part stale vomit, and one part stale cigarette butts. He rolled his eyes to the top of their sockets and peered at the faded roof. He rolled his eyes across the ceiling and down the wall, stopping at the sight of the door. He stared through a haze at the door, then rolled onto his right side. Piercing sunlight poured through one of the windows and lay across his face. Case slammed his head into the floor and pinched his eyes shut. "*Son...of a bitch!*" Case mumbled.

"Detective Case?" Gabrielle's voice sliced in from the door.

Case scrambled to sit up. "Huh? What?"

"Afternoon," she remarked with a smile. She stood in the doorway, gazing at him. "Me and Adam are ready to get out of here, now. Could you drive us, please?"

Case smacked a dry mouth. "Um..." he managed to spit out, tasting stagnant vomit on his breath. "Do I look like I can drive?"

Gabrielle laughed. "You look *terrible*."

Case sort of cackled. "Yeah, I don't feel so good, either."

"Why is that?" Gabrielle asked. "Me and Adam feel *great* this morning! What a ride, man."

Case spotted his unopened pack of cigarettes underneath the old table. He reached out and snatched them up. "That's because YOU two," he began with a point of his finger, "didn't have eight screwdrivers before you came out here." He smacked the top of the cigarette pack against the palm of his hand a few times. "I should've thought of that, first." Case removed the cellophane from the pack of smokes. He flipped the top, pulled a foil tab, and brushed off excess

shards of tobacco. He plucked himself a nice, fresh cigarette and patted his pockets for his lighter.

Adam's head popped up behind Gabrielle's shoulder. "Is he finally awake?"

Case flipped Adam off. Then, he used his middle finger to flick his lighter and lit his smoke. "You're going to have to give me a minute," he remarked. Case smoked his cigarette for a bit, then began to feel uneasy. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was forgetting something. He pulled out Gina's cell phone to see what time it was, but the battery was dead. It had been on all night. "What time is it?" Case asked.

Gabrielle looked at her wristwatch. "About four-thirty," she replied.

Case took another drag of his cigarette, then smacked himself in the forehead, eyes widening. "Awe... SHIT!" he shrieked. "You guys got a cell phone?"

Adam shook his head. "No."

"Uh-uh," Gabrielle replied.

Case curled his index finger over his top lip. "I was supposed to be at a wedding rehearsal at two!"

Adam laughed. "You the best man or something?"

Case took another drag of his cigarette. "I'm the groom," he replied.

"Ooooooooo..." Gabrielle moaned. "Yeah, that's not cool."

"No kidding," Case replied with a wipe of his face. "What— What am I going to do?"

Adam thought for a moment, then turned to his girlfriend. "We've got to get this guy a phone, Gab. Where's a phone at around here?"

"Our friend Tiffany's got a phone," Gabrielle told him.

Case squinted. "Your friend *who*?"

“Tiffany,” Gabrielle repeated.

“Could that be OUR Tiffany?” the voice asked inside Case’s head.

“I don’t know,” Case mumbled under his breath so that Adam and Gabrielle couldn’t hear him. *“I would ask what her last name is, but I don’t even know OUR Tiffany’s last name.”* He spoke aloud. “Where’s she at?”

“Not far,” Adam replied. “That’s where we wanted you to drop us off, anyway.”

Case stubbed out his cigarette. “Are we going to her house, or what?”

“She owns this magic shop,” Gabrielle explained. “We go over there and hang with her all the time.”

Case hopped to his feet. “Let’s do it, already.” They left the shack and returned to the mushroom trail, heading back out of the woods. “You two thirsty?”

“Yes!” Gabrielle replied almost immediately.

“I’m hungry,” Adam returned.

Case shook his head. “I’m sorry, guys,” he told them, placing a hand on either of their shoulders. “I didn’t mean to sleep all day.”

“We tried to wake you up,” Adam said.

“Yeah,” Gabrielle added. “I rolled you around all over the shack like a rollie pollie.”

Detective Case laughed. “I guess you should’ve smacked me across the face. How long have you guys been awake?”

“Since one,” Adam replied. Case jerked Gabrielle’s hand towards his face so he could see her watch. It was 4:32 in the afternoon. She wasn’t kidding around.

“What’ve you guys been doing all day?”

Gabrielle jerked her hand back with a smile. “We smoked your last two cigarettes.”

Adam smacked his lips at her. “Gabrielle!”

“I already figured that out, Adam,” Case told him. “I’m a detective, remember? So, what else?”

“Just talked,” Gabrielle returned. “We talked about all the weird stuff that we saw last night. That was really cool.” Gabrielle slugged Detective Case in the shoulder. “*You* are such a pervert!”

Case clamped his hand over his shoulder and turned to Adam. “What’s she talking about?” he demanded, pointing his thumb at her.

“You don’t remember all those jokes you were telling?” he asked. “Oh my God. The one about those two fags.”

“You’re gross!” Gabrielle shouted.

Case smiled as flashbacks began to roll through his head. “That’s why you don’t shroom when you’ve been drinking. You either do one or the other...never both.”

“Why did you have eight screwdrivers before you came out here?” Gabrielle asked. “Was it because you lost your job?”

“No, I did that *before* I lost my job. That’s why I lost it.” He looked down at her. “That’s why I’m going to quit.”

Gabrielle took Case’s hand and patted it. “Well, I wish you would, man,” she told him. “Maybe you wouldn’t be sleeping through your own wedding rehearsals any more.”

“Yeah...” Case said, shaking his head. “God dammit! Gina’s gonna kill me.”

“Gina?” Adam asked. “Gina– Gina–”

“Gina Keller!” Gabrielle shouted. “*That’s* your fiancé?”

“Yeah, that’s her. Is that one of Tiffany’s friends?”

“Yeah,” Adam replied.

Case smirked. “That’s the same Tiffany *I’m* thinking of, then. How do you know her?”

“Her friend lives in the same apartments I do,” Gabrielle replied. “I go hang out with her when, uh...” Gabrielle stopped abruptly. She turned and faced forward.

Case looked at her, then back in the direction they were walking. “Which one is it?”

“Huh?” Gabrielle asked.

“Your father?” Case guessed. “He hits you?” He looked at her, and she looked up through a pair of big, blue eyes.

“It’s her father,” Adam told him.

“Shut-up, Adam!” Gabrielle returned.

Case turned to Adam. “And YOU?”

“Huh?”

“Come on, kid,” Case said. “What’re *you* doing out here?”

“It’s his mom,” Gabrielle said. “She’s always got these guys over.”

“Bunch of damn drunkies!” Adam shouted.

“Hey, watch it,” Case warned.

Adam looked up with a pair of apologetic eyes. “Right, sorry,” he told him. “I mean...not like YOU, though. Jerks, you know?”

Case nodded. “And Tiffany?”

“What do you mean?” Gabrielle asked. “What ABOUT her?”

Case faced forward. “Well, I mean, why do you *think* she...” He paused, retrieving his keys from his pocket and fumbling through them. “I’d really like to talk to her. I think she knows something.” They arrived at Case’s car.

“What do you mean ‘she knows something’?” Gabrielle asked.

Case unlocked his door and opened it. “Oh...right,” Case remarked. “I’m working on this case, uh...” He hit a button to unlock all the doors, and the three of them climbed into the car. Gabrielle sat next to Case in the front, passenger seat, and Adam sat in the back.

Adam leaned forward and stuck his head in between them. “What kind of case?” he inquired.

Detective Case started the engine, put his seatbelt on, and pulled onto Highway 000 North, headed for the freeway. “It’s a murder investigation,” he replied. “I’m a homicide detective, remember?”

“What does Tiffany know about it?” Gabrielle asked. “You don’t think she—”

“I think she was *also* abused when she was a child,” Case interrupted. “I think that’s why she lets you guys hang out with her.” He turned to Gabrielle. “Makes sense, doesn’t it?” She nodded. “Bothers me, though. Girl like that running around. You guys know what I mean? You know, she’s kind of...”

“Crazy?” Adam suggested.

Case pointed at him. “You guys DO know what I’m talking about. I just want to ask her some more questions. That’s all.”

“*More* questions?” Adam inquired. “About what?”

“Don’t worry about it. Now, sit back down, and buckle that seatbelt.” Adam and Gabrielle buckled their seatbelts. “Now, where’re we going again?”

“Tiffany’s magic shop,” Gabrielle replied.

“A magic shop, huh?” Case asked. “What kind of magic does she do? Pulling rabbits out of hats...stuff like that?”

Gabrielle smiled at him. “Not...exactly.”

Case furrowed his brow. “What, then?”

“*You* know what I’m talking about, detective.”

“Wait...” Case trailed off. “Like voodoo and stuff?”

“No, not VODOO!” Gabrielle corrected. “The old...folk stuff?”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Like...the Appalachian stuff? What do they call it...Celtic?”

She nodded. “Hmm, what do you guys know about that?”

“Tiffany...” Gabrielle began with a mysterious smile. “She’s done some things for us.”

“*Never works,*” Adam mumbled

“Does too!” Gabrielle shot back, turning to face him.

“Oh, come on! You don’t really believe in all that shit, do you?”

“Yes, huh!” Gabrielle shouted. She turned to Case. “One time she showed us this thing— You know this thing...” She held up her hands as if to illustrate, then relaxed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Never mind.”

Detective Case reached in front of Gabrielle, opened the glove box, and pulled out a bottle of mouthwash. “Celtic folk magic,” he remarked. He took a swig of the mouthwash, cracked his window to spit, and rolled it back up again. Case smiled at Adam in his rearview mirror. “Celtic folk magic.” He held the mouthwash out for Gabrielle. “Want a bump?”

“Sure,” she replied. She snatched it from him, took a swig, and offered it to Adam, who waved it away. Gabrielle spit her mouthwash out of *her* window, then returned the bottle to Case’s glove box.

“Which way?” Case asked once he had arrived at the freeway.

“Left,” Gabrielle replied.

Adam popped up and stuck his head between them. “No,” he said, “go right, here.”

“No, Adam!” Gabrielle spat back. “It’s a left, here.”

“Which way, guys?” Case repeated. “We can’t sit here all day. It’s rush hour.”

“Which way’s Winchester?” Adam asked.

“Winchester’s right,” Case replied, flipping on his right blinker.

“No,” Gabrielle said. She reached over Case’s lap and flipped the blinker the other way.

“It’s not on Winchester. It’s on Raulin.”

“Raulin’s a left,” Case agreed, and he began to pull onto the freeway.

“Dammit, Gabrielle!” Adam shouted, and Case screeched to a stop. “It’s not on Raulin. It’s on Winchester!”

“Okay,” Case interrupted. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a quarter, and held it up. “Heads for Winchester...” He turned the coin around. “Tails for Raulin.” He flipped the coin through the air, slapped it onto his wrist, and looked at it. “Looks like Winchester.” Case flipped his blinker the other way and squeezed into a torrent of traffic. A couple of minutes later, Case made a left onto Winchester.

“Uh...” Adam muttered. “Wait a minute.”

“Told you!” Gabrielle shrieked, turning to Case. “Sorry, man.”

“I’m too hung over,” Case told her. “I...just don’t care.” He did a U-turn, made a right onto the freeway, and headed for Raulin. Once he got to the freeway, Detective Case retrieved Gina’s cell phone charger from the glove box. It was made for a wall outlet rather than a car cigarette lighter, so he decided he might as well charge the phone at Tiffany’s shop. “Hey, man,” Case asked, “isn’t this a school day?” Adam and Gabrielle began to giggle, and Case shot them each a disapproving glance.

Adam leaned forward, stuck his head between Case and Gabrielle, and faked a cough. “Oh God, man,” he said through his nose, “I think I’m coming down with something.”

Gabrielle woofed out a couple of coughs as well. “Damn,” she added, “I think it’s contagious.”

“Very funny, you two,” Case replied with a smirk.

“Don’t worry,” Adam assured him with a pat on the shoulder. “Tiffany was supposed to call us in sick this morning. She’s got our back.” Case began to zone out, staring at a little, yellow brick building a couple of blocks up. Tiffany’s magic shop was the lonely building he passed on the freeway all the time that didn’t have a sign out front. How interesting. He was finally going to the lonely, yellow brick building on Raulin Street, and crazy little Tiffany would be inside, waiting for him.

Chapter 14: “Tiffany”

“Boy, are *you* in trouble,” Tiffany remarked, standing in the doorway of her little magic shop. She was in odd dress, wearing a white robe with a hood. She looked like she was in a cult. She stared at Gabrielle and Adam through a pair of curious eyes. “Wait a minute, what are you two doing with *him*?”

Gabrielle looked up. “Long story.”

“Yeah,” Adam added. “You got something to eat?”

Tiffany smiled at him. “I just ordered a pizza a while ago.”

“Pepperoni?”

“What else?” Tiffany told him.

“*Yes!*” Adam whispered drawing his fist towards him. He and Gabrielle brushed past Tiffany and into the shop.

Detective Case met Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. “Gina pissed?” he asked.

“She’s on a RAMPAGE!” Tiffany told him. “She’s called eleven times already to tell me what an ass you are. I think you’d better call her back.” She handed him a cordless phone. Case stared at it, shaking his head. Tiffany let the glass door close behind her and walked back into the shop.

“*Dammit*,” Case mumbled. He dialed the number to his and Gina’s apartment. She answered after the first ring.

“*This had better be Mr. Case*,” Gina remarked with a stern tone.

“You– You rang,” Case replied.

“*You DICK!*” Gina barked back. “*Where the hell’ve you been?*” Case felt a rather sizable lump in his throat. He was too afraid to remember the answer to his fiancée’s question.

“Honey...”

“*Don’t you HONEY me!*” Gina fired back. “*Do you even...KNOW what today is?*”

Detective Case made a click with his tongue. “Look, you’re my fiancée, so I think you should know...”

“*Wrong! I WAS your fiancée.*”

“Oh, come on, Gina! It’s just the stupid rehearsal thing.”

“*‘Stupid’?*” Gina repeated. “*What do you mean, ‘stupid’?*”

Case stuck his tongue through the side of his cheek. “We’re not getting married for another few days,” he explained. “We could always reschedule...”

“*No need!*” Gina snapped. “*Now, get over here, and pick up all your stuff out of this parking lot!*”

“Oh, come on,” Case replied with a confident smirk. “We both know you didn’t throw all my stuff out in the parking lot.”

“*Not YET.*”

Case was silent. “I got fired last night.”

Gina was silent. “*Is that supposed to make me WANT you back? Why haven’t you been answering my phone all day?*”

“Because the battery ran out,” Case contended. “Look, it’s kind of a long story...”

“*Well I don’t CARE! You should’ve found a payphone, shit-head!*”

“But, I slept in the woods last night.”

Gina was silent again. “*The woods? What– What’re you talking about?*”

Case shook his head, planting his hand on the back of his neck. “Uh...”

“*You know what?*” Gina asked. “*I don’t care. Alright? I don’t care. Just get back*

here. NOW!”

“Okay,” Case kindly returned as the pizza guy pulled up. “I have to go talk to this Tiffany girl real quick.”

“You’d better hurry up!” she shrieked. There was a click as she hung up. Case turned Tiffany’s phone off. The pizza guy handed him a pizza, jerked a receipt from his pocket, and looked it over. “That’ll be eleven seventy-eight,” he reported. Detective Case took out his billfold and looked inside. He had a ten and two ones.

“All I got’s twelve,” he replied. “I guess that’s fine.” He handed him his money and took the pizza from him. “You keep the change.”

“Gee, thanks, mister,” the pizza guy mumbled. Case watched him return to his car and drive away. Then, he wandered into the magic shop. He found Gabrielle and Adam sitting on a pair of barstools at the front counter. Adam turned around at the sound of a bell jingling as the door closed.

“Pizza!” he screeched. He dashed up to Case, snatched the pizza from him, and returned to the counter. Case looked around. There was a long glass case on the right wall. It reminded him of a jewelry store display case. Tiffany’s wasn’t lined with jewelry, though. Rather, she had a collection of strange daggers on display. Case bent down, perusing them all. He’d never seen anything quite like them. On a table in the middle of the floor, there was a collection of books on spells, herbs, and so forth. He looked through a smaller glass case, which was at the end of the case of daggers. It showcased a row of stuffed dolls. They were white, with black “Xs” for the eyes.

“Voodoo dolls,” Case muttered under his breath.

“Berends,” Tiffany remarked. Case spun around to face her. “‘Berend’ is the old Celtic

word I use. ‘Voodoo’ is a Jamaican tradition.” Case stared at a familiar symbol which dangled from Tiffany’s silver necklace...a pentagram. Tiffany looked down and held up the emblem to show him. “It’s a sign of protection,” she explained. “I know it’s gotten kind of a bad rap over the years.”

Case turned his head and scratched the back of his neck. “Right,” he replied, turning to Adam and Gabrielle. “How come you two didn’t know that?”

Adam finished off a piece of pizza. “I *did* know that,” he replied with a smirk.

“Tiffany’s a...white witch.”

Case turned back to her. “Oh, I’ve heard of that.”

Tiffany smiled and folded her arms over her chest. “What can I do for you, Detective?”

Case handed her phone back to her. “Where were you the night Fran was murdered?” he asked.

Tiffany widened her eyes. “What are you kidding me?”

Case smiled. “I wish I could say I was. I’m not.”

“We were here,” Gabrielle replied. Tiffany and Case turned to her.

“All night?” Case inquired.

“All night,” she replied, taking a bite of a fresh slice of pizza.

Detective Case turned back to Tiffany. “I’ve got to get back to the university and talk to that Greg guy. Hell, talk to anybody!” Case looked away, then back. He pointed at Adam and Gabrielle. “You got another one of those stools for me?” Tiffany walked through a black curtain which hung in a doorway on the wall behind the front counter. Case looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “You guys alright?” They both nodded. “You’re not feeling sick or anything?”

Gabrielle took a drink of her soda. “Should I be?”

Case smiled. "I've been pretty sick from mushrooms before." Tiffany returned from behind the curtain with a stool, which she sat next to Gabrielle. Then, she handed Case a list with five names on it.

"Here you go," she remarked.

"The list!" Case shouted. "You made me a list of Fran's friends!"

"Five's all I could think of," Tiffany told him.

Case had a seat, folding Tiffany's list and shoving it into his pocket. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you soooooo much." He picked up a slice of pizza, shoved half of it in his mouth, and took a bite.

"Oh, did you pay for that?" Tiffany asked. Case nodded. "Here, let me give you some money." She opened a register that sat on the counter.

Case lowered his head and held up his hand. "It's on me."

Tiffany counted out some cash. "No," she insisted. "No, you take this. What was it? Eleven something?"

"It's the least I could do," Case told her. "You know, for questioning you earlier."

Tiffany smiled. "Yeah, that's *twice* you've questioned me now. You're not much of a detective, are you?"

Case laughed. "I'm not even a detective, anymore. I got fired last night."

Tiffany eyes became saddened. "Oh, you're kidding. No wonder you didn't go home last night."

"He was out shrooming with us!" Adam explained.

Tiffany crossed her arms and turned to him. "What's this, now?" Case looked up and smiled, taking another bite of his pizza. "You know these two?"

“We met last night in the woods,” Case explained.

Tiffany laughed. “Wait a minute; what were you two doing in the woods? I thought my friend Diana dropped you off at Ted’s last night.”

“Yeah,” Gabrielle replied, “they ditched us again.”

“See, now I don’t understand that,” Case remarked. “How did you two manage to get yourself ditched in the woods?”

Adam picked up a fresh slice of pizza and took a bite. “They said we’d go mushroom hunting.” He took a sip of his soda. “We got out.” He took another bite. “They drove off.” Case put his hand over his face and cackled.

“Holy crap!” Tiffany shouted. “You guys went shrooming last night?” Gabrielle and Adam leaned against the backing of their barstools and laughed. Case narrowed his eyes. He watched as Tiffany turned and disappeared behind the black curtain again. He looked down and noticed a couple of business cards on the counter. He picked one up to have a look. In the middle it read “Tiffany C. Hanes.” Underneath that it said “Spiritual Guide.” Case studied it and got an idea. He pocketed the card, finished off his slice of pizza, and wandered around the front counter. He took a breath, then poked his head through the curtain. Tiffany jumped at his sudden appearance, and Case threw a couple of apologetic hands at either side of his face.

“Man...” Tiffany gasped from another barstool. “You SCARED me.”

“Sorry,” Case remarked, making his way into the little room behind the curtain. “I uh...I didn’t think that was possible.” Tiffany blew out a nervous laugh. Case looked around the room. The brick walls, cement floor, and sheet rock ceiling were all red. A white pentagram was painted on the floor. There was a small table next to Tiffany loaded with candles that lit up the room.

“Can I...help you with something, Detective Case?” Tiffany inquired.

Case rubbed the back of his head. “Well, I...” He pointed his thumb at the curtain behind him. “You know, I didn’t know...” He curled his index finger over his top lip.

“What?” Tiffany asked, shaking her head with a confused face.

“Does that bother you,” he finally managed to spit out, “that I took the kids shrooming last night?”

Tiffany smiled with a sigh. “No.” Case nodded. “It was irresponsible and childish of you...” She looked into his pale, blue eyes. “...not very cop-like at all, but I don’t care, no. That some kind of of *thing* you do or something? You go out rummaging around for magic mushrooms in the middle of the night in the woods?”

Case uttered a single laugh. “It’s, uh– It’s a long story, Tiffany.”

“I’m sure it is.”

Case had another glance around the room. “So, what’s with all THIS? I mean...this place you’ve got here.”

“You mean the occult?” Tiffany suggested.

Case snapped his fingers, pointing at her with a satisfied grin. “The ‘occult’,” he repeated. “Good word.”

“Well, it’s a long story, Louis,” she replied with a simple shrug.

Case bobbed his head up at her. “I’m sure it is.”

Tiffany looked away with a mysterious giggle. “So, what do you want to know, Detective?” She faced him again. “You want to know if I’m a Satanist?”

Case swallowed hard. “I want to know about YOU.”

“Why?” she demanded. “Why do you want to know about ME?”

Case let out a nervous sigh. “I think...something bad happened to you,” he explained. “Several things, perhaps. Probably when you were younger, that sort of thing.” Tiffany turned away and swatted a tear from her eye. Case turned to his right and nodded. He turned back and began to slowly creep towards her.

“Whoa, STOP!” she shrieked. She snagged one of the candles off the table next to her and held it in front of her. “*Don’t– Don’t come any closer!*” she squealed. Case didn’t stop. He just kept creeping up to her, closer and closer. “Case!” Tiffany gasped. “*Stop...*”

He clasped his fingers around the long, white candle and gently slipped it from her shaking hand. “It’s okay, Tiffany,” he assured her, returning the candle to the table. “He can’t hurt you, anymore.”

“*Stop...*” she squeaked. She bowed her head with a sob, hiding behind her chin-length black hair. Case placed his hand on the back of her head. He could feel her shuddering beneath his fingers. He eased his fingers through her hair. It was like he’d figured all along. She usually acted tough, but she wasn’t. She was just a scared little girl.

“I-I’m sorry, Tiffany,” Case told her. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” She wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face against his black shirt. Case hugged her back. “Tell me what he did to you, Tiff.”

She moaned. “*I told you not to CALL me that.*”

Case chuckled. “Your father– That’s what he used to call you? Tiff?”

She sobbed. “*Yes...*”

“I see,” Case replied, rubbing her back. “And, last night? The smoking thing?” Tiffany and Case let go of each other. Tiffany slowly eased into her barstool. She hadn’t even noticed, but she had slid out of her seat in Case’s arms. She lowered the neck of her robe, and Case

began to understand. He reached out and skimmed his fingers across a couple of circular scars along the top of her chest. He counted twenty in all. “Cigarette burns,” he surmised.

“Yes,” Tiffany told him, throwing her robe back up as Case dropped his hand at his side. “Cigarette burns.” She sighed. “I can’t stand it when people smoke around me.”

“It reminds you of HIM,” Case remarked. She threw her hands over her eyes, leaning forward again with a sob. “Oh, it’s alright, Tiffany.” He patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t cry. Hey, look...there’s something I need you to do for me.”

Tiffany wiped her eyes and tried her best to look up again. “*Wh-What?*” she gasped. “Something *else?*”

Case held up the card he had snatched off her counter earlier. “I need some of these. Did you *make* these?”

She sniffled. “I made those on my computer.”

“What, up here?” Case asked, looking around.

Tiffany smiled, reaching up to wipe her eyes again. “Come on. I’ll show you,” she remarked. She hopped to her feet and took him by the hand. She led him back through the curtain and to a door at the far left corner of the magic shop. She opened the door and flicked on a light, revealing a little office she had set up. There was a desk at the far wall with a computer. It had an old-fashioned CRT monitor, an old, clacker keyboard with a curly cord, and a printer of course. She wandered to the desk, picked up a piece of cardstock from a shelf at the side of the desk, and showed it to him. “See?” she said referring to a grid of perforations it had on it. “It’s already pre-cut.” She stuck the cardstock in the printer, opened a program on her PC, and had a seat.

Case took Gina’s cell phone charger out of his pocket, plugged it into a wall socket

beside Tiffany's computer monitor, and attached it to the phone. He watched as Tiffany typed her name in the top rectangle of a grid on the screen. The layout was similar to the grid on the cardstock. "See?" she inquired.

"Cool," Case replied. "Put *my* name on it." She deleted her name and typed "Lou Case" in its place. "Louis B. Case," he corrected. She quickly fixed it before pressing the return key.

"And underneath?" she asked with a smile.

"Private Detective," Case replied.

Tiffany's eyes widened. "Oh, really?"

Detective Case smiled. "Necessity is the mother of invention as they say." Tiffany smirked, typing in a phrase of her own. Case squinted, studying the screen. "Private Dick," he read. He turned to her and smacked his lips. She snickered and quickly corrected it. "That's great," he said. "Let's put Gina's cell number on it and print out a few." He flipped open Gina's phone and had a look. He shook his head, handing it to Tiffany. "Do you know how to find the number on this thing?"

Tiffany studied it, then looked up. "I don't know how to use those things."

Case took the phone back and called Gina at the apartment. "*Hello, Gina Keller,*" she remarked. "*You about home, yet?*"

"Gina, what's your cell number?" he asked.

"*Hold on,*" she replied. "*555-4422. Why?*"

Case turned to Tiffany. " '555-4422,' " he repeated. "Oh, we're just making some cards on Tiffany's computer, here."

"*You still haven't left?*" Gina asked. "*What in God's name are you doing over THERE?*"

Case smiled. "I'm going to be a private detective, now."

"A 'private detective?' *What the hell are you talking about, Lou Case?*"

"Yeah," Case replied as Tiffany made all the other cards on the screen the same. "I've got to make some business cards so I can go back to the university, tomorrow."

"*Honey!*" Gina fumed. "*You're not GOING to the university, tomorrow! Now, get over here. NOW!*" Case slammed the phone shut.

Tiffany looked up. "So, no cards?"

"Print them," he instructed, tapping his finger on the desk. "Then we're going to get on the old interweb and see what we can't figure out about this Dr. Lebowitz."

"Dr. Lebowitz?"

"The janitor that was killed at the university."

"Ah," Tiffany replied, remembering. "The one you were dreaming about." Tiffany printed Case an entire sheet of cards like the ones they had made onscreen and handed it to him.

"Think ten will be enough?"

Case studied the cardstock. "Better print some more," he replied. "I'll pay you, if you want."

"Oh, okay," Tiffany replied, with a smile. "A hundred grand ought to cover it." Case reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. A frown came over his face once he looked inside and remembered giving the pizza guy his last twelve bucks. "Put that *away!*" Tiffany told him with a smile, waving him off. Case dropped his empty billfold back into his pocket.

"I need something to help me sleep, too," Case remarked.

Tiffany dropped two more sets of cards into the printer and started two more print jobs.

“Having trouble sleeping?”

“I’m going to try to quit drinking, but I can’t sleep at night unless I have a drink first.”

Tiffany looked up with a confident smile. “Oh, I can take care of that.” She stood and walked back out to the store.

Case waited for the two sets of cards to finish printing, then picked them up and looked them over. “Far out,” he remarked with a satisfied smirk as Tiffany returned with a couple of odd-looking teabags.

“Here you go,” she said, handing them to him. Detective Case curiously put them to his nose and had a smell. He squinted, looking them over.

“What *is* this stuff?”

“They’re sleeping potions,” Tiffany explained. “You boil one up in a cup of water to help you sleep.”

Case smelled them again. “I’m supposed to drink this stuff?” he asked, pointing at them.

Tiffany snickered and sat back down. “It’s not *that* bad,” she told him. “I made them myself.” Case pulled up another chair and sat beside her. He held the teabags in front of him, staring at them.

“Well, like...what’s in them?”

Tiffany pulled up a search engine on her internet browser. “Well, let me think...” she began. She began listing ingredients on her fingers. “Kava kava, valerian, skull cap, mandrake, passionflower— Oh, and some chamomile.”

Case cocked his head to the side, then back again. “How much?”

Tiffany looked at him. “Oh, don’t worry about it!” she replied. “I’m not going to charge *you* for them. Here we go.” Case looked at the screen. Tiffany had found an old newspaper

article about Dr. Lebowitz and his little drug problem. He had a close look at the picture of him that appeared at the top of the article. The police were escorting him from a hospital called “Glory Medical Center” in handcuffs. Case focused on Dr. Lebowitz’s face. A chill ran down his spine as he sifted through some of the images he could still recall from his dreams.

“Looks different without his face being all smashed in,” Case remarked.

Tiffany turned to Detective Case with a grimace. “Someone smashed his face in?”

Case patted Tiffany on the shoulder. “You don’t need to worry about all that,” he told her. “So, he *was* a drug-addict. Could this R.G.K. thing have something to do with drugs?”

“No,” Tiffany replied. “The school does random drug-testing.”

“Ah,” Case remarked. He turned to Tiffany with a pair of inquisitive eyes. “How do *you* know that?”

“My friend Diana got fired for smoking pot.”

“Oh,” Case replied.

“She was a librarian.”

“Oh,” Case remarked with a smile. “Why does that not surprise me?”

Tiffany laughed. “I doubt I’ve ever met a librarian that *wasn’t* a pot-head.” She and Case read the entire article, but there were no answers to be found. “Nothing,” Tiffany remarked.

Case shook his head. “That’s how this whole case has been. Let’s find something else.”

“Okay,” Tiffany replied. She stepped back to her search results. They read through them.

“ ‘Meet hot blondes in your area’?” Case read.

Tiffany chuckled. “I think you get one of those every time you do a search.” She

scrolled down the page, and they read some more. Then, Tiffany flipped to the next page of results. “Guess he’s not cool enough for one of those social networking sites or nothing.”

“Yeah,” Case remarked. “See if that hospital he was fired from has a website.” Tiffany typed “Glory Medical Center” into the search field and pressed the return key. Detective Case read the first search result aloud. It read like the title of a newspaper article. “ ‘Glory Medical Center Burns to the Ground’ .”

“Oh, great,” Tiffany scoffed. She clicked on the result. It pulled up another newspaper article, this one about a tragic fire at Glory Medical Center.

“The entire staff and all the patients were killed,” Case remarked, pointing at a line in the article. “Damn the luck!”

“Think it’s related?” Tiffany asked.

Detective Case looked at her sarcastically. “No.” He stood back up. “It means we can’t call Glory Medical Center and find out anything about Dr. Lebowitz, though.” He snatched up his teabags and his cards. “Look I’ve got to go, Tiffany. Gina’s going to kill me if I don’t get home and talk to her.”

Tiffany stood as well. “Alright, Louis. Tell her I said ‘hi’.”

“I will,” Case replied. He looked at her, then put his arms around her again.

Tiffany hugged him back. “You take care of yourself you drunken shroom-head, you.”

“Okay,” he blew through a laugh, and he began to leave. “You take care of those kids out there, alright?”

Tiffany smiled. “It would be a lot easier if strangers would quit coming up to them and giving them drugs and whatnot.”

“Mm...” Case trailed off. “Would you rather they ate the wrong mushroom and got sick?

At least I can show them which ones are the right ones.”

“And we’re all very happy to hear *that*.”

Case scratched the back of his head. “Yeah...” he managed to say. He pointed his finger. “Yeah, that’s exactly why I’m going to quit drinking, right there.”

“Okay,” Tiffany said, kind of laughing. “Good night.”

Detective Case raised his hand to say good-bye, then exited the office, closing the door behind him. “Good night, guys,” he remarked on his way past Gabrielle and Adam.

“Good night,” Adam replied.

Gabrielle hopped up and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Hey, later, man!”

Case hugged her back. “I’ll see you later, kiddo.”

Outside, Case made his way to the car. He popped a cigarette in his mouth and fumbled for his lighter, stopping once he’d gotten to the car. It didn’t feel right, lighting up a smoke, now. He couldn’t shake Tiffany from his thoughts. He kept seeing flashes of those cigarette burns on her chest. It made him sick. He tried to imagine how anyone could do that to poor, little Tiffany. Especially her own father. “*Tiff*,” the voice remarked. Case opened his eyes. He plucked the cigarette from his mouth, turned, and chucked it and the rest of the pack into a trashcan next to his brown car. Then, he hopped into the car and headed for the apartment.

Chapter 15: "The Music"

"Oh, there you are, you little shit!" Gina barked, wrapping a set of cold, clammy fingers around her fiancé's throat. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't STRANGLE you!"

Case backed against the front door, easing it closed. "Gina..." he trailed off. He reached up and slipped *his* fingers around Gina's wrists. "Please don't strangle me. I'm...too tired for that."

"No..." Gina trailed off. "I-I'm gonna kill you!" Detective Case looked her in her shiny, green eyes and raised a curious eyebrow. He jerked Gina's hands from his throat, threw them at her sides, and spun her around. Then, he slipped her into a chokehold.

"Think about this for a moment, Gina," he remarked. "Do you really want to tango with *me*?"

Gina squirmed in his arms. "You...ass-hole!" She tugged at his arm, attempting to pry it from her throat. "I'm gonna KILL you!" Case twisted his free fingers through her curly brown hair. He tugged at it just hard enough for her to feel it.

"Calm down, Gina," he remarked.

Gina pinched her eyes shut with a grunt, then relaxed in his arms. "Why should I?" she demanded. "Do you have any idea..."

"I quit drinking!" Case shouted. He relaxed his arm and let her go.

She spun around on her heels and faced him. "Oh," she gasped. "Well, I don't care! And, I know *damn* well you won't quit drinking. I've heard all this before!"

Case sighed. "Look, I know it won't be easy..."

"Easy? You can't even go to SLEEP at night without having a fifth of whiskey."

"Right," Case replied, "it won't be— A *fifth*?"

“Uh-huh.”

“A fifth of whiskey, Gina? Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. To go to sleep at night.”

Case raised his eyebrows, rolled his eyes to the top of their sockets, and cocked his head to the side. “Well, here,” he remarked, reaching into his pocket. “Look at what your friend Tiffany gave me.” He pulled out the two teabags she had given him earlier, and Gina snatched them away.

She studied them, then dropped them at her side. “What were you doing there, *anyway*?”

Detective Case stared at the wall to his right. “Uh, well...” he trailed off. “Can we go sit down, please?”

Gina’s eyes popped open. “What in the world did you *do* last night, honey?” she asked as Case led her to the cushy blue sofa in the living room. Case ripped off his white jacket and slung it over the arm of the sofa.

“Well, I got canned,” he began, “just like everyone kept saying I would.”

“Yeah, I heard you over the phone,” Gina replied. “What for?”

Detective Case grinned. “Yeah, I kinda, sorta shot the camera at the entrance to the police station parking garage.”

Gina shoved him. “You idiot! What did you do *that* for?”

“Paul!” Case replied. “That PAUL wouldn’t let me in. I shot at *him* first, and he pointed at the camera. So, I shot the camera so it wouldn’t be on tape.”

Gina laughed. “That’s got to be the stupidest thing you ever did!”

“No,” Case replied. “No, it was a hollow point. So, without that tape they can’t prove I had anything to do with it, but it doesn’t matter because chunky-britches caught me breaking into

the building, anyway.”

Gina smiled, pinching the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger. “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Case continued, “I stole the evidence from Francine’s murder from Paloni’s desk, too.”

Gina rolled her eyes, then faced her fiancé. “You’re a moron,” she told him. “You said you were just going to go check out the murder scenes again.”

“Yeah, I know,” Case replied, hopping up and making his way into the kitchen. He reached into the cupboard, found himself a white coffee mug, and filled it with water. Then, he popped it into the microwave for a couple of minutes.

“So, what happened to my phone?” Gina asked from the living room. “And, what were you doing at Tiffany’s little store?”

“I’m getting to that!” Case shouted from the kitchen. “So, I went out to the old mushroom trail after I got fired.”

“What? You mean where you and your loser friends used to hang out?”

“Hey! They weren’t losers.”

“Carter?” Gina asked. “Max? Oh, my God...that Brendon guy.”

“Hey, Brendon was cool, man.”

“Brendon was such a douche! Oh, what about Steve? You remember that *Steve* guy you always used to hang out with?”

“Yeah, I remember Steve,” Case replied. “He was cool, man! He was just a little misunderstood.”

“Misunder– Didn’t he get thrown in jail for screwing some dead chick at the morgue?”

“Bah! She wasn’t dead. Why does everyone automatically assume she was dead just because they did it at the morgue?”

“Well, why’d he get thrown in jail, then?” Gina demanded.

“Health violation,” Case replied. “Yeah, apparently it’s a health violation to have sex at a morgue. It doesn’t matter if they’re dead or alive.”

“Gee, I can’t imagine why!”

“Nah, Angelo— Angelo was the necro.”

Gina turned towards the kitchen. “Angelo? Didn’t you ask him to be our best man?”

“Honey, can I finish my story, please?”

“Oh, right,” Gina replied. “Please...continue.”

“So, I went out to the mushroom trail. It’s an old tradition we used to have back in the day. When one of us got fired from our little schoolboy job or grounded or busted by the cops or whatever, we’d all go out to the mushroom trail.”

“Someone got grounded, and you guys would sneak him out of the house?”

“You bet!” Case replied. “We left no man behind, Gina.”

“Man, that is...” Gina trailed off as the microwave dinged. “You guys were SO screwed up!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Case replied. “So I went out to the old mushroom trail and spent the night. Must’ve left your phone on.” He dropped one of the teabags Tiffany had given him into the mug of hot water to let it steep.

“Uh-huh,” Gina said. “You spent the night, the phone ran out of batteries, and as soon as you woke up and realized you’d missed the rehearsal—”

“I drove over to Tiffany’s magic shop as fast as I could.”

“*That’s* your story?” Gina asked.

“Yeah,” Case replied.

“You went all the way to Raulin to use a phone?”

Case looked up from his mug. “Wasn’t thinking straight.” Gina smiled. She crossed her legs and arms.

“And, just how did you FIND this place you’ve never been before?”

Case smiled as well. “Some kids told me.”

Gina smacked her lips. “Kids? What kids?” Case laughed. He squeezed the remaining juices from the teabag with a pair of tongs and had a sip.

“Hey, this stuff’s not half-bad. Your friend Tiffany really knows her business.”

“Dammit, Lou!” Gina spouted. “What’re you not telling me?”

Detective Case had another sip. “Well frankly, Gina, what happens on the mushroom trail...stays on the mushroom trail.”

“Okay...” Gina trailed off. “So, you definitely got high on some psilocybin mushrooms last night.” Case laughed from the kitchen. “Anything else you’re not telling me?”

“Yeah,” Case replied, sitting next to her on the sofa. “I had to drop those two kids off at Tiffany’s. I mean, what was I supposed to do?”

“What kids?” Gina asked. “Are you talking about...what’re their names?”

“Adam and Gabrielle,” he replied. “I gave them a ride over there, and I used Tiffany’s phone while I was *there*.” Gina turned to her fiancé as he took another sip of tea. “Boy, that is damn good tea,” he told her.

“Ugh!” Gina spat. “You...missed our wedding rehearsal because you and Gabrielle and Adam were out getting high on mushrooms?”

“Gina, calm down. I missed our wedding rehearsal because I got drunk. I wouldn’t have had the shrooms without the sauce.” He took another sip of tea.

Gina looked him in the eyes. “I’m sorry you got fired, honey.”

“Mm,” Case mumbled as he took another sip of tea. “Check out what me and Tiffany made.” He retrieved a couple of the business cards he and Tiffany had made earlier from the pocket of his jeans. He had broken them apart at the perforations on the way home. “What do you think?”

Gina snatched one of the cards from him and looked it over. “When did you come up with *this* idea? While you were shrooming last night?”

Detective Case took another sip of tea. “Yep.”

Gina laughed. “So, now you’re going to be a private detective? Just like THAT?”

“Just like *that*.”

“I see. Think you can make a living that way?”

“I can try, I guess. If that doesn’t work out, I can always find another job.” He took another sip of tea.

“If you could solve this case...”

“Exactly! I might have a whole new career!”

“Actually, I was *going* to say, ‘You could get your badge back’,” Gina remarked.

“Oh,” Case replied, having another sip of tea. “Yeah, I guess that could work, too.”

Gina looked her fiancé in the eyes. “You promise me you’re going to quit drinking?”

Detective Case placed his hand on the side of his fiancée’s face. “Gina...” he began, but he was overcome by a terrible yawn. He removed his hand from Gina’s face and made a fist in front of his mouth. “Ho— Gosh, excuse me.”

“I should say so, honey,” Gina replied. “Now, promise me.”

Case held up his right hand to swear. “I’m promising you, right now. I’m going to quit drinking.”

“Good.”

“Fine,” Case said. “Now...” He began to yawn again. “You wad-uh reschedule the rehearsal, or what?”

“What?”

“Do you want to reschedule the rehearsal?” Case repeated.

Gina smiled. “Oh, sure. How about next week?”

Case thought for a moment. “Right, tomorrow’s Friday...” He began to yawn again.

“You okay there, Lou?”

Case sucked down the last of the tea and pointed at the empty mug. “I think this stuff’s kicking in.”

“I guess SO.”

“Yeah, I’m going to go...” Case was interrupted by another yawn. “Damn.” Case slithered to his feet and headed for the kitchen, but he lost his balance. He fell face-first on the carpeted floor. Gina couldn’t help but snicker. She dashed across the floor and helped him up.

“Honey, you okay?” she inquired, sitting him back down on the sofa.

Case laughed with her. “I-I’m fine. I just need to put this mug up in the sink. That’s all.” Gina snatched the mug from him and took it into the kitchen. Case’s eyes felt kind of dry. He began to have trouble holding the lids open. He opened his mouth until it hurt and yawned again as Gina wandered back into the living room.

“You alright?” she asked.

Case looked up through a pair of hazy eyes. "I'm going to bed," he told her. He carefully stood back up. He took a moment to make sure that he had his bearings this time before making his way towards the hall.

"Honey!" Gina called. "It's not even seven yet."

Case stopped in the middle of the hallway. "*I* don't care," he replied. "I'm tired as Hell. Thank your friend Tiffany for me." He continued down the hallway and took to the stairs.

"Lou..." Gina moaned from the living room. He stopped on the second step. "We haven't, you know...made up, yet." Case stood there, frozen. It was an intriguing proposition. It *had* been a couple of days. He replied with a wall-rattling yawn.

"Damn, Gina," he told her. "If you can get it up, you can HAVE it." He made his way upstairs, slipped into the bedroom, and fell face-first onto the cool covers of the bed. "Ah..." he sighed. "What a day..."

Chapter 16: “A Good Morning”

Case’s eyes popped open. He blinked a few times, staring at the ceiling. He sat up and glanced at the alarm clock. It was 5:47. He slipped from underneath the covers, then took a moment to smooth them back over Gina. He quietly headed for the dresser and grabbed himself some fresh clothes. Today, was another black shirt, black jeans, black shoes, and white jacket day, he decided with a shrug. Once he’d gotten his clothes picked out, he snuck into the bathroom and threw the shower on. Towards the end of the procedure, he summed things up with some solfegé sounds. *“Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti-Do!”*

Gina sat straight up. *“What...”* she whispered.

“Laaaaa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la...laa...laaa,” she heard Case sing from the shower. He singing was furious and upbeat. Gina slowly rubbed her eyes and looked at the bathroom door. *“Laa-la-la-laa-la-la-laa-la-la– LAA!”*

She glanced at the clock, then hopped out of bed and banged on the door. “Honey!” she shouted. She heard the water turn off and the shower door open. “Honey?”

Case’s head popped out of the bathroom door. “Laaaaa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la...laa...laaa!” he screeched at her. Gina threw her hands out at her sides, glaring at him through a pair of wide eyes. Detective Case wandered across the bedroom with nothing but a towel on. She could hear opera music coming from a radio in the bathroom. She watched him walk to the dresser and grab a stick of deodorant off the top. He faced her on the way back to the bathroom. “Laa-la-la-laa-la-la-laa-la-la...LAA!” he sang.

Gina turned around and stumbled back to bed. “Oh, my GOD!” she grumbled. She opened a drawer below the alarm clock. She retrieved a couple of earplugs, jammed them in her ears, and slammed the drawer shut. Then, she buried her face in her pillow. “Should of

THROWN HIM OUT!” she screamed into the pillow.

A few minutes passed, and Private Detective Case emerged from the bathroom once more. “Mm...Laaaaa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la...laa...laaa!” he squelched one more time for her.

Gina sat up and glared at him. “Will you *please* shut the hell up?” she begged. Case chuckled. He exited the bedroom and made his way downstairs. He opened the pantry and found a box of cereal. Then, he gathered up a bowl from a cupboard above the sink and a spoon from a drawer below. He glanced at a large clock on the wall in the living room as he snagged a half-full carton of milk from the refrigerator. “Six-oh-two,” he noted. He set his items on the kitchen table and opened the drapes in front of a window beside the table to let a little morning sunshine in. He opened the window too, smiling at the sound of birds chirping. Case sat down, filled the bowl with cereal, threw some milk on top, and had a big, monster bite.

“Mm-mm!” he yelled. “*Damn*, that’s good!”

“*Shut the hell up down there, God dammit!*” Gina screamed from the bedroom, upstairs.

Case bellowed with laughter. “Come on, Gina! Come on down here, and have some Wheatie Puffs with me!”

“*Just DIE, already!*” she screamed back. Detective Case snickered. He had another big bite and slammed his fist into the table a few times.

“Oh my GOD, that’s good!” He could hear Gina stomping down the stairs. Then, he could hear her feet slapping the floor all the way down the hallway. She stormed into the kitchen, pausing to plant a hand on either side of the door frame. She wore a white nightgown. It had this old-world quality to it, like from the late 1800s.

“You...DICK!” she screeched through a set of clenched teeth. She zipped across the

kitchen and grabbed her fiancé in a chokehold. “I’m gonna *kill* you!” Case filled with laughter. He grabbed Gina around the back of the head and buried her face in his right shoulder. Then, he slid off the side of his chair, flipped her over his shoulder, and snatched her up in his arms. Gina wriggled furiously, trying to free herself.

“That’s called a snapmare, baby,” he told her. “Maybe I’ll show you how to do that, sometime.”

“I...hate you!” she kindly replied. She struggled a little more, and Case tightened his hold. “I’m going to get loose, you...bastard!”

Case looked down, meeting her eyes. “My goodness! Kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Gina continued to struggle. “I don’t need to kiss ANYBODY!”

Case smiled at her. “Will you kiss *me*?” He pursed his lips for a kiss.

“Oh, no...” Gina replied. “Put that away!”

“Oh, pleeeeeeease?”

Gina glared at him. “You are such a *dork*.” Case sat there with his lips pursed. Gina sighed, finally sitting up to kiss him.

“Thank you,” Case remarked, releasing her. “I love you *too*.”

Gina jerked away and managed to stand back up. “Can I *please* go back to bed?” she begged.

Case slid off the floor and sat down in his chair. “You can go back to bed, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let you sleep.”

“Bah!” Gina groaned, storming out of the kitchen. “*Couldn’t get back to sleep now, anyway!*” Detective Case smiled at the sound of his fiancée stomping up the stairs. He shrugged

and had another bite of cereal.

“Mmmmmmm!” he screamed.

“*Bite me!*” she called back.

About half an hour later, Gina made her way back downstairs and entered the kitchen, ready to greet the day. “*Morning, ass-hole!*” she screamed towards the living room. Case was relaxing on the sofa now. He caught a glimpse of her down the hallway. She was wearing a white shirt with red polka dots today and a pair of dark blue jeans.

Case smiled, turning his head towards the kitchen. “Did you have a nice rest, honey?” he asked.

“*Shut-up!*” she called back. Case squinted and laughed to himself. “*You...drank all the coffee!*”

Case turned towards the kitchen. “I don’t like coffee, honey. *You* must’ve drank it all.”

Gina yawned loudly. “*Well– Well, DAMMIT!*” She slammed the pantry door shut.

Case squinted and laughed to himself again. “*Gotta be in class in one hour, and NO COFFEE!*”

Detective Case whipped out his car keys, snatched his coat off the sofa arm, and joined his fiancée in the kitchen. “I’ll go get you some,” he offered, slipping into his jacket. Gina threw her arms around him.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you!” she replied with a kiss on the forehead. “Hey, how’s the concussion coming along?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” he replied. “There’s just a small bump left, see?” He grabbed Gina’s hand and placed it on the bump on the back of his head.

“Ew,” Gina said, pulling her hand away. “That’s gross.”

“Yeah, I picked a big scab off of that bastard while you were in the shower a while ago.”

“Okay!” Gina replied. “That’s good. Now, go get me some coffee.”

Case snickered as he headed for the front door. “I’ll be right back.”

As he made his way towards the car in the parking lot, Gina’s head popped through the kitchen window. “You got this window open? No WONDER it’s so cold in here!” Case smiled at the sound of the window slamming shut. He began to pat his pockets, looking for his cigarettes. His smile faded at the sudden realization that they were no longer there.

“Whoops!” the little voice in his head remarked.

Case’s smile returned. “Oh, yeah. Almost forgot.” He plopped down in the car and slammed the door shut.

“Think you’ll make it?”

Case started the car to let it warm up, then snagged a hold of his seatbelt. “Only one way to find out,” he replied as he buckled up for safety. He flicked on the heater and put his hand to one of the vents. “Tad chilly.”

“Probably won’t need but just a couple of minutes,” he imagined the voice saying.

Case turned to the empty passenger seat. “Probably.” He thought about those three letters: R.G.K.

“You think it could be someone’s initials?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Case replied. “First person I meet at the school today named Ralph or Rudy...”

“Yeah, no kidding. How about Greg?”

“Yeah,” Case replied. “That ecstasy dealer’s name is Greg. He could go by his middle name, I guess.”

“Gabrielle,” the voice suggested, and Case laughed.

“Gina!” Detective Case and the voice yelled simultaneously. “Now if ever there was a killer.”

“Gina Gracie Keller.”

“Hmm...” Case groaned, placing his hand in front of the heater vent again. “All-most.”

“Do we know any Georges or Ralphs?” the voice inquired. Case thought about that as he began to pat his pockets for his cigarettes again. He stopped and smiled. *“Not THERE!”*

Case threw the car into reverse. “I’ll get the hang of it,” he remarked. He backed away from his parking spot, drove to the end of the parking lot, and headed for a grocery store that was near the apartment.

Within a few minutes, Case was at the register with a can of coffee. “\$22.57,” the clerk reported. Case whipped out his debit card, slid it through the little keypad, and punched in his pin number. He looked at the clerk.

“I need fifty back.”

“Sure,” the clerk replied, opening the register.

“And, can you bust it up for me?”

The clerk rummaged around, then handed Case ten ones, four fives, and two tens. “Have a nice day,” he remarked, and Case headed for the car. He took his car keys out and patted one pocket for cigarettes before remembering that he had none.

“Hey,” the voice said, *“you’re getting better.”* Case popped the door open, hopped inside, and dropped the can of coffee in the passenger seat. He fired up the engine.

“I don’t even know why I smoke those stupid things,” he remarked, buckling his safety belt and pulling out of the grocery store parking lot. “They smell like butt, they taste terrible...”

“Someone always spills the ashtray...”

Case looked at the passenger seat and pointed at an old cigarette burn. “They burn holes in your seats...”

“They burn holes in your pants...” the voice added.

Case’s eyes widened. “In fact...” He looked at his crotch. He ran his finger around the crotch of his pants, and, sure enough, he found a small, quarter-inch hole.

“Hate them damn things.”

“Hate ‘em!” Case agreed.

“Thank God!” Gina shrieked as Case handed her the can of coffee a little while later. “I *knew* you were good for something.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Case replied as he sat down at the kitchen table. Gina already had the coffee maker ready to go with water and a fresh filter. She quickly opened the new can of coffee, dropped a scoop into the filter, and closed the compartment. Then, she flipped the switch.

“So, what are *you* doing up so early?” she asked, sitting across from him at the table.

“I’m going back to the school to talk to some more people.” He handed Gina the list that Tiffany had given him the night before. “I’ll check out *these* people and see if I can get a few more names out of that Chad guy. That reminds me...” Detective Case reached underneath the table and snagged a hold of an old revolver he had taped there a while back. He held it up and twirled it around his finger. “Hell yeah!” he remarked, dropping it into his coat pocket.

Gina looked through the list, then dropped it on the table. “Think you’ll find anything?”

“Nope,” Case replied. “I’m going to talk to the security guards, too. There was a camera beside the janitor’s closet that was spray painted. You’d think they would’ve seen...something.”

“You think they saw him?” Gina asked.

“Nope,” Case replied.

Gina scoffed. “Then, why bother?”

Case put his elbows on the table and pressed his fingertips together. “Because I can’t think of anything else.”

“The frat guy?”

“The one that came onto Fran? Yeah, I’ll check him out, too. I need a name, though. Maybe Chad will put that on his list.” Gina looked at the coffee pot. It had barely begun to drip. She turned back to Case.

“Where’s my cell phone?”

Case smiled. “Didn’t you see my card?” He handed her one of his business cards, and Gina looked it over carefully.

“Hey, wait a minute. That’s *my* number!”

“Do you mind?”

Gina looked up. “Well, no. I guess not.” She smiled. “Hey, if my boyfriend calls, just tell him I’ll call him back, later.”

“If *any* guys call,” Case replied, “I’ll find them, wherever they are, and hack them up into little pieces!”

“Oh, is that so, detective?” Gina inquired.

Case snatched his card from her and held it in front of her face. “*Private* Detective,” he reminded her. “Remember?”

Chapter 17: "The List"

Detective Case stood in front of the building where Gina's psychology class was, waiting for Chad to show up. Case had arrived with Gina a few minutes prior, wishing her luck with a kiss good-bye. He held Tiffany's list in front of him, perusing it. "*Greg Sanders*," he quietly read to himself, "*Armando Sanchez, Sandy Falk, Danielle Wallace, and Cindy Schumacher*." He looked up just as Chad happened to be approaching the door. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark shades as usual.

"Detective," Chad remarked.

"Mr. Harris," Case replied with a smile. "You got my list?"

"Oh, yeah." Chad rummaged around in his pockets. He came up with a folded-up piece of notebook paper and handed it off to Case. "I could only think of three."

Case read Chad's list to himself. "*Greg Sanders, Tye Walker, and Craig Phillips*."

"That's the guy I chunked through the window, right there," Chad remarked, pointing at "Tye Walker." "And *that's* the drug dealer," he told him, pointing at "Greg Sanders."

Case patted Chad on the shoulder. "Good man." Tiffany arrived about that time. She was wearing a white sweater today, a pair of red flannel pants, and a pair of black Mary Janes. It was an interesting outfit.

"Louis," she said to Detective Case. "Dick-breath," she said to Chad.

"Fallopian toadstool," Chad replied. "How's things in the old porn industry?"

Tiffany glared at him, then turned to Case. "Where's Gina?"

Case pointed his thumb at the door. "She went to class already."

"Schoolgirl!" Chad replied with a smile.

"Look who's talking!" Tiffany yelled back.

Chad faced her. "Shut-up, ass-hook!"

"*You* shut-up, sex-boy!" she returned.

"What are *you* going to do about it, freak? Cast a spell on me?"

"She's not going to cast a spell on you," Case interrupted. "You're screwed up *enough*."

Chad smacked his lips. "Look, I *cheated* on you, okay?" he told her. "So, get over it, already." Tiffany looked away.

"Yeah, she'll bounce right back, Chad," Case remarked. "Don't worry about it."

Chad threw his arms out at his sides. "What're you...taking HER side, now?"

"I said, 'Don't worry about it'," Case repeated. Chad stared at him. Then, he bobbed his head up at them and turned to go inside the building. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh as the door closed behind him. "Tiffany," Case remarked. "And, how are WE this fine Friday morning?"

"Sorry about all that. Was that *my* fault?"

Case shrugged. "If you hadn't started it, he would have." He turned to her. "The best thing you can do with people like Mr. Harris there is to just keep your mouth shut."

She smiled. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you very much."

Tiffany nodded. "Good. You and Gina kiss and make up?"

"We did," he replied. Out of nervous habit, Case patted around for his cigarettes before remembering that he had none. "Dammit," he remarked.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," Case told her. "Are you going to be alright?"

She looked into his pale blue eyes. "No." With that simple remark, she made her way into the building. Case turned and watched her until the door swung shut behind her.

“ ‘Are you going to be alright’?” the little voice mocked.

Case turned as if he were looking at someone. “*Shut-up,*” he muttered under his breath.

“*Come on!*” it screamed. “*I KNOW what you’re thinking.*”

“*No, you don’t,*” he replied.

“*You like her. Just admit it.*” Case took out his car keys and dashed through the parking lot to his car. He hopped inside and closed the door.

“Don’t start with me, man!” he shouted, pointing at the empty passenger seat. He could just imagine the owner of this “voice” sitting there, laughing at him.

“*You’re in love with her!*” the voice shouted through laughter.

“I am not—” he began, stopping suddenly at the sight of a couple of students in his rearview mirror. He waited for them to get out of sight behind an ugly green van that was parked next to him. “I am *not* in love with her!” he continued. “I’m in love with Gina Keller!”

“*Why did you quit smoking?*” the voice demanded. “*Hmm?*”

“Is *that* what this is about? Would you like me to start smoking again? Would that make you feel better?” He felt as though the voice’s owner was pretty dumbfounded by that series of questions. Case faced forward again. “Should I start smoking again?” he repeated. “No, right?” He imagined the voice’s owner shrugging. Case sighed. “Look, you’re right. I DO like her, okay? I *do*.”

“*And...you want to marry HER instead of Gina.*” Case reached back and smashed his fist into the steering wheel. It wasn’t enough. He reeled back and punched it a few *more* times. Then, he slouched in his seat and took a deep breath. He looked at the building with the Registrar’s office in it.

“We don’t have time for this,” he remarked. “We need to get in there and get to work.”

"We'll finish this later, then," the voice replied.

Case turned to the empty passenger seat. "Agreed." He patted the side of the empty seat, emerged from the vehicle, and headed towards the building with the Registrar's office. As soon as he walked in, his eyes landed on the janitor's door. The police tape was gone now. He made his way to the Registrar's office and looked through the glass square at the top of the door. Case jerked away and flattened himself against the wall next to the door. *"Paloni!"* he squeaked. After a moment, Sergeant Paloni and Gary, the forensics guy emerged from the office. Detective Case narrowed his eyes in terror as Paloni held the door open between himself and Case.

"Have a good day, ma'am," Paloni said into the office, and he let go of the door. He and Gary made their way down the hall and out the door at the end just as the door to the Registrar's office swung closed on its own. Case let out a sigh of relief, then turned and entered the Registrar's office himself.

"Hello," an older lady behind a desk said to him. "May I help you?"

Detective Case smirked. "Those guys that were just in here," he began, "I'm with them."

"Oh, you're a cop, too?"

"Yes, ma'am," Case lied. He handed her his lists. "Can I get a copy of each one of these student's schedules, please?" She slid on a pair of reading glasses which hung from her neck and studied Case's lists for a moment. She looked at him.

"You need this one's schedule twice?" she asked. Case stared at the lists with a pair of curious eyes.

"Oh, right," Case remarked, snatching a pen off the lady's desk and drawing a line through the "Greg Sanders" on Chad's list. *It was* a duplicate of Tiffany's "Greg Sanders" after all. "No, just one will be fine."

She began to type on her computer. "It'll be just a minute, Detective..."

"Case," he told her, having a seat on a leather bench beside the door. After a couple of minutes the schedules began to print out on a laser printer at the end of the lady's desk. She finished printing them and handed them to Case.

"Here you go, Detective Case," she remarked.

"Thank you," Case replied. "Where's the campus cops?"

"They're just across the hall," she replied, pointing at the door.

"Oh, okay," Case returned. He left the Registrar's office and wandered into the security office. He was struck with a grin. There was a desk at the door, and in a chair behind the desk sat a rather large security guard, slouched down, dead asleep. Case looked at the wall behind him. All the screens from all the cameras were lined up, right behind the desk. One of the screens was blacked out. Case kicked the desk, and the security officer sprang to life.

"W-What's going on?" he snapped in a panic.

"I'm with the police," Case told him.

"Oh, man," the guard muttered, "will you boys in blue leave me alone! We...we went over that tape a thousand TIMES. There's nothing on it."

Case grinned. "I see," he said, turning and slithering back out. He had a seat on a leather bench next to the security office and shuffled through the schedules. He pored over them carefully and realized that three of the girls from Tiffany's list were all in the same class right at that very moment, Sandy Falk, Danielle Wallace, and Cindy Schumacher. They would be there until 8:50. Case checked Gina's cell phone, noting that it was already 8:37. He looked at the other four schedules. It looked as though he could catch Greg Sanders and Tye Walker together either before or after the next class at nine. Craig Phillis had a class with Greg and Tye on

Tuesday and Thursday, but there would not be another one of those until next week. If Case wanted to talk to him or Armando Sanchez today, it would be in classes of their own at 11:00 and 3:00, respectively.

He shuffled the schedules around, arranging them from earliest appointments to latest appointments. To this he added a wildcard, Fran's schedule. He had been carrying it in his coat pocket since Gina had given it to him at the hospital. "*Couldn't hurt,*" he mumbled under his breath. He looked at Sandy's schedule, which was on top. Her, Danielle, and Cindy would be coming out of room TB1447 in about ten minutes. "Wherever *that's* supposed to be," Case remarked, looking around. He glanced at the instructor's name and realized that it was Dr. Swan. That was the same class that Gina was in at the moment. He *knew* where that was.

"I love it when a plan really comes together," the voice said.

Case looked to his right with a grin. "*That's just peachy keen,*" he quietly replied. He checked the time on Gina's cell phone again, then made his way to the other building. It was now 8:40.

"We have no idea what any of these people look like, you know?" the voice remarked.

Case stood with his back against a tan, brick wall, facing Dr. Swan's Psychology class.

"Tiffany can point them out to us," Case whispered with a shrug.

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" the voice remarked. Case grinned. "*You know, she could've mentioned they'd be in there with her,*" the voice added. "*We could have questioned them before class. Might've saved us some trouble.*"

Case got a puzzled look on his face. "*Yeah, no kidding, right?"* he quietly replied. "*Why didn't she say something about that?"* Tiffany and Gina appeared at the doorway.

"Mr. Case," Gina remarked.

“Louis,” Tiffany added as they made their way up to him.

“*Oh, boy,*” Case whispered. “Why didn’t you bother to mention that Danielle, Cindy, and Sandy were all in this class with you?” Suddenly, students began to pour out of the classroom, filling the hallway within a matter of seconds. There must have been 150 of them. It was dizzying.

“THAT’S why,” Tiffany told him. “I forgot they were even *in* there.” She and Gina scanned the crowd, and Tiffany managed to make them out. “THERE they are!” she shouted over the crowd noise. She hopped up and down and pointed. “Those three *always* hang out together.”

“Thanks,” Case told her, and he began to pummel his way through the crowd after them. He watched them make their way to the other side of the building and through a set of double glass doors. Case shoved through the last few students and joined them outside. He was just in time for a cigarette break. A funky, charred-up tobacco smell hit him like a sledgehammer in the chest. It was like a pile of dead skunks or a bag of fertilizer. He had probably smoked over 100-thousand cigarettes in his life, yet the smell was oddly unfamiliar too him. Yet, it still had some bizarre hint of familiarity. It made him sick to his stomach.

“Hey, man,” one of them remarked. She looked like a chimney, the way smoke bellowed from her lips. Case cringed at the smell as he looked them over. One was a brunette, one had black hair, and the one that had spoken first was a blonde.

“Hello,” he managed to say. “Which one of you’s which?”

“Huh?” the brunette asked.

“What the hell are you talking about?” the black-haired one asked. The other two chuckled. Case grinned. He had a way of grinning too, especially when he was in a particularly

smart-ass kind of mood. It tended to turn people off.

“You guys are going to make me do this the hard way, huh?” He pointed at the black haired one. “Sandy,” he remarked. Then, he pointed at the brunette. “Danielle.” Finally, he pointed at the blonde. “And Cindy, right?”

Sandy, Danielle, and Cindy looked at each other. “Whoa!” they all moaned.

Sandy turned to Case as she took a drag of her cigarette. “What are you, some kind of psychic or something?”

Case apprehensively pulled out his business card instead of his trusty badge to show them. “I’m a...private investigator.”

“Not good enough to be a cop, huh?” Cindy inquired. Danielle and Sandy laughed.

Case put his hand in his coat pocket and curled his fingers around the revolver he had grabbed earlier that morning. “*I’d like to blow their heads off,*” he mumbled under his breath.

“*Mention Fran. You know, the hole in her face?*”

Case crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m trying to figure out who put the hole in your friend’s face.” Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle got serious. Case pointed at Cindy. “It wasn’t *you*, was it?”

Sandy stomped her cigarette out and stepped in front of her friend. “Hey! Don’t you mess around with my friend Cindy, Private Case!” She stuck her finger in Case’s face. Case snatched her hand out of the air, flipped her around, and twisted her arm behind her back. “Ow, God!” she snapped.

Case tightened his grip and laid his face next to hers atop her shoulder. “How about you, SANDY?” he belched in her ear. “Where were *you* Tuesday night about six or seven?”

Danielle and Cindy backed away. “Hey, man,” Danielle said, “take it easy. We were

here Tuesday night.”

“Yeah,” Cindy added. “ ‘til nine.”

Case bobbed his head up at them, releasing his hold on Sandy and pushing her towards her friends. “See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Sandy rubbed her shoulder. “God, man!” she spat.

“Any way to *prove* you girls were here Tuesday night?”

“We were in a study group in the Student Café,” Danielle replied. “You have to sign in and out.”

“Is that upstairs?” Case asked, pointing at the upper floors of the building.

“Yeah,” Sandy replied. “Now, get lost, dick.” Case grinned. It was that smart-ass grin of his again. He was really quite intimidating when he wanted to be. He began to slowly approach her.

“Ready for some more?” he beckoned.

“N-No!” she shrieked. She, Cindy, and Danielle began to back away.

Case flicked one of his cards at their feet and made his way back into the building.

“Didn’t think so.”

“Case!” Chad yelled through the crowd of students.

Detective Case waved as the door to the building eased shut behind him. “What’s up?!” Chad reached up high and pointed at a staircase at the other end of the building. Case looked. He could just make out a few students gathered underneath. He squinted as he began to fight his way through students. He managed to get a good vantage point, and he stopped. There were five in all. Case smirked as one handed a bag of pills to another. “*Greg*,” he surmised. He watched from the gallows as Greg handed another bag of pills to someone else. At that, he

walked in on them and whipped out his revolver.

“What are you kids doing back here?!” Case barked.

“Damn, dawg!” one of the buyers shrieked as they threw their hands over their heads.

“Who done brought the five-oh up in here?” Case looked at him, closely. He had a couple of healing cuts on his face.

“Are you Tye?” he asked.

“Uh...” he trailed off. He turned and pointed at the other buyer. “Nah, dare he go, man!”

“Man, shut-up, Tye!” the other buyer screamed back. “He’s here asking questions about that chick. Don’t be dragging me into this!”

Case turned to *him*, now. “And, you must be Craig Phillis.”

He rolled his eyes. “Awe, come on, man.”

Case smacked his knee with a chuckle. “You don’t even have a class until eleven! What’re YOU doing here, numb-nuts?” He looked at the other two that weren’t Greg, Tye, or Craig. “*You* two can go,” he told them. Case didn’t have to tell them twice. They quickly dashed out from underneath the stairs. Greg, Tye, and Craig dropped their hands and crossed their arms over their chests. Case dropped his revolver into his pocket, threw his hands behind his back, and leaned against the wall. “Now, Greg...”

“Shove it, pig,” he hastily replied.

“Hey, I got you on distribution, already,” Case remarked. “Don’t be stupid.” Greg put his hands up at either side of his face and turned his head to the side. “So, I hear you were her dealer.”

Greg looked down and shook his head. “It’s always the dealer,” he remarked. He jerked his head up and looked Case in the eyes. “Wasn’t ME, bacon boy.”

Case looked at Tye. “What about you, Mr. Walker?”

“Man, I don’t even know when that chick was killed, sucka.”

“Tuesday,” Case told him. “Between seven and nine.”

Craig smacked his hands together. “We were at the pool hall!” He turned and pointed everyone out. “All three of us!”

Detective Case cocked his head to one side. “You’re kidding.”

“Ha-ha!” Greg spat, pointing at Case with both fingers. “Can’t pin nothing on *me!*”

“Which pool hall?” Case inquired.

“The Side Pocket,” Greg replied.

“Damn,” Case remarked. He reached in his pocket for his cigarettes. “Damn!” He could hear Greg, Tye, and Craig hooting and hollering after him as he walked away. Case put his hands over his ears as his head filled with fog.

“*Ready for a smoke?*” the voice asked.

“Shut-up,” Case turned and replied. He said it right into some student’s face. She gave him a dirty look as she passed. Case turned and watched as she walked away. “Sorry!” he called after her. She turned around and flipped him off. Case shook his head and continued to walk. He looked around and realized that the halls were just about empty now. He headed for the bathroom hall, then stopped just as a Hispanic student wandered out. He looked up and stopped as well. Case reached into his pocket and jerked out the list to have a look. “Armando?” he asked.

His eyes popped wide open. “Awe, *snap!*” he shrieked. He turned and bolted through the front doors.

Case was through the doors and chasing him through the parking lot in under three

seconds. “Armando, come here!” he hollered. Armando ran as fast as he could, but he was a bit on the heavy side. Case drew in close enough, and he jumped forward, snatched Armando around the neck, and dropped him face-first on the pavement. As Armando struggled to free himself, Case tightened his hold. “Stop!” Case told him. “I’ll put your ass to sleep!”

“Alright!” Armando gasped. Case loosened his grip, and Armando jerked away. He plopped against a car and fought to catch his breath.

“What were you RUNNING for, man?” Case demanded.

Armando sucked in huge, panicked breaths. “You the cops, right?” Case handed Armando one of his cards, and he looked it over. Armando looked at him with a smirk. “Man, you ain’t no damn cop!”

Case laughed. “I used to be. I’m working the Carlina case.”

Armando squinted. “The what?”

“That girl that was killed,” Case explained. “Janitor, too.”

Armando widened his eyes. “Man, wudda you want to talk to *me* for?”

Case stood up and held his hand out. “Because you’re the only lead I’ve got left. You have to help me.”

“I didn’t kill the bitch,” Armando replied, taking Case’s hand.

Case lifted Armando to his feet. “Then, what were you running for?”

Armando smiled. “Well, if you don’t know, then why should I tell you?”

“You were here to see Greg, huh?”

“Guess you’ll never know.”

Case smirked. “Where were you Tuesday night?”

Armando rubbed the back of his head. “I was at home.”

“Alone?” Case asked.

Armando dropped his hand and crossed his arms. “Yeah. So, what?” Case looked Armando over thoroughly. He remembered what he had discovered the other night. He had said that the R.G.K. killer had walked right over him.

“This one’s anything but nimble,” the voice remarked.

“You think of anything,” Case told him, “you give me a shout.” He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, only to realize they weren’t there. His head was filled with the laughter of the voice’s owner. He turned around and headed towards the bathroom.

“Shut the hell up,” he whispered.

“Go have a smoke,” the voice replied.

“Blow me.”

Chapter 18: “Checking Up”

“Is this the Student Café?” Detective Case asked.

“Well, what café do you *think* it is?” the girl behind the counter inquired.

“Oh, ha-ha,” Case replied, sarcastically. “Is there a log book or something?”

“There *is*,” she told him.

“For the study group?”

“Yes, sir,” she informed him.

Case smiled. “May I see it?”

She leaned forward on the counter. “Why should I let you?” Case threw his arms out at his sides. “I’m kidding!” she told him, reaching behind the counter. “I’ll show it to you.” She dropped a three-ring binder on the counter.

“Oh my goodness, thank you SO much,” Case sarcastically replied. He flipped the book open and looked through it. Sure enough, he found the names he was looking for, Sandy Falk, Danielle Wallace, and Cindy Shumacher. They had all signed in at 6:30 and out at 9:00 on Tuesday night.

Case looked up. “Beg pardon,” he began, “might I *impose* yet another simple question upon you, your majesty?”

“I’m sorry,” she told him with a smile and a pat on the counter. “What is it?”

“Were you working here Tuesday night?”

She shrugged. “If you call this WORK.”

“Were these three girls here the whole time?” he asked, tapping his finger beside their names.

She had a quick look. “Yep.”

“Are you sure?” Case inquired. “They didn’t even leave to have a smoke or anything?”

“No, sir,” she replied.

Case furrowed his brow. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because they didn’t sign out and back in again.”

Detective Case flipped the book closed and slid it across the counter. “What are you majoring in?” he asked.

“Philosophy,” she replied.

“Figures,” Case remarked, turning to leave the café. “Thanks.”

“*Pool hall?*” the voice asked.

Case turned to his right as he made his way down the stairs. “*Pool hall,*” he replied, quietly. He reached toward his pocket for his smokes, stopping when he remembered they weren’t there. He dropped his hand at his side and continued down the stairs.

“*Just give it up,*” the voice told him.

Case made his way through the parking lot, hopped into his car, and fired up the engine. “No,” he coldly responded. He threw the car into reverse and headed for The Side Pocket.

“*Smoke...*” the voice beckoned.

“Shut-up,” Case told it.

“*Smoke.*”

“Shut...UP!” Case repeated. He came to a red light.

“*Smoke-smoke-smoke-smoke-smoke!*” Case sighed, staring at the empty passenger seat. He smiled, remembering that there was nobody *really* there.

“Like I said,” he remarked. The light turned green, and Case continued to the pool hall. He pulled into a parking spot, killed the engine, and made his way inside. As soon as he walked

through the door, he was slapped in the face with a cigarette smoke backhand. He winced at the God-awful stench. It made him sick. He blinked, then looked around. He made his way through a labyrinth of pool tables and arrived at the front counter. The place was pretty deserted as one might expect for that time of day. He spotted a couple of groups of college kids at a far corner as he reached the counter.

“Hello,” the man running the place remarked. He was big and balding. He wore an old, white undershirt, which was offset only by the occasional exhale of cigarette smoke. “What can I help you with?” Case waved his hand. The man’s cigarette smoke made him dizzy. “Sorry, I’ll put it out,” he remarked. He stubbed his cigarette out in an ashtray on the counter.

Case dropped one of his cards on the counter and slid it towards him. “I don’t suppose I could see your security tape from Tuesday?”

The man picked up the card and looked it over. “About what time?” he asked.

“Seven to nine.”

“Follow *me*,” the man replied. Case walked around the counter and followed him through a door in the back. An old, wooden television sat on a rusty, metal cart. A VCR sat on top of the TV and a couple of chairs faced it. There was a shelf against the wall behind the cart with about a week’s worth of security tapes. The man rummaged through the tapes as Case sat in front of the TV.

“Here we go,” the man remarked. He popped a tape into the VCR and joined Case in front of the TV. He grabbed a remote off the top of the VCR and began to fast-forward through the footage. The angle of the camera was such that Case could see the pool hall in its entirety. There was no sneaking out the back door off-camera or anything like that.

“Stop,” Case demanded. The man played the video at normal speed. He watched as

Gary, Tye, and Craig all made their way into the pool hall. He noted that the timestamp read “7:17 PM.” Case leaned forward and pointed them out. “See these guys right here?” Case asked.

“Yeah, I remember them,” the man answered. “Bunch of noisy sumbitches. They’re in here a lot.”

Case turned to him. “You remember how long they were in here that night?”

“Oh, late. Until midnight, I think. That’s when we close.”

Case snatched the remote from him and fast-forwarded through the rest of the tape. “Come on,” he begged. Before he knew it though, it was just after midnight on the tape, and the three of them were walking out the front door. The lights went out, and thirty seconds later, the tape went to static.

“Told you,” the man remarked.

Case turned and shook the man’s hand. “What’s your name?”

“Benny,” he replied.

“Thanks for your time, Benny,” Case told him. Detective Case poked his head back through the door behind the counter. He was kicked in the stomach with a cigarette smoke boot. He winced at the stench. It was baked in. He stumbled through the pool hall and smashed through the front door. Fresh air filled his nostrils, and he breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Aaaaaaaa,” he groaned. “Thank God.” He fumbled through his keys as he approached his car. He unlocked the car door, jerked it open, and looked at the sky. He threw his hand over the tops of his eyes. He stared at a gang of dark, ugly clouds as they crept across the gentle, blue sky. Detective Case smirked. He dropped down on the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut.

“Let’s get some lunch,” he remarked. He started the engine and headed for a diner he

had passed along the way. “Hopefully this place has a non-smoking section.” He imagined the voice laughing. A few minutes later, Case pulled into the parking lot of the diner and found himself a nice, cozy parking spot right next to the entrance. As he moseyed up to the door, he plucked his notepad and a pen from his coat pocket to jot down a few notes while they were still fresh on his mind. He pushed through the door and stood in front of a podium with no greeter. “*Gary, Craig, and Tye were at The Side Pocket from seven-seventeen to twelve-oh-nine,*” he whispered to himself as he wrote. “*Sandy, Cindy, and Danielle were at the Student Café from six-thirty to nine-o-clock.*”

A girl appeared behind the podium. “How many?” she asked.

Detective Case looked up from his notes. “Uh...”

“Two,” a girl’s voice rang out from behind. He whirled around to find Tiffany standing there. She waved at him kind of skittishly, hiding behind a nervous smile.

“*Oh, joy...*” Case mumbled under his breath. He could hear the voice laughing at him as he turned back to the greeter girl. “Uh...”

“Smoking or non-smoking?” she asked him.

“NON-smoking!” he belched, pointing a very confident finger at her. Case and Tiffany followed as she turned and led them into the dining area.

Case turned to Tiffany on their way through the doorway. “Where’s Gina?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Tiffany replied. “It’s kind of hard to get in touch with her when *you’ve* got her phone.” Case bobbed his head up at her. “Hey how’s the big case coming along?” she asked. Case blew a breath through his lips.

“Here we go,” the greeter remarked. Tiffany and Case sat across from one another at a small, booth table she had brought them to. “I’ll get your waitress.”

“How did you get all the way over here?” Case inquired.

“Walked.”

Detective Case nodded. “Man, that’s a pretty good walk.”

She shrugged. “Gina was supposed to meet me at the Student Café, but she never showed. So, I came over here.”

Case held his hands out at either side. “That’s a hell of a walk!” he repeated.

“Well, what do *you* care?” she asked with a curious smirk. “And, what’re YOU doing here?”

“Checking out alibis.” Tiffany turned away with a nod as their waitress arrived and handed them each a menu.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked.

“Water,” Tiffany replied.

“Let me get a b...” Case began, stopping suddenly with a smack on the table. He could hear the voice laughing at him again. “*Shut-up, you little prick.*” he muttered under his breath.

“He’ll have an iced tea,” Tiffany told their waitress.

Case patted the table again, looking up with a point across the table at her. “Sweet,” he added.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she replied, writing everything down as she walked away.

“I couldn’t have come up with that,” Case remarked.

“I *knew* I was good for something,” Tiffany replied, having a peek at her menu. “How long has it been?”

“Since I had a drink?” Case thought about that. “Night before last.”

“Good,” she told him. “And, how’s that going?”

Case picked up his menu and glanced at it. “I could sure go for one right now.”

She looked up. “Just...try not to think about it.”

“I *am*,” he told her without looking up from his menu. “But, somebody keeps asking me questions about it.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

After Case finished his lunch, he stared through a window across the walkway from them. It was a large window with a grid of wood paneling over it. The sun snuck behind some clouds, and things became a little darker. The clouds he had noticed earlier were beginning to wrap the sky in a black cloak. There were a few trees scattered around the diner. Their orange leaves barely clung to their flimsy branches as they swirled with vigor. The wind was picking up. He nodded and had a sip of his iced tea.

“Storm’s coming,” he remarked. Tiffany patted her lips with her napkin. She turned to the window, then returned to her meal. Detective Case faced her. “Hey, Tiffany,” he began, “*you’re* a witch. What do you know about hexes?”

Tiffany looked up and finished chewing. “I’m not a witch, per se.”

“Oh,” Case replied.

“More like a...scholar.” She narrowed her eyes. “You know what I mean?” He shrugged. “Why do you want to know about hexes?”

Case took another sip of tea. “I swear I’m hexed...lately, you know?”

Tiffany laughed. “You’re not *hexed*, man.” She had a sip of water.

“I could be though, right?” he inquired.

“Well, if you seriously believe to be hexed, the best thing to do, to start off that is, would

be to make a list of possible suspects.”

“Oh, I see,” Case replied. He took another sip of tea.

“I’d also like to see a list of all the things that have been happening to you lately.” She looked up. “Like, all the things that make you think you’re hexed.”

“Mm,” Case mumbled.

“I’d need to see just how many bad things have really been happening to you before I can truly suspect that a ‘hex’ has taken place, as you put it.” She had another bite. “There’s coincidence, and then there’s...something more.” Case turned back to the window. A flash of lightning twinkled in the distance. He turned back to Tiffany.

“How...” he began. “What would a person have to...”

Tiffany widened her eyes as she swallowed. “Do what, now?”

“How might a person go about doing such a thing?” he managed to spit out. “Like getting me fired, for example.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Tiffany replied. “Like I said, I need a list before I can determine exactly what’s going on. Like, a list of complaints, basically.” Detective Case had another sip of tea. “If I were to guess, though, I would say that you’re dealing with someone that’s pretty experienced.” Case nodded. “That person would have to be ‘enchanted’ as we say.”

Their waitress appeared beside them. “Can I take your plate, sir?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Case replied, handing her his plate and silverware. She took everything from him, and then she was gone. Case leaned in. “Enchanted?”

Tiffany took another bite off her plate, then had a sip of water. “The terminology varies from...whatever you want to call it...religion to religion, but yeah. The person is probably *enchanted*, or the person is in possession of power in some respect.”

“Mm-hmm,” Case remarked, having another sip of tea.

“Like,” Tiffany continued, “have you ever owned something that was very special to you? ‘Possessed it,’ as it’s said?”

“Well, yeah,” Case said. “Like, I got this old cigarette lighter that Gina gave me back in high school. I keep it in my sock drawer, and every time I see it, I remember those days, you know?”

“And how does that make you feel?” she asked.

Case thought for a moment. “Well, it makes me feel...kind of good, I guess.”

“It makes you feel *empowered*, right?”

Case had another sip of tea. “Well, yes. Yes, it does. She gave me that back when we first met.”

“There, you see?” Tiffany asked. “That feeling is what we call ‘charm.’ There is a certain energy, right? An energy...that seems to come from the lighter itself.”

“So, I could hex somebody with *that*?” Case asked.

“Well, that’s not much of a charm,” Tiffany replied. “You’ll probably need something a little stronger than a lighter.”

“Like what?” Case wondered.

“Something organic, usually.” She had another bite and laid her fork down on her plate. “Something alive. Maybe something dead...” Case cringed. “Like I say, though, it really depends on who you’re dealing with. See, I don’t have a clue who we’re dealing with or what they’re into.” Gina’s cell phone began to ring. Case plucked the phone from his pocket and looked at the screen. “Who is it?” Tiffany asked.

“That’s Paloni’s number,” Case remarked. He flipped the phone open and put it to his

ear. “Sarge,” he mused. “What’s the dill, pickle?”

“*Hey!*” Paloni responded. “*Private Dick-Head! How’s everything going?*”

Case smiled. “Found one of my cards, eh?”

“*Yeah, from this guy at the pool hall over here.*”

“That would be...Benny,” Case remarked. “So, what’s up?”

“*We’ve got another body. That’s ‘what’s up’.*”

Case’s heart began to race. “You’ve gotta be SHITTING me!” he screeched. He took the phone away from his face. “Sorry, everybody!” he called out. He put the phone back to his ear. “So what are you calling *me* for?” Sergeant Paloni was silent. “Sarge?”

“*Oh...*” he trailed off. “*It’s just that– There’s just some confusion here. That’s all.*”

“You guys don’t have a clue what’s going on, do you?” Paloni was silent again. “Hey, you and me both, pal,” Case told him. “Every single lead I’ve had is a dead end.”

“*Well, come down here and check this out, would you? Maybe you’ll pick up on something I haven’t, yet.*”

Case cackled, smacking the table a couple of times. “Don’t tell me you need *my* help! You mean Captain Chunky Butt is actually going to allow ME to set foot in a real-life, actual crime scene?”

“*Captain Ford...isn’t HERE!*” Paloni replied.

“Ha!” Case returned. “So, what kind of evidence do you have over there?”

“*Just get down here,*” Paloni told him. “*You know how Big Brother is on these cellualars.*”

Case looked up as Paloni reeled off the address to him. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he replied, and he flipped Gina’s phone closed.

“ ‘A real-life, actual crime scene’?” Tiffany repeated. “Was there another murder?”

Case had a sip of his tea. “Yes. Are you ready? I’ll take you back.”

Tiffany turned around, found their waitress, and raised her hand. “Ma’am, can I get the check, please?” their waitress waved at her, then left to get it.

“Maybe I’ll finally find...*something*,” Case remarked.

“Not going so well, huh?”

Case ran his hand over his face, pulling his bottom eyelids down. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” he replied. “I’ve been hexed! I’m not getting ANYWHERE. I checked out everyone on you and Chad’s lists—”

“Oh, not *him!*” Tiffany interrupted.

“I checked them all out, Tiffany, and I’ve got DICK. I need a lead so badly.” Case finished off his tea as their waitress handed Tiffany the check. “What do I owe?” Case asked, taking out his billfold.

“No,” Tiffany replied, “you get the tip. Two bucks.”

Case looked at her. “No, Tiffany. I’m paying for *mine*.”

“No! You paid for the pizza last night, and you’re driving me back to school. *I* got it.”

Case laid two tens on the table. “I got it!” she assured him, stuffing the cash back into his wallet.

“You get the *tip!*” Case looked around. *Everyone* in the restaurant was staring at them. He laid a couple of ones on the table and put his billfold away.

“Fine. Let’s get out of here.”

Tiffany smacked her lips through a smile. “Thank you!”

Chapter 19: “The Genesis”

“Thanks, Louis,” Tiffany remarked. She stood in front of the university with Case’s car door open.

“Hey, thanks for lunch,” Case replied.

“I *owed* you!” Tiffany shouted back. “You’re not going to start in with THIS again, are you?”

“It’s cool, man,” he assured her with a kind smile. “I’ll catch you later, alright?”

“Bye,” she replied with a smile of her own. She shut the door, and Case headed for the latest crime scene.

“Man,” he remarked, “feels good to be full.”

“A *smoke sure would hit the spot*,” the voice replied.

Case looked at the empty passenger seat. “Sure would smell the car up.”

He imagined the voice laughing. “*Yeah. It would.*”

“Maybe a stick of gum, though.” Case popped the glove box open and rummaged around. He came up with a half-empty pack of wintergreen gum he had tossed in there a couple of months ago. “There we go,” he decreed, popping a stick of gum in his mouth and dropping the rest of the pack in his coat pocket. Case arrived at the scene moments later and spotted Gary before he’d even had a chance to park. He was running up to his driver’s side door.

“Private Detective Case!” Gary yelled tapping on the window. Case slowed to a stop and rolled the window down.

“Yes, Gary?”

Gary stuck his hand through the window, and Case shook it. “So glad you could make it, Case,” he remarked. “We need you here so badly.”

“Gary, let go of my hand, man,” Case demanded.

“Hey, sorry,” Gary replied, prying his fingers away. “It’s just that we’re SO happy to see you, here.”

Case snickered. “Not going so well?” Gary bobbed his head up at him. Case pulled away to park his car, then hopped out to join the rest of the crew. This included Crosier and Vick, who were a couple of new detectives.

“Private Detective Case!” Vick greeted him.

“Detective Vick,” Case replied with a pat on the arm.

“Case,” Crosier remarked, reaching out to shake Case’s hand.

“Crosier,” Case returned, smacking Crosier’s open palm.

“Detective Shit-Head!” Paloni declared, holding up his fist.

“Sergeant Porn Star!” Case replied, bumping knuckles with him. “I heard you jerks just couldn’t make it without me.”

“Yeah-yeah,” Paloni replied. “Get up in there already so we can finish this.” Led by Case, the quintet piled into the crime scene, an apartment this time. Case stopped and had a long look at the front door. Crosier, Vick, and Gary brushed past him and continued into the apartment. “R.G.K.” was written in blood on the door, nice and big so that everyone would be sure and see it. The blood ran down from the letters in little drips, all the way to the bottom of the door. It pooled on the tan carpet.

“Come on, Detective,” Paloni remarked with a pat on the back.

Case looked at him, pointing at the door. “You figured that out yet?” he asked.

“It has to be someone’s initials,” Paloni replied, “but we haven’t figured out *who*’s yet, no.”

“Hmm,” Case mumbled. “Well, that makes three.”

Paloni squinted. “You mean TWO.”

Case squinted back with a laugh. “Oh, yeah. You guys never looked under the sink, did you?”

“You mean at Fran’s?” Paloni asked. “You found another R-G-K at Fran’s?”

“We must’ve missed it,” Case replied with a nod.

Paloni whipped out a notepad and scratched down a couple of things. “Well-well-well,” he remarked, following Case into the apartment. Gary motioned for them around the corner of a short hallway.

“Back here, guys. In her office.” Case wandered into the kitchen and spit his gum into the trash, then joined everyone in the office. “Her name was Betsy Clark,” Gary remarked. “She’s also a student at the university.” Case looked at the body from the doorway. It was tied to a computer chair with rope, like Francine had been tied to her recliner. This time, a pickaxe had been used as the murder weapon. It stuck out of the back of her head. It had been driven into her skull so hard that the point was sticking out of her chin.

Case looked at Gary. “Prints?”

“None so far,” Gary told him. “We haven’t moved the body, though.”

“Hairs or fibers?”

“None,” Gary assured him.

Case turned to him. “Not even a footprint?”

“Nothing.” Gary held up a box of latex gloves. Case grabbed a pair, snapped them on, and walked up to the body for a closer look. “Get your camera, Gary,” he instructed. Gary left the room briefly before returning with a camera. Gary snapped a couple of photos as Case untied

the victim. He lifted her shirt, searching for bruises or cuts...anything. He found nothing. Case stood up and ran his fingers through her scalp. He found a concussion on the back of her skull. "Gary," Case declared pointing at the bump, and Gary snapped a couple of photos.

"He knocked her out...tied her up?" Paloni surmised.

Case looked up. "I think so. There has to be *something*." He flipped Betsy's eyelids open and had a look. They were just beginning to cloud up. There was a flash of lightning through a window in the office, followed by thunder. Case snapped his fingers, pointing towards the front door. "Someone get some plastic over that door before it starts to rain and washes our signature off." Vick and Crosier left the office to cover the door. "Sarge," Case remarked, motioning for him to come closer. Paloni walked up and looked into her eyes.

"She died in the past couple of hours," Paloni noted, jotting down a couple of additional notes.

"Alright," Case declared. "Everyone get your gloves on." Paloni and Gary snapped on a pair of latex gloves.

"What's up?" Paloni asked.

"Hold her," Case replied. "I'm going to get this pickaxe out of her head, and we're going to lay her on the floor."

Paloni looked at him. "What are we...M-Es now?"

"Gary, lay something on the floor so we don't get this shit all over the carpet," Case remarked. Gary left the room to get some of the plastic that the other two detectives were using to cover the door.

"What do you think we'll find?" Paloni asked. He flicked open a knife and cut the ropes that bound Betsy's body to the computer chair.

“I don’t know, but I’m not leaving here until I find SOMETHING.” Gary returned with a giant roll of plastic and rolled some across the floor. “Ready?” Case inquired.

“Hold on,” Gary replied, getting everything situated. “Okay.” Case gripped the handle of the pickaxe and began to twist it back and forth. Paloni and Gary held Betsy in place as best as they could. They could hear her brains squishing as Case jerked on the pickaxe. Gary let out a nervous breath beneath a pair of narrow eyes as Paloni shook his head. Case managed to inch the pickaxe all the way out, and he turned and laid it gently on the plastic. Then, he grabbed Betsy underneath the arms.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Paloni replied.

“1-2-3,” Case remarked, and they lifted the body into the air, turning to lay it on the plastic next to the pickaxe. Case pored over the computer chair, then rolled it out of their way. “Alright, everybody,” he mused, “start looking.” The three of them knelt down and patted away at her lifeless body. Paloni found a set of car keys in the pocket of her jeans, and Gary found a broken cigarette. That was all, though. Case slipped off her shoes and smacked them together so that anything inside would fall out, but there was nothing there, either.

“Dammit!” Paloni shouted. “Now, what?”

“Take all her clothes off,” Case suggested. “Hell with it.” Paloni yanked her shirt off, and the three of them stared at her white, blood-soaked bra.

“I can’t do this,” Gary remarked, ripping his gloves off.

“That’s alright, Gary,” Case told him. “You helped us move her. Go help Vick and Crosier cover the door.” There was another flash of lightning followed by a roar of thunder. “And, hurry up!” he added.

“Roger,” Gary said with a wave of his hand as he dashed through the doorway.

Case slid off her jeans, and Paloni removed her undergarments. “Just like the good old days, eh Case?” Paloni remarked. He removed a magnifying glass from his pocket and pored over her naked body. Case snatched up a dusting kit and dusted for fingerprints. They stood up and looked the body over once they’d finished.

“I got nothing,” Case remarked.

“Let’s flip her over,” Paloni replied. He grabbed Betsy under the arms, and Case grabbed her ankles.

“1-2-3,” Case mused, and they turned her over and laid her on her stomach.

“Tattoo,” Paloni remarked pointing at a tattoo of a broken heart on her right shoulder blade. Case snatched up Gary’s camera and snapped a couple of photos. Then, they searched and dusted the back side of her body. They stood up and looked at each other. Case shook his head. “Flip her back over,” Paloni told him. They knelt down and flipped her back over. Detective Case left the office briefly, returning after a moment with a comforter from her bedroom. He laid the blanket over Betsy’s body to cover her nakedness, then stood up and smacked his left palm with his right fist.

“God *dammit!*” he snapped.

“Look in her mouth,” Paloni suggested with a point of his finger. Case knelt down and pried her mouth open. His eyes widened. He looked up with a grin. “You’re kidding me,” Paloni remarked as lightning flashed, followed by thunder. Detective Case reached inside of her mouth and withdrew a long, silver necklace. He held it up at the end, letting it drop out of his hand and unravel. He stared at the emblem. Finally, they had *something*. “What is it?” Paloni demanded.

Case looked at him. “It’s a pentagram.”

Chapter 20: "The Elements"

Case arrived at Tiffany's magic shop, parking just as lightning crackled across the sky, followed by a roll of thunder. Rain poured from the sky and dribbled across the hood of his car. He killed the engine and held his hand in front of him with his fingers closed around the necklace. With the end of the necklace wrapped around his index finger, he let his fingers go slack. The necklace poured out and hung from his finger. He stared at the pentagram dangling from the end, then snatched up his umbrella from the backseat. Case dropped the necklace into his coat pocket and emerged from the car. He popped the umbrella open and made his way up to Tiffany's little yellow brick shop. The little bell jingled as he walked through the door. He was not surprised to find Adam and Gabrielle sitting at the front counter on a couple of barstools.

"Detective Case," Adam remarked.

"Louie!" Gabrielle shouted. "What's up, man?" He looked them over. Today, Adam had on a pair of black jeans, a t-shirt with some punk band on the front, and his red sneakers. Gabrielle looked more like a little schoolgirl tonight, wearing a white button-up shirt with long-sleeves, a grey skirt that reached down to her knees, and a pair of black flats.

"Where's Tiffany?" Case asked. Tiffany popped out from the curtain at the back of the counter. She was wearing her white robe with the pentagram necklace, hood *up* this time.

"Right here, copper!" she screamed with a playful smile. Her face went blank as she caught sight of him. She reached up and pulled her hood down. "What's up? You didn't come all the way down here to pay me back for lunch, did you?"

Case pressed his lips together. "I...came down here to show you something."

Tiffany wandered around the counter and walked up to him. "Oh, really?" she inquired. "What did you get me, Louis?" She stopped a few feet from him and crossed her arms over her

chest.

“Evidence,” Case replied.

Tiffany got a puzzled look on her face. “ ‘Evidence’?” she repeated.

“You know the girl that was killed this morning?”

“Yeah,” Tiffany returned. “The whole school’s talking about it. Betsy someone...”

“We examined the body...” Case began.

“And?” Case jerked the necklace out of his pocket. He dangled it from his finger for her to see.

“And, we found THIS stuffed in her mouth. Oddly enough, I thought of *you*.”

Tiffany squinted as she took a good look at the emblem. “This was in her mouth?” she asked.

“THAT’S gross!” Gabrielle remarked.

Tiffany shrugged. “Well, it’s not one of mine, if that’s what you mean.”

Case glanced at the necklace, then back at her. “Not one of *yours*? You’re telling me there’s another person on God’s green earth that actually OWNS one of these?”

“This one’s different than mine,” she told him. Tiffany grasped her pentagram with her index finger and thumb. She held it next to the one that Case was holding to show him. “See? That one’s inverted.” Case took another look. He noticed for the first time that the star was upside-down.

“Oh. What does that mean?”

Tiffany laughed. “Tell him, Adam.”

Case turned to Adam for an explanation. “It means that it’s evil,” Adam told him.

“If...you believe in that sort of stuff.”

Case turned back to Tiffany. “Uh!” Tiffany grumbled. She held up her pentagram for him to see again. “The pentagram has long been known as a symbol for the five traditional elements: water, earth, fire, divinity, and air. To possess the pentagram is to possess the known forces of the universe.” She pointed at the necklace that Case had. “*That* one represents the negative of our elements. It symbolizes the Goat of Lust as it attacks the heavens with its horns.”

Case studied the emblem closely. “ ‘The Goat of Lust’?” he repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tiffany smiled. “That’s the devil, silly.” Case’s eyes popped open. Memories from recent dreams flooded his thoughts. He remembered soaring through a pretty blue sky, only to become surrounded by darkness and plummet to the ground. He remembered crashing into the earth, drilling through, and tumbling into the corridors of Hell. He recalled the violence, the insanity, and the sexuality of it. And, last but not least, he became blinded with blood-dripping images of Satan. His hideous face glared down from above, flames shooting from his nostrils as he bellowed with ferocity. It was the face of a goat, just as Tiffany described. “Are you alright, Louis?” Tiffany asked. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’ve met him,” Case told her.

“Huh?”

“The Goat of Lust...Satan.”

“W-What do you mean ‘you’ve met him’?” Tiffany inquired.

“You know, while I was asleep.”

Tiffany furrowed her brow. “You mean in a dream?”

Case looked at the floor, then back up. “I don’t think so.”

Tiffany widened her eyes and nodded. “Mm-hmm,” she mused. “That’s– I don’t know

what that is.”

Case placed his hand on her shoulder. “Tiffany, I’m hexed. I’m telling you!” He stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Someone sent me straight to Hell!”

“That’s weird,” Adam interrupted.

“He’s kidding, Adam,” Tiffany told him. She turned back to Case. “Tell him you’re kidding.”

“What’s he like?” Gabrielle asked.

Case narrowed his eyes. “Who, the devil?”

“Yeah.”

Case nodded his head, thinking about it. “He...never swears.”

Adam nodded. “That figures.”

Gabrielle turned to him. “No kidding, huh?”

“Okay,” Tiffany said, walking back to the register. “I think we’ve gotten off the subject a bit.”

“Right,” Case replied. He retrieved an evidence bag from his pocket, dropped the necklace inside, and replaced it. “So, who would be carrying a necklace like *this* one?” Tiffany sat at one of several barstools that were scattered around the counter. She looked at Case and smiled.

“Well, I suppose someone evil.”

Case shared her smile and rolled his eyes. “Gee, how did you ever think of *that* one?”

“I know, huh?” Tiffany replied. The door to the store opened, and Case turned around to find the pizza guy from the other night. He stood beneath an umbrella of his own.

“Eleven seventy-eight,” he remarked.

“Far out,” Case replied, producing his billfold.

“Engh!” Tiffany spat. “Don’t you do it!”

Case handed the pizza guy fifteen bucks. “Here,” he told him, “that should make up for last time.”

“Cool,” the pizza guy remarked, handing Case a pizza. “Thanks, man.”

“Hey, have a nice night,” Case told him. He helped the door ease shut and took the pizza to the front counter.

“Pizza!” Adam cried. He jerked the box from Detective Case and dropped it on the counter. Then, he flipped the lid open and stuffed an entire slice in his mouth.

“Ew!” Gabrielle shouted. “Nah, don’t waste any time chewing or anything.”

Tiffany popped the register open and snatched up fifteen dollars. “Here,” she said, holding the cash out for Case. Case smiled. “Louis, TAKE this money!” Case looked at Adam. He dug into a second slice of pizza.

“Pretty good?” he asked.

“Hell yeah,” Adam replied. Tiffany buried her face in her hands. Case looked up with a smirk.

“Oh, Tiffany,” he said, “we’re friends, right? I can buy a pizza or two for you.” Tiffany looked up. She looked like she might cry again. Case frowned. He held his hand out for the cash, but Tiffany dropped it back into the register and shut the drawer. Then, she slowly walked into her office and slammed the door shut. Case looked at Adam. “Oops,” he remarked. Gabrielle punched Case in the shoulder. “Ow!” he said, rubbing his arm.

“You bastard!” she spat. “Go tell her you’re sorry.”

Case crossed his arms over his chest. “No, I’d better just leave her alone.”

“I think she’s on the rag,” Adam remarked. As he took another bite of pizza, Case reached behind him and smacked him over the back of the head. “Mf!” Adam mumbled. “What the hell, man?”

Case stuck his pointer finger in Adam’s face as he continued to chew. “Don’t say that anymore,” he warned. “That’s not cool.”

Adam swallowed and looked at him. “Sorry.”

“It’s...alright,” Case replied. He looked at the door to Tiffany’s office. “Just don’t say it anymore.”

“Yeah!” Gabrielle added. Case patted her on the shoulder and had a seat between them. He set his umbrella on the counter.

“So, what’ve you two been doing all day?”

Gabrielle looked up with a smart-aleck smile. “We went to school, dummy.”

“Well, I know *that*,” Case replied, snatching up a slice of pizza. “What did you DO at school, smart-ass?”

Adam patted Case on the shoulder, and Case turned to him. “We learned stuff,” Adam told him.

“No *kidding!*” Case returned. “What did you learn about?”

“Oh, who remembers?” Gabrielle replied, having another bite of pizza.

“Bah!” Case spat, and he had one himself.

“So what did YOU do today?” Adam asked Case.

Case finished chewing and swallowed. “I made a complete ass out of myself up at the university.”

“Oh, really?” Gabrielle inquired. She sipped her soda. “Do tell.”

Case uttered a single laugh. “Well, I interviewed a few of the students. That’s all. No leads.” He had another bite of pizza.

“Heard you and Tiffany met for lunch today,” Adam remarked.

“Yes, we did, Adam. We had lunch together.”

“What did you HAVE?” Gabrielle asked.

Case turned to her with a pair of narrow eyes. She giggled. “What difference does it make? After that I got a phone call from Sergeant Paloni about another murder.”

“Right,” Adam said. “Yeah, you were talking about that a while ago.”

“Did you really see the body?” Gabrielle asked. Case thought about Betsy again. He recalled the scene, him and Paloni stripping her down and examining her...thoroughly.

He turned to Gabrielle and nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“That’s gross,” Gabrielle remarked. “How can you stand that?”

“Well, somebody has to.” Case finished off his slice of pizza before plucking another from the box.

“Hey, Lou,” Adam said, “next time there’s a body to examine, can I help?” Case laughed, nearly choking on his pizza.

“You *would* want to see that,” Gabrielle replied.

“Seriously!” Adam insisted. “I think it would be interesting.”

“It’s not,” Case assured him. “It’s not like on T-V.”

“Oh, come on!” Adam pleaded. “Then why do *you* do it?”

Case turned to him. “Because I’m used to it.”

“Yeah, but YOU had to have a first time.”

“Well, yeah, of course,” Case replied. “I was curious, too, once.”

“Yeah?” Adam remarked. “And, what was it like?”

“I threw up. Twice.”

“See, Adam?” Gabrielle said. “It’s gross!”

“It really is, Adam,” Case agreed. “It’s not something you *want* to see.”

Adam turned his head, held his hand up, and waved them off. “Whatever,” he said, and he had another bite of pizza. “The girl today…”

“Betsy,” Case told him.

“Betsy…” Adam continued. “How did she die?”

Case cocked his head to one side and thought about that. “Well, I’m not really sure, actually.”

Adam looked at him through a pair of narrow eyes. “What do you mean ‘you’re not really sure’?”

“I mean she had a pickaxe stuck in her head,” Case replied.

“Okay!” Gabrielle butted in. “I’m trying to eat, here.”

Adam looked at what was left of his slice of pizza, then back at Case. “Well, that seems pretty simple to me.”

“Well, someone could’ve driven a pickaxe into her head, sure,” Case agreed.

Gabrielle stuck a finger in one ear and continued to eat with the other hand. “*La-la-la-la-la-la-la!*” she began to sing.

“But, you don’t think so?” Adam asked.

“No, I don’t,” Case replied. “No, our killer likes to use some kind of a machine or something.” He had another bite of pizza. “The first victim was killed with a croquet mallet. She was hit so hard that it left a hole in her face.”

Gabrielle turned to them. “Oh, my God!”

“Wow,” Adam replied. “You’re right. He’s got some kind of a machine or something.”

“Or something,” Case agreed, finishing off his second slice.

“So, how about that Beethoven, huh?” Gabrielle asked. “Great composer!”

“Oh, Gabrielle,” Adam replied. “Is it really that bad?”

“You guys are grossing me out, man!”

“So, who else got killed?” Adam asked.

“Oh, some janitor,” Case returned. He shook his head. “Very odd...”

“What?” Adam asked, overcome with a look of intrigue.

“The killer dropped a sack of bowling balls on his face. It was all...twisted up and smashed in.”

“Hey, Regina came by today,” Gabrielle butted in. Case sat silently for a moment. He squinted, staring at the counter, repeating what she had just said in his mind.

“*Regina?*” the voice inquired. “*Is she talking about Gina?*”

Case’s head popped up, and he turned to her. “What...the hell did you just say?” he demanded.

Gabrielle looked up with a curious face. “Regina came by,” she repeated. “You know...your fiancée?”

Case looked forward and widened his eyes. “‘Re-gina’?” he repeated.

“You *did* know ‘Gina’ was short for Regina, right?” Adam asked.

Case shot Adam a twisted face. “No, Adam,” he replied. “I did *not* know that.”

Gabrielle punched Case in the shoulder again. Case spun around to face her. “Ow!” he remarked, clutching his arm. “That hurts, you little shit.”

“You didn’t know your own fiancée’s first name?”

Case was beside himself. “Regina Gracie Keller,” he remarked. “R.G.K...”

“Huh?” Adam inquired.

Detective Case snatched up his umbrella, shot to his feet, and dashed for the door. “Hey, wait!” Gabrielle shouted. “Where are you going?” The bell on the door jingled as Case pushed it open. He stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“I have to go to my fiancée’s old apartment. She’s still moving out.”

“Why?” Adam asked.

Case looked outside and realized that the rain was just a light sprinkle now. “Please don’t ask me that,” he replied. “Tell Tiffany I’m sorry.” He made his way to his car and skidded into a cloudy sunset.

Chapter 21: "The Apartment"

The rain had let up by the time Detective Case arrived at Gina's old apartment. He killed the engine and hopped out. He was greeted with the sweet scent of a dying thunderstorm. He stared at the numbers on the front door. "Six hundred and sixty-six," he read. An image of the devil flashed through his mind. It was a memory from one of his dreams.

"You belong HERE...with us!" he remembered him saying, flames firing from his nostrils with every syllable. *"Six hundred and sixty-six feet underground. You belong in Hell, sinner. Welcome to my domain."* Case reached into his coat pocket for his cigarettes, but found the pack of gum from earlier, instead. He sighed. He popped a piece of gum in his mouth and reached for the doorknob. He stopped suddenly, turned, and glanced at the sky. It was clear enough for him to make out Betelgeuse. Then, he combed back through the heavens to find Venus. Tonight, they seemed to have grown in size and intensity just a bit more than the night prior. The moon was also full. Case shook his head.

"It's a bad omen," he remarked.

"I know," the voice replied. Case whirled back around and tried the doorknob. It was locked. He backed away, studying the door. He dropped his hands into his pockets and bumped a knuckle against Gina's cell phone. He thought about calling Sergeant Paloni like he knew he should. He figured he might as well get the captain and all the rest of the crew involved as well. *It was their case after all, not his.*

"To Hell with that," he remarked. "Gina's *my* fiancée."

"Kick the door down," Case heard the voice say. He stood there, staring at the black rectangle of wood. *"Kick it down,"* the voice repeated. *"Kick it!"*

"Bah!" Case shrieked. He looked around to make sure no one had heard him. The coast

was clear. He took out his billfold, removed his driver's license, and shoved it into the crevasse of the door next to the knob. He eased it in and pushed against the door. With the right combination of the two actions, it swung open, and Case leaned forward, staring into the apartment. It was dark...dreadfully dark. It was so dark that he couldn't see past the dim rectangle of light that was cast onto the carpet by the open door. Case stretched his arms out and felt his way down the wall of the living room. "*Should've brought a flashlight,*" he whispered into the suffocating blackness.

His fingers curled around a light switch. He eagerly flipped it up and looked around. There was nothing in the living room except for a coffee table in the middle of the floor. There was a wall at the left side that divided the living room and the kitchen. At the far side of *that* wall, there was a small dining area with a table and four chairs. He walked into the tiny kitchen and found a few sheets of paper scattered about one of the counter tops. Case walked up to take a closer look. They were drawings, curious little doodles of stick figures and whatnot. He snatched one of them up and took a good, long look. His eyes widened as it dawned on him exactly what he was looking at. His jaw swung open like a hinge.

"*What are those things called?*" the voice asked. "*You know...like in the old cartoons?*"

Case held the picture in front of him, studying it with utmost intent. Basically, it was a rough drawing of a murder machine. It was made of several elaborate elements. Each one was labeled accordingly. He looked at the first element, which was labeled "Janitor, desperate to get into closet." It was a picture of a stick figure ramming a door down. The door was labeled "Closet Door." His eyes darted to the next element of the drawing, a push broom, which was wedged against the bottom of the door. Its handle extended across the floor and rested against a drawing of a box, which was labeled "Wooden Crate." On top of the crate sat an anvil, which

had a rope tied around it. The rope ran through a pulley attached to the back wall, and the other end of the rope was tied around the trigger of what was labeled as a “Flame Thrower.” The flame thrower was tied to the top of a barstool in the middle of the room which was labeled “Stool, cemented to floor.” Finally, the nozzle of the flame thrower was aimed towards the door at the bottom of a net. The net was tacked to the ceiling just above the door, filled with bowling balls.

“You know, those machines?” the voice repeated.

“It’s called a Rube Goldberg machine,” Case managed to get out. His hand went limp, and the drawing slid from his fingers and floated to the floor.

“This is off the charts. Even for YOU!”

“R-G-K,” Case remarked. “Rube Goldberg Killer.”

“Regina Gracie Keller,” the voice added.

Case punched a hole in the wall just above the counter. “Son of a BITCH!” he snapped. “I didn’t even know her full *name!*” He hammered the counter with his fist. All of the drawings swirled about and crashed to the floor.

“Calm down,” the voice remarked. *“She probably WANTED it that away.”*

“Why?” Case demanded. “What is the point of all this?” He knelt down and snatched another drawing off the floor to look it over. This one had a stick figure with long hair tied to a recliner. She was labeled “Fran, tied to recliner.” There was a punching glove on the back of the chair, resting atop a spring. It was labeled “Punching Glove, filled with cement.” The spring had a small tie around it, keeping it under tension. The whole piece was labeled “Spring, held by plastic tie.” There was a pair of hedge clippers set up behind the recliner, ready to clip the tie. A sledgehammer stood on the floor on the end of its handle, ready to fall and smash the hedge

clippers. At the other end of the room, a bowling ball was rolling across the floor towards the sledgehammer. The punching glove was aimed at a hinge on the ceiling, equipped with a quick-release. Ready to swing down on the hinge and smash Fran in the face when the quick-release was triggered was a croquet mallet. “She’s completely out of her mind!”

Case imagined Tiffany being there with him. “*You remember what you said?*” she asked.

He thought for a moment. “I believe I said, ‘If one of her friends turns out to be the devil himself, that *might* be our guy’.”

Imaginary Tiffany shook her head. “*I guess you were right.*”

Captain Ford’s warning popped into his mind. “*Stay away from this case, Case,*” he whispered. “*Something’s bothering me about it.*” He spit his gum into the kitchen sink. “Man, that fat bastard wasn’t kidding.” Case jammed his hands into his coat pockets. That’s when he felt the evidence bag. He jerked it out of his pocket and stared at the pentagram.

“*Yeah, what’s with the pentagram anyway?*” imaginary Tiffany asked.

“Yeah, really,” Case replied. “I still don’t get that.”

“*Is SHE into that kind of stuff?*”

Case shook his head. “I don’t know.” He dropped the pentagram back in his pocket. “I don’t understand.”

“*Well, she has to come back sooner or later,*” imaginary Tiffany remarked. Detective Case nodded. He dropped his hand into his coat pocket and felt the revolver. His eyelids clamped shut. He was not only engaged to a killer. He was engaged to a bonafide psycho. It all began to play out in his mind. He would be waiting there for her, his own fiancée, ready to stick a gun in her face, take her to the floor, and slap the cuffs on her.

“Do I even HAVE my handcuffs with me?” he asked. He imagined Tiffany putting her hand on his shoulder. Case liked the idea of her being there, comforting him, telling him it was okay. He wished that she really *was* there.

“*It’s alright,*” he imagined her saying with a shrug. “*What’re you going to do?*” Case smirked. That didn’t sound like the Tiffany *he* knew. He tried again. “*We should KILL that bitch!*” Yeah, that was more like it.

Case looked where he imagined her to be standing. “I have to talk to her,” he remarked. “Have to find out why. I’ve never wanted to talk to Gina so badly in my life.” He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, and came up with his lonely pack of gum. Case returned the gum to his pocket. Then, he snatched another drawing off the floor.

This one got a little personal. It was a complete reproduction of what Case had stumbled upon at the university a couple of days ago. There was a picture of a stick figure slipping on a pile of marbles, then flying through the air. The stick figure was labeled “Hubby, desperate to leave closet.” Just behind him was an open door, which read “Janitor.” Next to him were two sets of lunch tables set up side-by-side. Next to *that* was a step ladder with the bucket of paint on top. Above the tables was a shelf labeled “Shelf, weighted unevenly.” At the end of the shelf above the stick figure’s head was what was labeled as a “20 lb. Trophy.”

“*She could’ve killed you,*” the voice said.

“*Yeah, really,*” imaginary Tiffany added.

Case looked up and thought. “You don’t think she was *trying* to kill me, do you?” A simple shrug seemed to be Tiffany’s response.

“*You can ask her during the interrogation,*” the voice replied.

“Yeah,” Case agreed. “Yeah, I can ask her lots of things. Like, ‘Why did you kill these

people, you FREAK?’ Or, how about, ‘Did you ever really love me anyway, you goofy bitch?’ How about when she walks through the door to the apartment, here?” Case whipped out his revolver and took aim at one of the walls. “I could just pop a cap in her ass right then and there! Say I thought it was an intruder or something.”

“*Lou!*” imaginary Tiffany shrieked. “*PUT that thing away!*”

Case turned to his imaginary companions. “Rube Goldberg Killer?” he snapped, dropping the revolver back in his coat pocket. “She’s out of her mind!”

“*What about at the university?*” the voice asked.

“What do you mean?” Case asked.

“*Wasn’t she in class when you slipped and fell?*”

Case thought for a moment. “When I slipped and fell, sure. She could’ve come and cleaned up the crime scene after she was through with her test. She would’ve had to walk right over me while I was lying on the floor.”

“*Why didn’t she clean up after the janitor sooner?*” imaginary Tiffany asked. “*Like BEFORE you got there.*”

“Well, let’s see,” Case replied, curling his index finger over his top lip. “She probably set it up the night before. The janitor, Dr. Lebowitz, came in that morning and was killed before we’d even gotten there. I think the janitor was MEANT for me. That’s how the machine was supposed to work, according to her drawing. She needed a *reason* for me to leave the closet in a hurry, so that I would slip on the marbles.”

“*Why?*” the voice interrupted.

“*Why what?*”

“*Why? Why’d she do it?*”

Case placed his hands on his hips and stared at the floor. “I guess I’ll have to ask her that when I’m knocking her teeth out in the interrogation room.”

“I don’t know, man,” the voice continued. *“It doesn’t make any sense.”*

“Right,” imaginary Tiffany agreed. *“I mean it’s like me and Lou were talking about in front of the diner the other night.”* He imagined her turning to face him. *“Remember?”*

“Yeah,” Case replied. “Like if it had been the drug dealer, he would have just slashed her throat.”

“Yes,” imaginary Tiffany agreed. *“That’s why none of the suspects fit.”*

“Yeah,” Case remarked. “We didn’t have any normal suspects because our killer didn’t have a normal motive.”

Case imagined the owner of the voice crossing his arms and cocking his head to the side. *“I see,”* the voice said. *“But like...why DID she do it?”*

“Like I say,” Case replied, “I’ll ask her when I’ve got that bright light shining in her eyes.”

Case picked up a final drawing off the floor and looked at it. This one had a girl stick figure tied to a computer chair. She was labeled “Betsy, tied to a computer chair.” In front of her was a skateboard rolling in with one of those old computer monitors resting on top. It was headed past Betsy into what was labeled as a “Stepping Stool.” The stepping stool had a ten pound dumbbell sitting on top, tied to a quick-release. The quick-release was on another hinge, which sat on top of what was labeled as a “Filing Cabinet.” Sitting straight up out of the hinge was a pickaxe, ready to fall into the back of Betsy’s skull.

Detective Case shook his head. He scooped up the four drawings. He stacked them neatly on top of the kitchen counter, laid them down, and dropped his hands into his pockets. He

stared off into space. “I need a drink,” he remarked. He pulled his right hand out of his pocket and looked at it. It was shaking. He imagined Tiffany walking up behind him and grasping his hand.

“*No, you don’t,*” she told him. Case rubbed his eyes with other hand. He felt alone...so very alone. He jerked his head around at a sudden noise. He caught a faint glimpse of a spaded shovel. It swung forward and smacked him in the face.

Chapter 22: “A Nightmare”

Case found himself in the wondrous blue sky again. He floated through the air and was gradually blanketed by a sea of white, puffy clouds. He was overcome with a very pleasant feeling. It was warm and soothing to his spirit. He drifted further and further into the serene environment. However, he began to feel uncomfortable. The further he floated, the more uncomfortable he began to feel. The clouds began to darken, and soon lightning was ripping through the sky and twisting around him as thunder screamed in his ears. Case wanted to scream back, but he couldn't even get his mouth open. He felt helpless...paralyzed. Finally, he plummeted through the black array of madness, where he was beaten with ferocious rain and horrifying hailstones as he toppled through.

The further he descended, the faster he plummeted. He began to fall so fast that he could feel his skin rippling against the wind. His upper lip flapped up and smacked him in the nose. His mouth became dry as air whooshed in and filled it, causing his cheeks to puff out. The ground approached. He knew what was coming. He braced for the impact, crashing into the jagged earth and soaring straight through, deep into the halls of Hell. This time, he smashed through the sandy floor of Hell and descended even deeper into a fiery catacomb. He fell through hundreds of feet of empty space and landed on a soft, squishy surface. It felt as though he were lying on a giant tongue.

Case recovered and wiped a bit of saliva from his face. His hands slapped the squishy floor as he struggled to his knees. It was disgusting. He actually *was* lying on a gigantic, tongue floor. He lifted his head, and his light teal eyes met the radiating, golden eyes of Satan. He towered high above Detective Case at three times his size. Case stared into his blood-leaking goat face through a wild stare and a pair of wobbly arms. He was filled with terror. He

desperately grasped at fleeing thoughts as warm blood rained upon him from the Goat of Lust's face.

"I will consume your soul, Detective Case!" Lucifer growled through a pair of flame-firing nostrils. *"I'm going to carve up your little pretty-boy face before I chew your innards to a runny pile of pulp."* Case hopped to his feet and clutched the devil around one of his tree trunk calves, grasping at any hint of an attack he could muster up. The beast reeled back and howled with laughter. He snagged Detective Case around his tiny throat, lifted him, and tossed him through the air like a rag doll. Case smashed into a large stalactite, fell through empty space, and smacked into the squishy floor. Little drops of saliva splattered him all over. He squeezed his eyes shut at a throbbing pain that shot throughout his entire body. There was an intense, fiery heat which seemed to emanate from everything around him all at once.

The devil grinned, revealing a hideous orifice of jagged chompers. *"How about some more, detective?"* Case shook the pain away. Strands of razor wire began to curl out of the tongue floor and wrap around his wrists. He let out a shriek as they slowly crawled up his arms and legs. The razor wire drew him towards the sticky, smelly floor as it leisurely slithered around his neck, face, and torso. Cold, sharp steel sliced into his flesh, covering him all at once with spiraling lacerations. He felt light-headed as blood literally poured from his body and pooled on the tongue floor. It felt *so* dreadfully awful. His warm blood soaked him completely, thick and wet. Just when he thought he couldn't stand it any longer, the razor wire began to pull away, taking little chunks of his flesh and bits of clothes with it.

"BAAAAAAA!" Case shrieked as Lucifer reached down and snatched him by his hair. He jabbed a giant pitchfork into Case's abdomen, in and out, in and out...again and again. The pain was piercing and intense, like stubbing a thousand kneecaps or bumping a hundred noggins

on corners of cabinets. Case glared down at a torrent of rich blood that leaked from his midsection. He widened his eyes at the sight of his bowels falling out and rolling around on the squishy ground.

“Son of a bitch!” the beast squealed. He beat Case back and forth across the face until it was like ground beef. He punched through Case’s shredded abdomen and plucked his still-beating heart from his chest. He squished it between a pair of giant fingers and held it up for him to see. Case winced at the brutal sight of it. A rapid thump began to fill his ears. The devil howled with laughter, releasing Detective Case from his grasp. He fell what seemed like a hundred stories, smacked into the tongue floor, and became drenched with spit again. He lay there for a while. The pain gradually became less and less intense as his body began to heal itself. Finally, he slowly sat up and looked around.

The devil was nowhere in sight. Case looked down and realized that all of his flesh had returned, and he scrambled to stand up. A sharp pain twisted up his spine. Lucifer had slid a couple of razor-sharp blades into his lower back and through his ribcage. *“AYEEEEEE!”* Case shrieked. The devil twisted the blades through Case’s torso, then touched the tips of them to the back of his ribs. He slid the blades back down. Case felt the points of the blades bouncing off his ribs like mallets playing a xylophone. A tingle shot up his spine and into the back of his skull. Then, the devil jerked the blades out of his back. Case smacked face-first into the tongue floor.

“Son of a BITCH!” he spewed, curling into a ball as he cringed with pain. The devil cried with hoarse laughter, glaring down as Case shuddered with pain and fear simultaneously. Case twisted his head to the side to see what else Lucifer had up his filthy sleeves. He actually had no sleeves, Detective Case noticed. He wore a plain white undershirt of all things, a “wife-

beater” as Case called it, just like Benny at the pool haul earlier.

“*Detective Case,*” the beast beckoned as he met Case’s wild eyes. “*I’ve got another little treat for you.*” Satan uncurled his fingers to reveal Case’s three new acquaintances, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. He dropped the three of them onto the tongue floor, and Case was instantly on his feet. All healed-up again, he sprinted towards them with ferocity, but after a few paces, a prickly green vine leapt out of the squishy floor and snapped around his throat. It jerked him to the ground once again. Case scrambled to his feet, twisting his fingers around the vine as he struggled to free himself. The vine tightened, and he fell back to his knees in submission. “*Bwah! Ha! Ha! Ha!*” Satan snarled. “*I’m going to twist your little friends into a flesh smoothie!*”

He batted all three of them through the air. Tiffany flew twenty feet. She smashed into a stalactite and was knocked unconscious. Adam was flung end-over-end. He landed with his head stuck in a hole in the floor. Gabrielle did a back flip and landed on her stomach. She cringed as little droplets of saliva splattered her.

Case pointed an irritated finger at the beast. “Leave them alone, Lucy!” Satan knelt next to Gabrielle. He met her face-to-face as she slowly lifted her head off the sticky ground. Her face coiled up with terror.

“Holy *CRAP!*” she shrieked into his bleeding precipice. He snatched her around the throat with his enormous pointer finger and thumb, then lifted her slowly off her feet.

Adam finally popped his head loose from the hole in the giant tongue floor. “Hey!” he screamed. “Get your claws off my *woman!*” The devil growled at him. Flames shot from his nostrils.

“*Or, what?*” he snarled back. “*What are you going to do about it?*” He eased a giant

finger up Gabrielle's skirt. The pointed tip of his claw slid across the inside of her thigh. She trembled with terror.

"DON'T!" she shrieked. "Please!" Satan glared at her helpless boyfriend. Adam returned his terrifying gaze with a look of terror, and the devil jerked his claw from beneath her knee-length dress.

"She's still a virgin! You are truly pathetic, BOY!" He pounded Adam into the ground like a railroad spike. Case struggled to free himself from the vine wrapped around his neck. Thorns in the vine just tore his hands to shreds. What's worse, a few more vines began to twist through the floor and curl around the rest of his body.

"Don't touch her, you FREAK!" he cried.

"Hee, hee, hee..." Satan snarled back. He held Gabrielle in front of Case by her little ribs. *"She's all yours, Detective Case. Go ahead...RAVAGE her!"* He squeezed her between his thumb and pointer finger, and Case could hear her ribs beginning to crack. *"That IS what you want, isn't it?"*

"Lou..." she squealed. *"Help me!"*

"Have a taste, Detective," he beckoned. *"HAVE some!"* Gabrielle howled. Her screaming turned into a gurgle, and blood began to bubble out of her mouth. It oozed down her chest. Case tore free from the vine around his throat and lunged for her. Another vine that was wrapped around his legs tightened up, and he smacked face-first into the tongue floor.

"Bah!" he screeched in frustration. Tiffany came to, and she stumbled towards Satan's pitchfork. It still lay on the ground from earlier. It was enormous and heavy, but she managed to lift it just the same. She turned and jammed it in the devil's butt cheek.

"WAAAAAAA!" Lucifer squealed. He dropped Gabrielle onto the squishy, soggy floor,

whirling around to retrieve his pitchfork.

Detective Case lurched forward and wrapped Gabrielle in his arms. “Just relax,” he told her. “The pain will go away in a minute.”

“Oh, God...” she groaned, “it hurts so bad...” Satan plucked the pitchfork from his derriere and stabbed it into the tongue floor. He glared down at Tiffany.

“*Tiffany Carol Hanes,*” he beckoned. “*Now, YOU’RE no virgin!*” He snatched up her arms in either hand, flipped her over, and weaved her arms together like a pretzel.

“*Gaaaaaaa...*” Tiffany gasped. “My FATHER used to do that to me!”

“*Ah! Ha! Ha! Ha!*” Lucifer belched. “*He used to do THIS to you as well, didn’t he?*” He used one of his claws to tear the back of her white sweater open, then flipped her onto her back. Satan watched her chest. Tiffany’s black bra rose and fell in heaves, her breathing becoming heavier. “*He used to make LOVE to you, didn’t he, Tiff?*” She lifted her head and shrieked into his blood-drenched face. The devil let go of her arms, and she collapsed on her back. He plucked her shoes from her feet and jerked her red flannel pants off.

“*Your panties don’t match your bra,*” he remarked.

“You’re a real GENIUS!” Tiffany shot back. Satan grasped her around the throat with his pointer finger and thumb.

“*I’m going to pop your little head like a GRAPE!*” he graciously returned. He squeezed her neck like a vise. Tiffany struggled to breathe, and her face began to heat up.

“Shit!” Case snarled. “Give me a hand, Gabrielle.” He and Gabrielle tore at the vines wound around him.

Gabrielle looked around for her boyfriend. “Adam, get your ass up and help us!” she shrieked.

“Yeah, sure thing!” he shouted back. He was still struggling to get his shoulders out of the ground. “I’ll be right there!” Satan released his Hellish grip on Tiffany’s throat, then sliced her bra loose with one of his claws. Tiffany began to cough. She reached up and rubbed at her aching neck.

“You just...wanna get right down to it, huh dick-head?” she managed to spit out. Lucifer opened his snaggle-toothed mouth. His tongue began to slither out and curl towards her. Tiffany winced. She began to wriggle and squirm as it twisted around her bare chest like a boa constrictor. *“Buh...”* Tiffany moaned. “Case, help me!” Case looked up. A pair of pink panties with little white hearts landed right on his face. Gabrielle promptly brushed them away.

“Hurry up, Gabrielle!” he screamed.

“I’m TRYING!” she yelled back. He and Gabrielle scrambled frantically with the last little bits of vine as the air filled with Tiffany’s blood-curdling screams. Case hobbled to his feet and snatched up one of the blades that Satan had slashed him up with earlier. He sprinted up behind Satan and slid the giant knife right into his balls. The walls vibrated as Lucifer reeled back and filled the air with a shriek of his own. Like clockwork, a hole appeared in the tongue-floor, and he quickly dropped in. The room began to fill with the roar of tortured souls. Case’s head turned about, his eyes darting in all directions. People poured in from every possible angle. They surrounded Case, Gabrielle, Tiffany, and Adam with ensuing chaos as they gouged, swore, and fought amongst one another. They were...the occupants of Hell.

Gabrielle dashed behind Case, burying her face against his back and throwing her hands around his waist. “Now, what?!” she demanded. Case reached down and snatched Satan’s other blade off the ground just as two guys and one girl lunged at them with knives of their own. Case sliced off all three of their heads in one, clean swoop. Adam watched their heads. They rolled

across the ground in front of his face. Gabrielle peeked around Case's back and watched as their three bodies crumbled to a heap on the tongue floor. "Yuck!" she remarked, throwing her hands over her eyes. Case looked at his torn-up clothes and was struck with an idea. He pointed at the bodies with the tip of his blade.

"Clothes!" he shrieked. He tore away from Gabrielle's grasp, and he and Tiffany quickly scavenged their bodies. After slipping into a few things, Case was grabbed from behind in a chokehold.

"You're mine, YOUNGUN!" a cold, raspy voice squealed in his ear. He tossed the knife to Tiffany as she buttoned up a pair of jeans, and she promptly jabbed the knife right between the eyes of the choke-holder. Case turned around just in time to watch the elderly man fall on his wrinkly back. The tongue floor rippled against his sudden fall, and little drops of spit dotted him. Case noticed a couple of gangsters creeping up behind Tiffany with steel pipes in their hands. He pointed them out, and Tiffany turned around.

"Gonna tap that ass!" one of them remarked.

"Once you had black, you don't go back!" the other told her. The first one swung his pipe at Tiffany's head. She ducked it, popped back up, and kicked the other one in the crotch. He bent over, and Tiffany jerked his pipe away and smashed his teeth out. He fell on his back as the other gangster smacked Tiffany on the side of her head with *his* pipe. Tiffany fell to her knees. She clutched her head as he got her in a chokehold. Adam and Gabrielle jumped on his back, and the four of them went crashing to the spit-soaked floor.

"Give it up, bitch!" the gangster shrieked, trying to choke Tiffany out. Tiffany reached over her shoulder and poked him in the eye. Then, she planted her hands against the squishy ground, pushed herself up, and flipped him off her back. He smacked into the tongue floor just

as Case flew in. He sent him whirling a little further with a kick in the jaw. Case knelt down to finish him off but was mowed over by other people, all fighting amongst themselves.

“Another hole!” Adam shouted, pointing. Case poked his head out of the pile of people on top of him. Sure enough, there was another hole in the floor just like the one Lucifer had dropped through earlier.

“Hop in!” Case cried, scrambling to free himself.

“Go!” Tiffany told Adam and Gabrielle. They turned and hopped through the hole. She reached down and tugged at Case’s arm. “Come on, Louis!” she screamed. “Move your ass!”

“Mf en furzer bot,” he mumbled through three sets of arms. Tiffany snagged a hold of his hand and slowly yanked him free. They made a mad dash and dropped through the hole just as it closed back up. The foursome found themselves in some kind of tunnel. The roof was so low that Tiffany and Case had to duck just to stand in it. Tiffany threw her arms around Detective Case, who immediately returned the favor. “You alright?” he asked.

Tiffany pulled away. “Well, yeah,” she said, examining herself. “Yeah, I guess so. My wounds are all gone.”

“Yeah, things work differently down here,” Case explained. He turned to Gabrielle. There was a single tear rolling down her cheek. “You okay?” he asked her.

She put her hands over her eyes. “I feel so violated.” Case took her in his arms. He patted her on the back of the head as she sobbed against his chest.

“He *is* the devil, honey.”

Adam snagged a brick off the ground. “Let’s get him!” he screamed.

“Yeah!” Gabrielle added, pulling away from Case and wiping her eyes.

Case curled his finger over the lop of his lip. “Well, can you even *do* that?” Everyone

turned to Tiffany. She threw her hands on her hips.

“Hey, why’s everybody looking at me?”

“Come on, voodoo girl,” Case said. “Tell us. How do we kill the devil himself.”

“No,” Tiffany replied, “I’m not no ‘voodoo girl’! And, I don’t know anything about killing the prince of darkness.”

“Where are we?” Gabrielle demanded.

“Yeah,” Adam added. “Where are we?” Case looked both ways down the tunnel. It stretched out for miles in either direction. Oddly enough, he and Tiffany were no longer ducking to fit inside, either. He snagged a broken piece of glass off the floor. The floor was made of grey, rectangular stones, all laid out like little bricks. He held his other hand out and sliced it open with the glass. He winced as blood began to gush from the wound.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tiffany inquired.

Case watched his cut for a while, finally shrugging with certainty that it was not “magically” healing. “Well, we’re not in Hell, anymore,” he remarked. He began to make his way down the tunnel, followed by Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. After a long walk, little, round windows began to appear at either side of the tunnel. They could see the sky outside. It was filled with grey clouds. They began to illuminate with lightning and rumble with thunder.

“Does this thing ever *end*?” Adam demanded with impatience. They walked for what seemed like hours, but they never seemed to come to any sort of ending. They just found more and more tunnel with windows on either side, displaying grey clouds with lightning and thunder. The weather outside slowly grew in intensity, gradually filling the four of them with a sense of dread and anxiety.

“Let’s go back,” Tiffany suggested.

“Yeah,” Gabrielle agreed.

Case stopped and looked at them. “Where...to Hell?” he asked. He turned and continued to walk. Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam followed right along. At long last they could see the end of the tunnel. It was a welcoming sight. Adam and Gabrielle took off, sprinting the rest of the way with their arms held out at their sides. They stopped at the end, and Case and Tiffany picked up the pace to see why.

“Which way?” Gabrielle demanded once they caught up. The tunnel had come to a dead end, but there was more tunnel running to the right and to the left. Case crossed his arms over his chest.

“Hmm. It’s a conundrum. How about right?”

“How about left?” Tiffany instantly replied.

“Left?” Case asked. “*Hell* no. Let’s go right.”

“I don’t think so!” she kindly returned. “Left feels *better*.”

“Hey,” Case told her. “I ALWAYS lean to the right. I’ve never regretted choosing the right over the left.” Satan smashed through the stony floor to their right. He gazed at them, snarling through a blood-dripping, fire-breathing, ghastly grin.

Chapter 23: “R.G.K.”

Detective Case came to. He was greeted with another drawing held in front of his face. He could tell that he was back in the living room. From what he could gather, he was tied to the top of the table from the dining room at the end of the kitchen. It had been dragged into the living room. He studied the drawing as he squirmed, hoping to free himself. The first thing he saw was a toaster flying in from the right side of the picture, labeled “Toaster.” On the floor in the drawing was a bottle, labeled “Five-Gallon Water Bottle, filled.” It had a hook tied to it, labeled “Hook, tied to bottle.” The toaster had an arrow pointing out of it, over the bottle, and down at the hook. The hook was hooked through a large rubber band. The rubber band was tied to either leg of what was labeled as a “Dining Table.” There was a picture of a bowling ball sitting against the rubber band, and the rubber band was stretched tight by the hook like a giant slingshot.

The bowling ball was to roll underneath the table and strike the legs of what was labeled as a “Dining Chair.” The dining chair was tied to a pair of scissors, which hung above the table through a pulley. The scissors were at the bottom of what was labeled as a “Net, filled with bricks.” The idea was that the scissor handles would be pulled by the chair and slice the net, dropping the bricks onto the table below. Finally, a stick figure was bound to the top of the table with rope. The stick figure was labeled “Hubby, tied to table.” Case finished combing through the details of the drawing, and it was jerked away. Gina’s upside-down, grinning face popped in to replace it. She wore a robe similar to Tiffany’s, except that Gina’s was all black. An inverted pentagram dangled down her chest on the end of a silver necklace.

“What do you think, darling?” she inquired. She smacked him across the face. “Rube Goldberg Number Five...” She threw the hood of her robe over her head and backed away.

Sure enough, there was a net filled with bricks tacked to the ceiling over his head. There was a pair of scissors at the bottom, ready to snip it open. The handles were tied to a chair at the other end of the table through a pulley, which hung from the ceiling somewhere between the chair and the net.

Case tilted his head back and looked Gina upside-down in the eyes. “Gina,” he began. “Do you have something you’d like to talk about, honey?”

“Shove it!” she snarled.

“Gina,” he begged, “please...PLEASE don’t kill me.”

She smirked. “I’m not going to kill you, dear.”

Case let out a deep sigh of relief. “Good.”

“I’m going to *sacrifice* you.”

Case cringed. “Honey, what the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. “What do you mean ‘you’re going to sacrifice me’?”

“To the devil,” she told him. “I’m going to sacrifice you to Satan.”

Case widened his eyes. “Why?” he inquired. “Why would you *do* that?”

She lifted a toaster above her head with both hands. “*Sh...*” she whispered. “It won’t be long now.” She chuckled the toaster at the floor. There was a loud thud as the toaster struck the water bottle. “Dammit,” Gina remarked. “Here we go, again.”

“Gina!” Case shrieked. “What are you doing? Don’t *sacrifice* me! Stop it!” He struggled with his ropes as Gina knelt down and retrieved the toaster.

She let out an impatient sigh. “I’m a witch, okay? I need...more power. It’s one of the oldest forms of trade with the devil.” She lifted the toaster over her head again. “Power for sacrifice.” She chuckled the toaster at the floor. Case cringed as he felt the rubber band come

unhooked and shake the table. “Son of a bitch!” Gina snapped. She stomped around the table and knelt beside the chair. “All the places for you to go, and you roll right in between the chair legs.” She came back up with the bowling ball, then kicked the chair over about a foot. “Piece of shit!” Case watched her with a pair of wild eyes as she skidded around the table and knelt out of sight behind his head. He heard her setting the contraption back up again. He frantically scrambled with the ropes.

Gina popped up again with a twisted face. “Hey!” she screeched. “None of that!” She pulled out his revolver and pressed it against his right cheek. “Cut it out, or I’ll blow your head off and find someone *else* to sacrifice.”

Case looked into her green eyes. “Why do you have to use a Rube Goldberg machine to sacrifice me?” he asked. “Why can’t you just shoot me?”

Gina brushed her curly brown hair out of her face. “It has to be indirect,” she explained. She stepped away, knelt down, and retrieved the toaster again. “Randomized. I have to direct the fabric of chaos at you.” She lifted the toaster over her head again. “So hold still, dearie!” She chucked the toaster, and Case felt the rubber band spring. He watched in horror as the chair flipped over and fell to the floor. He looked up, but to his relief the bricks did not fall. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Gina shrieked, throwing her arms out at her sides. “I don’t have *time* for this!” She stomped to the other end of the table and tugged on the chair, observing the scissors.

“Hey!” Case snapped. “Cut that out!”

“Oh, right!” Gina barked through a twisted giggle. “No kidding. I don’t want to screw it up, huh?”

“Gina...” Case trailed off. “Can’t we talk about this or something?”

“ ‘Talk about it?’ ” Gina repeated. “*Talk* about it?! You didn’t even know my NAME,

you *prick!*” She tossed the toaster across the table, and it smacked him right in the forehead.

“Gah!” Case screeched through a set of clenched teeth. He felt a stream of warm blood oozing down his face.

“Besides, it’s nothing personal, baby,” Gina assured him. “You figured out who I was. I *have* to kill you. It’s your own fault.” She made her way back to the other side of the table and knelt down to reset the rubber band. “You should’ve listened to that chubby, old boss of yours. He *told* you to stay away from this case.” The table lifted and quickly dropped as Gina reset the rubber band. She came up from the tan carpet, backing away as she looked around. “Now, where did that toaster run off to?”

Case struggled with the ropes and managed to grab a hold of a knot. “Come on, sweetheart,” he begged. “Don’t do this, please. We’ll...we’ll get you some help. It’ll be alright.”

“God dammit!” Gina screamed. “Where’s the stupid toaster!”

“Right here, you FREAK!” Tiffany’s voice screamed from the other end of the table. Case jerked his head around and faced the front door. A stapler flew across the room and smacked Gina right in the nose.

“AAAAAAA!” Gina shrieked, falling to the floor, clutching her face. Case gazed across the room at his good buddy Tiffany. He had never been so happy to see her. She was out of her robe and back in her white sweater and red flannel pants again. She sprinted across the carpet and stomped Gina in the teeth while she was on her knees. Then, she reached down and grabbed her in a chokehold. Case didn’t waste any time. He twisted the knot between his fingers, freed himself, and hopped off the table. His eyes went from Gina and Tiffany to his revolver. He snatched it off the floor. He pointed it at the two of them, making sure the safety

was disengaged, and thumbed back the hammer.

“Alright, hold it, you two!” he yelled. Gina and Tiffany stopped struggling and faced him. “Tiffany, go stand over there,” he ordered pointing a few feet to her left. Tiffany jerked away from Gina. She slowly stood and walked to where Case was pointing. With Tiffany safely out of the way, Detective Case turned the gun on his fiancée. “Now...Gina,” he gasped, “you have the right to remain silent.” Gina growled, then lunged at him. Case fired a warning shot into the ceiling. She impatiently plopped down on the floor with a look of disgust as he pointed the pistol at her. “If you give up that right,” he continued, “you little BITCH, anything you say that you haven’t *already* said could be used against you...in court.” Gina hopped to her feet and snatched a couple of strange looking weapons off a shelf behind her. Case had seen something like them before, but he wasn’t sure where. They were held in the hands by handles. A thin bar of shiny chrome curled out from the ends and looped over the knuckles. On the outside of the curve, there were five wavy dagger blades sticking out every which way.

“Shoot her, Louis!” Tiffany shouted. “I-I don’t know what her *intentions* are with those.”

“No, Tiffany,” Case replied. “Let her come get some.” With the weapons clutched in her fists, Gina crossed her arms over her chest, as if lying in a coffin. No sooner had she taken that pose, Tiffany began to gag across the room. Case narrowed his eyes. His head twisted in her direction.

“Tiff? You alright?”

She dropped to her knees, clutching her throat. “*Bah...*” she gasped. “I thought I told you not to call me that.” She gagged once more, and blood began to leak from her mouth. Case turned to Gina with a look of trepidation. Her lips twisted into a grin. An evil laugh began to emanate from between her teeth. She held the weapons out and charged towards the door. Case

was beside himself. He had to do it. He took aim at the center of her chest and began to fire. It didn't even slow her down. Before he knew it, she had fled the scene, and Case began to panic.

"What the f..." he began. He glanced around. He had *definitely* hit her three times. He didn't understand. He dashed to Tiffany's side at the sound of her uneasy breathing. "Tiffany?" he demanded, shaking her arm. "Tiffany?!" She turned her head to the side and threw up a load of blood-stained, stomach contents. It was awful. He could tell she was in terrible pain. All of that didn't bother him so much, though. What bothered him were the hundred or more straight pins that floated around in her vomit. They were the kind with the different colored plastic balls on the ends. "*My God...*" Case whispered with a pat on her back. "*Did– Did SHE do that?*" Tiffany looked him in the eyes. "What the hell is going on?!" he demanded.

"*D-Don't worry about me...*" she whimpered. Case brushed her black hair out of her face as she began to tremble. "*No, go...*" she told him. Case slowly shook his head. "GO!" she shrieked. He winced at the sudden intensity in her voice. "Louis! Go *get* that fucker!" Case pounded his fist into the carpet. He shot to his feet and dashed out the door after his fiancée. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut as tears rolled down her cheeks. She leaned forward and clutched her stomach. She threw up another brew of straight pins and blood. Then, she slumped against the wall, staring at the shelf that Gina had gotten those strange weapons off of. She noticed a cell phone...Gina's cell phone. Without hesitation, she hopped up, snatched the phone off the shelf, and dialed 9-1-1.

"Stop, Gina!" Case cried after his fiancée. She jerked her head around as she fled. She shot him a wicked smirk through the shadow cast upon her face by the hood of her robe.

"Everyone's gonna die!" she screeched, coiling her head back around. She continued into the shadows of a dark street corner. Case could see a group of hookers, turning tricks. A

couple of them approached her.

“Hey, girlie!” one of them shouted.

“Who’s your friend over there?” the other one asked.

Case was just across the street. “Keep away from her!” he cried. “She’s crazy!” Gina turned around and ran backwards. She stared across the street into Case’s eyes. She swung the weapon in her left hand as she passed by, slicing one of the two hookers to ribbons. Case widened his eyes as his fiancé was splashed with blood. Before the other hooker even had a chance to scream, Gina jerked back around, lifted her over her head, and chunked her through a nearby window.

Case screamed with fury. “Gina, STOP!” Gina belched a crooked laugh as yet another hooker came up to confront her.

“Hey!” she screamed. “Who do you think you messin’ with, honey?” Gina plowed through her like she was in a roller derby, tossing her into the street. She looked up and shrieked just in time to greet the grill of an oncoming car with her teeth.

“Jesus Christ...” Case whispered. *“What is she DOING?”*

“You should stop and help these people,” the voice told him.

“Not now!” he shouted back. Gina shot through an outdoor diner and hopped onto a couple’s table. She stopped and turned to face her fiancé.

“I’m up here, copper!” she screamed. “Come, and GET me.”

Case reached the table and pointed the revolver at her face. “Gina, stop this!”

She hopped behind the man sitting next to her and raised her weapons at either side of his neck. “Sorry, sweetie! You’re gonna have to *stop* me!” She reached out with both hands, drew her arms inward, and chopped the man’s head clean off. The lady across the table shrieked as

she, Case, and Gina were all spattered with blood. Case fired his two remaining rounds right into Gina's face. She just stood there and laughed at him.

"What the f..." Case trailed off. Gina flew across the table, swung around in mid-air, and sliced the lady's head off as well. Case looked down helplessly. He watched her head roll across the sidewalk and underneath another couple's table. Her blonde hair bobbed behind her head like a fox's tail as it rolled away. Gina landed right in front of Case. Her bright green eyes met his pale blue ones. A chill shot down his spine as he looked into his fiancée's twisted face.

"*Who's next?*" she whispered. Case threw a punch, and Gina rolled across the ground to dodge it. Then, she hopped onto another couple's table. Case swung around and looked at her. "How about THESE two? They'll do nicely." She dropped down, threw her arms out, and sliced both of their throats at once. Gina was sprayed with blood from both sides as she dropped to the ground. Then, she took off through the diner and across the street. She was headed towards a bridge that spanned the Benedict channel.

"I need a gun!" Case shouted, dropping his into his pocket. "Anybody got a gun?" A man stood up from his table and threw his hand inside his jacket. He and the other three men at his table all looked like a bunch of mobsters.

"Here," he replied, tossing Case a 9MM Beretta. "It's unmarked."

Case popped the safety loose and raced after his fiancée. "Someone call an ambulance!" he yelled. He closed in on her at the bridge. Gina jerked her head around and shot her fiancé a twisted stare.

"Come on and get some, you piece of shit!" she screeched. Case fired another pair of rounds into the back of her head. She fired back with maniacal laughter.

"You little..." Case began. "Stop this!" Gina caught up with a woman jogging down the

side of the bridge. She was listening to music through a pair of earphones. She had no idea of what was going on around her. Gina smashed into her and shoved her off the side of the bridge. Case winced at the sound of her panicked shrieks all the way to the raging river below.

“Case!” the voice shouted. *“You have to let her go. She’s gonna kill EVERYONE!”*

Case clutched his ears. “Shut-up!” he cried. Case began to run out of breath, and he slowed down a bit. *“Damn cigarettes!”* he gasped. *“I’m never smoking again!”* Gina glanced over her shoulder, and she too began to slow down. At the end of the bridge, three homeless guys were gathered around a small fire they had mustered up. Case tried to warn them as best he could. *“Get away from her!”* he rasped. *“She’ll kill you!”* They must have heard him because all three of them stood up. They were just in time for Gina to stab one of them right through the heart. She jerked her weapon out of his chest and was splashed with fresh blood.

“Tony!” one of the other two cried out. He lunged at her. She slashed him in the face.

“Gina...” Case wheezed.

“Bah! Ha! Ha! Ha!” she howled. The third homeless man smashed a beer bottle on the railing of the bridge. He held the jagged points of the upper half in front of her face.

“You’re gonna DIE, you little bitch!” he snarled. He swung the bottle at her. Gina ducked and kicked his legs out from under him. He fell flat on his back. Gina caught the bottle as it flew through the air. He looked at her and threw his arms over his face. “No!” he begged.

“Yes!” Gina shouted back. She jabbed the bottle into his abdomen. The man clutched his stomach in pain, and Gina began stabbing him in the face. She stabbed him over and over. With one last burst of energy, Case lunged at her, and they crashed to the ground. He flipped Gina onto her back, threw down her hood, and curled his ice cold fingers around her throat.

“Alright, you little witch!” he screamed into her blood-spattered face. “Let’s see how

you like it!” Gina twisted the corners of her mouth into a hideous grin. She reached up and sliced at Case’s arms with her other-worldly weapons. After a few slashes Case quickly tossed her aside. He hopped up and stomped her in the back of the head a few times.

“SHIT!” Gina shrieked. She rolled through a patch of dead leaves and grass, then hopped up to face him. “I’m gonna KILL *you*!” She swung her right-hand weapon at Case’s head. He bent backwards to dodge it and came back up again. He looked like he was doing the limbo. She swung again, and he dodged it again. “BAAAAAAA!” Gina cried out. She swung a third time. This time Case ducked and took her to the ground like a linebacker. He clamped his fingers around her wrists, and began to smash her hands into the ground.

“That’s enough, Gina!” he screamed. “Let go of ‘em!”

“BITE, me!” she kindly replied. She smashed her forehead into Case’s nose.

“Gah!” Case shrieked into her face. He slammed *his* forehead into her teeth. “You little SKANK!”

Gina spit blood into his face. “You wannabe piece of SHIT!”

Case smashed his forehead into hers. He reeled back and did it a second time, then a third, then a fourth. “You like that, Gina?” he asked. “Here, have some more!” He gave her a couple more, and Gina managed to get her right wrist free. She reached around and stabbed Case in the shoulder blade. He reeled back and let out a blood-curdling shriek. Gina squirmed beneath him. Warm blood leaked from his forehead, dripped down his chin, and mixed with the blood leaking from her forehead.

“Get off,” she growled through clenched teeth. She jabbed him in the balls with her shin and pitched him aside. Then, she rolled over, stumbled to her feet, and hobbled down the road. Case managed to drag himself off the ground and stagger after her. He stopped and looked at his

fiancée from across an intersecting street as she entered a bar.

“Awe, snap,” he remarked. He began to drag himself across the street. It just wasn’t his night. He walked straight into the headlights of a truck. The driver stomped on his brakes and let out a yelp from his air horn. Case turned and widened his eyes. “SHIIIIIT!” Case screamed. The truck struck him at just over fifteen miles an hour, dropping him to the jagged pavement. “Ooooooooo,” Case moaned, clutching his knee. The driver hopped out and knelt beside him.

“You alright, man?” he asked.

Case rolled over and stumbled to his feet. “*Fine*,” he gasped, whipping the Beretta out of his pocket. “*Never been better.*” Case staggered into the bar after Gina. He fired the Beretta into the air. “Alright, where is she?!”

“Over here, darling!” she cried. Case twisted his head to the left. Gina smashed three girls with a couple of bottles of whiskey. She had a drink from a third bottle, held up a lighter, and struck it to life.

“*No...*” Case mumbled. Gina blew the whiskey onto the lighter, blanketing the three girls in a raging inferno. Panic ensued. Everyone in the bar began to shout. All of them plowed towards their closest exits. Case fired another three shots into his fiancée’s chest. She simply smirked, took another drink, and blew it at the girls again, reigniting the flames. She turned and smashed through the back door and into the alley. Before Case could reach them, all three of Gina’s latest victims had fallen over, dead. He trudged into the alley after his fiancée. He caught a glimpse of her just as she slashed another girl’s throat and dashed up a fire escape. He fired two more rounds. Both of them spewed tiny sparks as they ricocheted off the railing beside her. Gina cried out with another maniacal laugh.

Case growled through clenched teeth. He dropped the pistol into his pocket and checked

the girl's pulse at the bottom of the stairs. Finding no heartbeat, he hobbled up the stairs after Gina. He slowly scrambled up four flights of fire escape stairs. His knee screamed at him with pounding pain. He hopped onto the roof of an apartment complex. He was just in time to catch a couple of nostrils full of marijuana smoke. He looked down. A group of stoners were passing a couple of joints around. Police sirens began to fill the air in the distance. "Where— Where'd she go?" Case demanded. One of them pointed towards the other end of the roof.

"Right there, man," he told him. "In the shadow."

Case pulled out the Beretta and crept towards the other end of the roof. "Gina?" he beckoned. "Gina?!" He could hear her giggling near the corner. Her giggles came from a shadow cast by a short wall that went around the edge of the roof. Case fired his four remaining rounds into the corner as he made his way to it. Once he'd gotten to the corner, he reached into the darkness expecting to grab her. There was no one there. Case reached around in the shadows but to no avail. She simply...wasn't there. He heard her giggle again right in front of his face. He chuckled the empty pistol at the sound. "Dammit, Gina! Where are you?"

"I'm *here*," she remarked. She lunged from the shadows, shoving Case to the ground and landing on top of him. She clasped his jacket in both hands, lifted his head off the ground, and glared in his face. "I'm right *here*!" Case could hear the police sirens getting closer. He reached out and clutched her wrists again. "No!" she screamed, beginning to squirm. "No, not again!" Case smashed his head into her nose as hard as he could. He laid back down. Gina's nostrils began to leak warm blood all over his face. She struggled to get her wrists free from his grasp. "AAAAA!" she gurgled through a throat full of blood.

"*Come on, Gina...*" Case rasped. "*Just relax. The police will be here soon.*"

"No!" Gina shrieked. "Shut-up, Lou!" She dropped her head and shook it from side to

side, dribbling and spitting blood in his face.

“AAAAAAA!” Case screamed. Her blood dripped into his eyes, and he pinched them shut. “Stop it!” Gina jabbed her knee into his ribs. Case gave in. He couldn’t hold onto her any longer. He let go of Gina’s wrists, and she scrambled back to the stoners. Case stumbled to his feet and hobbled after her. “No, Gina!” he screamed. They stood up. Gina plowed into three of them, throwing them over the side of the building.

“*Whoa, man!*” another one gasped. Thick, white smoke bellowed from his lips as his three friends filled the alley with screams on their way down. There were three thuds, a scream ceasing with each thud. Gina twisted around to face her fiancé.

“See you in Hell!” she cried. She did a back-flip over the wall.

“No, Gina!” Case screamed, sprinting to the wall. He glanced over the side with a look of sheer terror. Gina fell four stories and landed firmly on her feet. She looked up at him with a happy, little smile.

“Bye-bye!” she screamed with a wave of her fingers, and she turned and sprinted down the alley. Case threw his arms out at his sides. He stared at her through a look of utter disbelief. He hopped onto the fire escape and made his way back down the four flights of stairs. His knee began to protest. Case just clutched it and continued to hobble after her.

“Not now,” he begged. He reached the bottom of the stairs. Gina made her way around the corner of the apartment complex and stumbled upon a pair teenage couples. They were making out. Case sprinted to the end of the alley and rounded the corner just in time to watch. Gina jerked one of the girls from her boyfriend and chopped her head off. Case pinched his eyes closed. He shook his head and turned away. The boyfriend lunged at Gina, screaming at the top of his lungs. The other teenage couple stopped making out and watched. Gina slashed his throat

and slung him to the ground like a rag doll.

“The hell, man?” the girl asked.

Her boyfriend opened up a switchblade. “You killed Max and Winter!” the boyfriend shrieked, walking up to her. Case was frozen, tired, and in pain. He just stood there, helpless.

“Get her, Colt!” the girlfriend snapped.

“Don’t worry, Evelyn,” Colt replied. “I got this.” He swung the knife at Gina. She smacked it away, reached down, and sliced him from groin to sternum with one of her weapons. Gina turned to Evelyn with a terrifying grin. Colt’s blood splattered her in her bloody face.

“*Gina...*” Case whimpered.

“Shut-up, Detective Dick-Head!” she coldly replied. She dug her hands into Colt’s gash, jerked his bowels out, and slammed them down on the ground. His girlfriend put both of her hands over her mouth and gagged. “Bwah! Ha! Ha!” Gina shrieked. Gina jabbed both of her weapons into the back of Evelyn’s head as she turned to run away. She and her boyfriend fell to the sidewalk at the same time. Gina quickly jerked her weapons back out of the girl’s head and stood to face her fiancé. “Well-well,” she remarked, wiping blood from the daggers of her weapons on her black robe. “Now, what?” Case took one step towards her. A piercing pain shot out from his knee and up his spine.

“AAAAAAA!” he screamed, crumbling to the ground, clutching his leg. “Son of a BITCH!” Gina howled with laughter. She crossed her weapons over her chest as if she was in a coffin again.

“That all you got?!”

Case looked up through a twisted face. “I’ll get you, Gina!” he snarled. Gina tore off into the night. A couple of police cars arrived and screeched to a stop. An officer tore out of one

of them and aimed his gun at Detective Case.

“Freeze!” he screamed. “Don’t you move!” Another cop popped out of the other car. He also fixed Case between his crosshairs.

“Don’t move,” he warned. Case slowly raised his hands over his head. A blinding light came to rest on his dirty, bleeding face.

“Can– Can you call Sergeant Paloni, please?” he groaned.

Chapter 24: "A Recap"

A medic poked a needle into Case's forehead for one final stitch in the back of an ambulance. Case winced, jerking his head back. "Sorry," she told him, "last one." He looked down. Another medic was wrapping his left forearm in gauze. He had already wrapped the right one.

"I'm going to be a mummy when you two are done," he remarked. Sergeant Paloni's head popped through the double doors at the back. "How many?" Case demanded.

"Twenty-two," he reported.

Case was shocked. "Twenty-two people?"

Captain Ford appeared beside Paloni. "Well, if it isn't Detective Jackass," he remarked. He turned to Paloni. "And, how many people did he let her kill?" Paloni threw his hands behind his head and walked away. Ford turned back to Case.

"Twenty-two," he told him.

"Jesus, Case!" Ford yelled. "When exactly did you plan on *stopping* that girlfriend of yours?"

The medic finished wrapping his other forearm, and Case crossed his arms over his chest. "You know," he replied, "I could've had backup if you hadn't fired me the other day." He threw his hands up at either side of his face. "I'm just saying."

"Oh, you didn't have backup. That's why I've got twenty-two dead people lying in the street out here, huh?" Captain Ford pointed across the ambulance. "Why didn't you just grab that bitch by her hair and slam her head into the ground?"

"All done," the medic stitching Case's forehead declared. She and the other medic quickly exited the ambulance.

Case rubbed a bandage the medic had stuck on his head. "I'm sorry. Is that *proper* police procedure?" he inquired. "I'll try to remember that next time."

"Don't you understand?" Ford asked him. "There isn't going to BE a next time. You're no longer a detective!" Detective Case looked across the ambulance. He peered into Captain Ford's eyes.

"I need to see Tiffany. Is she at the hospital?"

" 'Tiffany'?" Ford repeated. "Tiffany *who*? What...are you babbling about?" Case snatched his white coat off a counter next to him. It was dingy, the sleeves were slashed up, and it was spattered with blood, but he didn't care. He threw it on, hopped up, and dashed out of the ambulance, blowing right past Ford. He walked up to Paloni, who was turned around talking to Gary, the forensics guy. "Go home, Case!" Ford called after him. "Get a life." Paloni stopped talking and spun around to face Detective Case.

"You know where Tiffany's at?" Case asked.

Paloni squinted. "Who's that, now?"

"Gina's friend," Case explained. Paloni rubbed his chin with his index finger and thumb.

"Oh, I think he means the chick that saved him," Gary remarked.

"Oh, right," Paloni replied with a nod of his head. He turned and slugged Case in the shoulder. "Hey, what's up with *her*, man?"

"What do you mean?" Case inquired.

"What, you were banging her, and Gina got jealous?" Gary asked. Case's face went dull. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked Gary in the eyes.

"No, you IDIOTS." Paloni smirked, turning to pat Case on the back. "Tiffany's just..."

"What?" Paloni asked.

Case turned to him. “Hmm. I need to talk to her. Is she okay?”

“Well, let’s see,” Paloni replied, rubbing his chin with his index finger and thumb. “I think they took her to the *west* side hospital.” Case turned and began to walk away. “Hey!” Paloni called after him. “Where the hell are you going?”

“I’m going to get my car,” Case coldly replied. He winced, reaching down to clutch his knee as he hobbled along. “Damn knee.”

“Well, me and Gary can drive you,” Paloni told him. He and Gary scrambled to catch up with him.

“I want to walk,” he remarked, limping along. “Go back through all of this in my head. You know what I mean?”

“Well, hold on,” Paloni replied. He sprinted in front of him and planted a hand on his chest to stop him. “We can’t just let you go walking around. What if she’s out here waiting for you?”

Case shrugged. “So, walk with me.” He looked at Gary. “You and old numb-nuts over there.”

Gary narrowed his eyes behind a look of disgust. “Hey, I’m not the one that just got my *ass* kicked by my girlfriend.”

Case bobbed his head up at him with an exhausted smirk. “No, but you might get your ass kicked by the guy who GOT his ass kicked by his girlfriend.”

Paloni shrugged. “Sure, I could use the walk.”

“Far out,” Case replied. He took off. Paloni and Gary scrambled along to keep up with him. For a man with a bad knee, he sure did walk fast. Paloni figured it was probably vigor, mostly.

“Hey,” Paloni began as they trotted along, “there’s something I wanted to ask you earlier before the captain interrupted us.”

“What’s that?”

“Like, I know she’s your fiancée and all, but why didn’t you just shoot her? You had that revolver I gave you, right?”

“Yeah,” Gary added.

Case nodded. “I *did*.”

Paloni threw his arms out at his sides. “So, why didn’t you shoot her?”

Case looked up. “I *did*. I just told you.” Paloni dropped his arms at his sides. He stared at the pavement as they closed in on the bridge across the Benedict Channel.

“Well Case, with all due respect, that just doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“No?” Case inquired, turning to him. “That doesn’t make sense, huh? Well, then you’re *really* going to be confused by THIS.” He jerked the revolver out of his pocket and popped out the cylinder to show him. “I *unloaded* this thing on her.” He pointed the barrel at the sky and shook the six empty casings loose. They tumbled to the ground with hollow metallic clanks.

“She must’ve replaced them with blanks,” Gary suggested.

“Or, you missed her,” Paloni added.

“I shot her right in the face, Sarge,” Case told him. He dropped the revolver back in his pocket and turned to Gary. “Then, I borrowed ANOTHER gun off of someone at the diner over there, and I emptied *that* one into her as well.” He pointed across the bridge. He was referring to the outdoor diner he had chased Gina through, earlier.

Paloni shook his head. “Something doesn’t add up.” Case reached into his pocket for a cigarette. He came up with a pack of squashed gum. He unraveled a scrunched-up stick and

popped it in his mouth. He tossed the foil wrapper aside and dropped the rest of the pack back in his pocket.

“No, Paloni,” Case replied, “it makes perfect sense.”

Paloni rubbed his chin with his index finger and thumb. “Well, if Gina was a witch, maybe.” Case turned to him with a smirk. “What? Wait a minute! You don’t mean...”

“Tiffany,” Case interrupted.

“Huh?”

“I have to talk to Tiff,” he told them. “Tiffany!” he corrected with a snap of his fingers.

“Are you *serious*?” Paloni demanded. “You really think she’s a witch?”

“Right in the face, Paloni.”

“ ‘Right in the face’?” Gary repeated.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Case continued. “The first three shots I fired at her, she was running right past me for the door.” By now they were at the cop-swarmed diner. They opted to walk on the opposite side of the street. “You know, at the apartment over here,” he added, pointing down the road.

“Still could’ve missed,” Gary remarked.

Paloni looked at him. “Yeah, it *is* Detective Case after all.”

Case smirked, sarcastically. “Well, we’ll know that when we get to the apartment.”

“Huh?” Gary asked.

“Like, I’ve got a feeling we won’t find three bullet holes in the wall,” Case explained.

“Just one in the ceiling.”

“Warning shot?” Paloni guessed.

“Right,” Case replied, “warning shot. But, even if I missed her with those three, I shot

her right in the face at the diner. I'm telling you."

"Right in the face?" Gary asked.

Case turned to Gary with a wild expression. "Twice!" he remarked with his middle and index fingers extended.

"Right..." Paloni trailed off. "And, exactly how many beers did you have to drink tonight, Detective Case?"

"Yeah, no kidding, Detective Case...of beer," Gary added.

Paloni laughed. "And, if the answer is 'none', then how many *screwdrivers* did you have to drink tonight? Or, shots of whiskey? Or..."

"For your information," Case slyly interrupted, "I haven't had any alcohol since Wednesday night."

Paloni turned to him with a look of utter shock. "Really?" he asked.

"For real?" Gary inquired. Case shot each of them a grin.

"Well...what the hell, then?" Paloni demanded.

Case shrugged. "Gina's a witch. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Paloni threw his arms out at his sides. "You've got to be kidding me, Case. This is the best you could come up with?"

"Hey, she *told* me she was a witch, Sergeant. That's what this whole thing has been about." He turned to Paloni, eagerly awaiting his response.

He rubbed his chin with his index finger and thumb. "That makes no sense, whatsoever," he replied. "Unless..."

"What?" Gary demanded.

Paloni turned to Case. "They were human sacrifices. Each one of them?"

Case planted a hand on his shoulder. "That's what she told me."

"Maybe..." Paloni agreed. "And, maybe there's three bullet holes in the wall over here."

"That's what we're going to find out."

"And what if there *aren't* any?" Gary asked.

"Like I say, 'I've got to talk to Tiff'," Case replied.

"You mean 'Tiffany'," Paloni corrected.

Case pretended to smack himself across the face. "Damn, I have to quit *saying* that."

"Why?" Gary asked. "What's wrong with 'Tiff'?"

Case shook his head, dropping his hands in his pockets. "It's a long story, Gary."

"She was abused, right?" Paloni inquired.

Case let out a short laugh through his nose. "How did you know that?"

"Guess," Paloni returned.

"What?" Gary asked him.

"He made Sergeant for a reason, Gary," Case replied.

Paloni looked at Detective Case. "Tiff's what her...father called her?"

"Hmm..." Gary mumbled with a shake of his head. They were now where Gina had thrown the hooker into the street to be smashed by an oncoming car. There was a hearse and yet another cop car, blocking off traffic in one of the lanes.

"My God," Case remarked. "This is so bad, man."

"I *know*," Paloni replied with a light shove. "Should've called me, buddy. I could've helped you."

"I know," Case returned. "I know. Did they all die?"

"Who?" Paloni asked.

“Like, everyone she attacked.”

“Looks like it, yeah.”

“Really?” Case inquired. “No survivors.”

“Well, let’s see,” Paloni began, rubbing his chin with his pointer finger and thumb.

“There were Harriet and Jean Raglen, the first two hookers she killed. Then, there was Queenie, the woman we just passed. Then, she killed the Grishams and the McCains at the diner followed by a jogger named Dana Guerrero, whom she threw off the bridge...”

Case couldn’t help but grin. “Keep going, man,” he remarked.

“Thanks,” Paloni replied. “Then, she killed the three homeless guys, Sam York and the Weis brothers. She followed that up with a little fireworks show at the bar over there, where she set those three Reagan sisters on fire. She threw those three stoners off the roof at the apartment complex...uh...Phoebe French, Una Myers, and Kate Nicholson. Finally, she took it upon herself to slash up those two teenage couples, Winter Price and Max Pradon, then Colt Moss and Evelyn Scott.”

Gary gave him a round of applause. “Nice.”

“Missed one,” Case remarked with a grin.

“I did NOT!”

“Some girl at the foot of the stairs in the alley.”

Paloni thought for a minute. “Awe, dammit,” he spat with a snap of his fingers. “The Teal girl...Carolyn Teal.”

“Ah,” Case said. “Yep, she killed them all. Twenty-two, huh?”

“Yeah,” Paloni said, lightly nodding his head. He patted his pockets. “Hey, you got a smoke there, Case?”

“Gee,” Case replied, patting his own pockets, “all fresh out.”

“What?” Paloni demanded. “Don’t tell me you gave THAT up *too*.”

“I chunked THOSE in the trash yesterday.”

Paloni’s jaw dropped. “Well...” he trailed off. He slugged Case in the arm. “Well, what *do* you do anymore, anyway?”

Case shrugged. “I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

“No seriously, man,” Gary added, “this is like discovering Abelian groups or something like that. I mean this is out of sight!”

Case squinted. “Abelian groups? The hell does THAT supposed to mean?”

“Abelian groups,” Gary replied. “You know, like in number theory?”

Case shook his head. “You lost me, Gary.”

Gary patted Detective Case on the shoulder. “Well, why does that not surprise me?”

“You got the key?” Paloni asked.

“Hell no,” Case replied.

Paloni gave him a dirty look. “What do you mean ‘hell no’,” Paloni demanded. “You broke in?”

“I had probable cause,” Case explained.

“Probable cause and no *warrant*.”

“Bah!” Case snapped, waving him off. “There, you see now, Gary? That’s exactly why I didn’t call you two out here, earlier.” Paloni scoffed. “You guys and your stupid warrants.”

“Yeah,” Paloni sarcastically replied, “our stupid warrants and our suspects that don’t go free later on, unlike certain *other* detective’s suspects who *always* go free!”

“Oh, God damn, Paloni!” Case returned. “Only like...two times that ever happened.”

Paloni turned to Gary. "Ole Louie two-times, we called him. Well, that's just great, Detective numb-nuts. Twenty-two spree victims and 3 serials, and she's gonna walk."

"After killing those two couples at the diner over there?" Case reminded him, pointing back at the diner. "There was probably like...a hundred witnesses."

Paloni laughed, turning back to Gary. "Detective Case relies on a lot of luck, you see?"

Gary squinted. "Why do we need the key? Isn't the apartment unlocked? I mean our guys are all over it."

"He knows it's unlocked, Gary," Case told him. "He just asked if I had the key because he knew I didn't. You see Sergeant Paloni here relies a lot on his ability to get secrets out of people. You know, like a woman?"

"Ah," Gary said with a nod. "Yep, that sounds about right."

"Shut-up, Gary," Paloni told him as they walked to the front door of Gina's old apartment. A uniformed officer held up a box of latex gloves for them. The three of them each grabbed themselves a pair.

"Don't know why I need THESE," Case remarked. "I'm looking for three bullet holes."

"Which wall?" Paloni asked, snapping his gloves on.

Case pointed across the living room. "*That* one."

Gary snapped *his* gloves on and held his palms up at either side of his head. "No bullet holes," he told them. "She really IS a witch, Case!"

Terrell, another forensics guy stopped dusting for fingerprints and looked up. "A 'witch'?" he repeated.

"Nothing, Terrell," Paloni replied. "Don't worry about it."

"Well," he replied, "it's just that we found some weird stuff in that back room over

there.” He pointed towards the bedroom.

Case turned to him. “Candles...stuff like that?”

“Candles, knives, a couple of necklaces with pentagrams on them, a Ouija board— You know, those kinds of things.”

Paloni gave Case a shove. “What’re you doing hanging around with a girl like *that*?”

“Hey, I just found out myself,” Case told him.

“Right,” Paloni replied with a pat on the back. “That’s right. I’m sorry, man. Why don’t you drive over to the hospital and check on what’s-her-face. See if you can find yourself a *new* girl.”

Case smiled. “SHE’S a witch too, Paloni.”

“Really?” Paloni demanded.

“Good God, man!” Gary shrieked. “You got a fetish or what?”

“Guys!” Case yelled back. “I didn’t say I was— I wasn’t...”

Paloni patted him on the shoulder. “Go on over there, buddy.”

Detective Case rubbed the back of his head. “What do I say to her?”

Sergeant Paloni shrugged. “Tell her thanks for saving your life.” Case looked at him, bobbed his head up, and headed for the door.

“Hey, Case,” Gary called after him. Case stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“What’s up?”

“What happened to *her*, anyway? Why’s she in the hospital?”

Case uttered a single laugh. “Gina put a spell on her.”

“Really?” Gary inquired. Case turned around to face him. “What do you mean? What *kind* of spell?”

“You guys didn’t see her admission papers?” Case asked. Paloni narrowed his eyes. He patted the pockets of his brown leather jacket.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got a copy of that. Somewhere...” Case smiled, then turned and walked out of the apartment.

Chapter 25: "Foreign Bodies"

"It's never felt so good to be alone," Case remarked.

"We need some time to think this out," the voice replied.

Case got ready to turn off the freeway at the next exit. "What now?" He reached into his coat pocket for his cigarettes.

"Just go get some smokes." Case thought of Tiffany and slowly shook his head. He couldn't erase that image from his head of the cigarette burns on her chest. It made him sick. She *was* a little crazy, but now he knew why. They were perfect for one another. She needed someone to love her, and now Case needed someone to love. He smiled, remembering earlier in the night when she had come by to save him. *"Right here, you FREAK!"* her voice rang in his head. She must have come out of her office not long after he'd left to find Adam and Gabrielle sitting there and no Case. When they'd told her where he was, she hadn't even thought about it. She had just hopped on the first thing smoking, arriving like his knight in shining armor. He had been her damsel in distress.

Case closed his eyes. He recalled chasing Gina around. The memories came flooding back like a movie playing in his mind. He watched her reel back with both arms and chop that man's head off. Then, he watched her dash across the table and do his old lady in a similar fashion. Other horrific images flooded his thoughts. He recalled her dropping from that other couple's table, slicing both of their throats simultaneously. He pictured her lying on top of him, spitting blood into his eyes. Images rolled through his thoughts of Gina smashing bottles of whiskey on those three girls, then covering them in a fiery breath. He felt a tear rolling down his cheek. He promptly brushed it away. He smashed his fist into the steering wheel. That's when another memory popped into his tired head.

"Lou!" he remembered Gina screaming at him. *"Lou, don't punch the steering wheel! What did that thing ever do to you?"* Case had looked at her. He noticed how the sun lit up her face. He looked deep into her green eyes and smiled. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, honey," he had replied. He popped out of the memory, flipped his right blinker on, and exited off the freeway. *"Nervous habit,"* he remarked. He turned and popped some music in the player.

"How did Tiffany get to Gina's apartment?" the voice asked.

"Bus, probably," Case guessed. *"Maybe a cab. What difference does it make?"*

"What about Gina? How do you think SHE got there?"

Case shrugged. *"She probably appeared out of thin air."*

The voice laughed. *"Yeah, no kidding, huh?"*

Case looked at the empty passenger seat. *"Still, why did Tiffany come right on by like that? She could've called me on Gina's cell if she was concerned."*

"She probably tried that while you were incapacitated."

Case nodded. *"Right."* He patted the empty passenger seat. *"Yep, that's probably it."*

"So, why'd she call in the first place?" the voice asked. *"I thought she was all pissed off about the pizza thing."*

"She must've gotten over it," Case replied. *"Stop psychoanalyzing everything."*

"Yeah, we can always ask her later. Think she's alright?"

"I hope so," Case returned. He pulled into a parking garage at the hospital and began to search for an empty spot. He slowed to a stop in front of a handicapped spot.

"We still got that permit?" the voice asked.

"Yep," Case replied, popping the glove box open. He snatched up a handicap permit and

slapped the glove box shut again. Then, he veered into the handicapped spot and dangled the permit from his mirror. He hopped out of the car and jogged through the parking garage. He made his way through the entrance to the hospital and to the front desk.

“Can I help you, sir?” a woman behind the desk asked.

“I’m here to see Tiffany Haynes,” Case told her. “Can I— Is she...” The lady behind the counter stopped typing. She looked at him through a pair of narrow eyes.

“You can go on up and see her. Long night?”

Case leaned forward on her desk. “You wouldn’t BELIEVE.” She stared at Case’s bloody, slashed up sleeves. She pointed at the elevators to her right.

“Fourth floor,” she reported. “Room 477.”

“Thank you,” Case returned with a pat on the counter. He made his way to where she was pointing and opened the door to the stairs.

“Uh, sir,” the woman called after him. Case stopped. “There’s an elevator right *there*.”

Case bobbed his head up at her. “I know,” he replied. He continued through the door and up the stairs. He raced up four flights of stairs, then plowed through a pair of double doors and looked around for room 477. He clutched his knee in dismay. He hobbled towards the end of the hallway to his left, passing three perpendicular hallways along the way. He walked by several rooms. Some had open doors so that he could see all the lonely occupants inside watching television or sleeping. He caught a glimpse of *one* unfortunate woman who was being given the last rights. Other rooms had closed doors. Those occupants probably had lots of visitors and wanted their privacy. He made it to the end of the hallway, only to end up at a dead end beside room number 426.

“*This is going to take a while*,” Case mumbled under his breath. He turned around,

headed back down the hallway, and made a left at the first adjacent hallway he came to. He followed it for a ways, but he never reached Tiffany's room. It was as though room 477 was in a whole other dimension.

"We're like rats in a maze," the voice remarked.

"No kidding," Case quietly replied. He wandered back to the first hallway, then down the next adjoining one. He passed more lonely people with their doors open and others that had their families and friends to *shut* their doors. A sudden roar of laughter burst from one of the closed doors. He backed up and raised his fists as if to fight. *"My God!"* he whispered. *"They must have extra-large lungs in that family."* As he continued down the hallway, the room numbers began to make more sense. He found room 460. Then he got to room 465. He rounded a corner and spotted 470. He was getting close, so close he could taste it. He filled with anticipation as he dashed past the last few rooms. But alas, the long and winding hallway came to an abrupt end at room 475. He stopped and threw his hands on his hips in dismay, staring at the three bold-faced, black numbers beside the door. It was one of those rooms with the door closed, of course. It was selfishly closed off and *filled* with visitors most likely.

"Must've been the FIRST one," he whispered.

"I hate hospitals," the voice added.

Case made his way back through the labyrinth of rooms, darted down the first hallway, and rounded the corner of the first adjacent hallway. The second room down was number 477. It had been under his nose the entire time. The door to room number 477 was one of the lonely ones with the door open. Case could feel Tiffany's loneliness pouring out of the room and filling the hallway. A lump appeared in his throat as he stood there, staring at the open door. He sighed, then slowly made his way to her room, stopping to stand in front of the doorway. He

found Tiffany sitting in bed, reading the Holy Bible of all things. Now, *she* was in one of those white hospital gowns with the blue polka dots. She looked up just as Case appeared. She didn't say anything. She let her head fall into her pillow. Then, she popped back up and tossed the bible aside.

Case made his way into the room, immediately shutting the door behind him. "You okay?" he asked. He pulled up a chair at her bedside and had a seat.

"I am," she told him. "You look like CRAP. Are *you* okay?" She touched her fingertips to the bandage on Case's forehead.

"I-I'm tired, Tiff," Case replied. Tiffany slowly dragged her finger down the bandage. Her fingernail gently scraped over each of Case's stitches underneath.

"Tiffany," she corrected.

"Sorry," he sighed. She seemed a little more relaxed than usual. "Are you ON something?"

"Morphine," she replied.

Case nodded. "Did they have to do surgery?"

Tiffany shook her head. "I threw up most of the pins. They pumped my stomach to get the rest of them."

Case squinted. "So, Gina did that to you?"

"Yes," Tiffany replied with a smile.

Case thought for a moment. "You mean like...she just snaps her fingers, and your stomach is filled with a bunch of sewing needles?"

Tiffany began to list things on her fingers. "Or paperclips...or safety pins...pencils...rubber bands– Any kind of foreign object will do. Hell, I've even got a book

about a guy who had a whole piggy bank in his stomach...change and all.”

“Huh...” Case remarked. He stood and tossed his jacket over the back of the chair. He sat back down and curled his index finger over his top lip. “She didn’t kill you, though. Why didn’t she use *more*? Why didn’t she just do the same thing to me?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Must’ve been all she was carrying.”

“Well, why not use something else that was handy?” Case inquired. “Like that stapler you threw at her or something?”

Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. “I don’t know. I don’t know what type of magic she’s using. She might need a separate spell for a stapler.” She patted her chest as she cleared her throat. “A specific word. She might not have known the specific word she needed for ‘stapler’, for example.”

Case looked at her. “Are you going to make it?”

“I think so,” Tiffany replied. “They’re keeping me overnight for observation.”

“Can you eat?”

Tiffany picked up a small plastic cup off some machinery and held it up for Case to see. “Well, they gave me this...sucralfate stuff,” she said, “but I just threw it back up.”

“That’s for ulcers,” Case replied. “I had to take that for a while when I was a kid.” She closed her eyes. A couple of tears rolled down her cheeks. Case curled his fingers around *her* cold, clammy fingers. “Tiffany? What’s the matter?”

“I’m so...sorry I got mad at you earlier,” she said with a shaky voice.

“Well, that’s okay,” Case told her, patting her hand. “I forgive you.”

She let out a nervous sigh. “THAT’S why I came by, earlier. Not because you thought Gina was the killer. No, I just thought you’d lost your mind again when the kids told me *that*.”

Case bobbed his head up at her. “Ye, of little faith.”

Tiffany snickered, wiping her tears away. “Imagine my surprise when I popped in and found you tied up on top of a table in the middle of the living room, a sack of bricks nailed to the ceiling above you, Gina pacing around in a black robe, ranting and raving like a lunatic...” Case nodded. “I grabbed the first thing I could...some stapler I found on the floor by the door.”

“Well, you saved my *life*, whether you were trying to or not.” Case met her dark brown eyes with his pale blue eyes. “I’m sorry, too.”

“What?”

“About the pizza thing,” Case explained. “I uh– I was just kidding around. I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings.” She turned away, her eyes welling up with tears again. “Tiffany, stop CRYING,” Case told her. He swatted beneath her eyes. “It’s okay, honey.”

She gasped, reaching up and prying his fingers from her face. “Yeah, I don’t even know why I got so upset a while ago.” Tiffany looked down at his hand, then back up again. “Your hand’s shaking,” she remarked. Case held his hands next to one another and looked them over. “Shaking” was an understatement. His hands were *convulsing*. Tiffany took both of his hands in hers. “You alright, Louis?”

He looked up. “Alcohol withdrawal.”

“Yeah, I forgot about that.”

“Me too,” Case replied with a nod. “I hope it doesn’t get bad.” Tiffany squinted, moving her head closer to him. She sniffed the air around him. Case was overcome with a look of curiosity. “What...are you doing?” he demanded. Tiffany grabbed Case’s shirtsleeve, held it under her nose, and inhaled deeply. “What is it? What do you smell?” She let go of his sleeve with the one hand and placed it on the side of his face. Then, she leaned in and kissed him. Case

could not be more surprised. “The hell was *that* for?”

She smiled. “You quit smoking.”

Case smiled back. “Yes...I did. I quit because of you.”

She threw her arms around him and kissed him again. “You quit smoking because of me?” she asked. “I think I *love* you.” Case snickered. He brushed her chin-length hair out of her face with a shaky hand.

“Well, I’m glad it makes YOU happy, because it’s *killing* me.”

“It’ll do that,” she told him with a nod.

“You ever smoke?”

“Off and on when I was a kid,” she replied. “My father...he would *always* catch me.” She dropped her arms and let him go, easing back into her hospital bed. “That last time he caught me...” She swallowed hard. “You should go.”

Case nodded. “I should be out there *looking* for her. Did you know she killed twenty-two people tonight?”

“It’s all over the news,” Tiffany replied. Case slowly stood and snatched his coat off the back of the chair. “Here, hold on,” she continued, “I’m going with you.” She struggled to sit up. She winced, clutching her stomach in pain.

Case placed a hand on either of her shoulders and eased her back down again. “It’s alright, Tiffany. Lay your sick ass back down, and get some rest.”

She narrowed her eyes in pain. “I don’t want you to go, man.”

“It’ll be okay,” he told her. “I’m just going to the bar over here.”

“What? No!” Tiffany begged.

Case laughed as he threw his coat back on. “I’m not going to get drunk, Tiff.”

“Tiffany,” she corrected.

“Sorry,” Case replied. “I’m not going to get drunk. There’s something I have to check out.”

“At the bar?”

“Yeah, over at Richie’s,” Case explained. “There’s this really weird girl that’s been hanging around.”

“And?”

“And, I think I know why, now.” He held his hand up and looked at it. It was still shaking, uncontrollably. “I’m not sure how I’m going to be feeling here in a bit, but if I’m still feeling alright and they’ll let me back in later, I’ll try to come back and see you again, okay?”

“Well, hold on,” Tiffany remarked. “There’s something else you have to do while you’re at it.”

Case sat back down. “What’s that?”

“Well first, you need to get Gina’s phone from over there.” She pointed at a counter by the door.

“Oh, right,” Case replied, looking at the counter. “Yeah, I could use that. Hell, it’s *my* phone, anyway. It’s in my name.”

“But also,” she continued, “there’s an old tree out behind the shop. Ask Adam and Gabrielle. They’ll show you.”

“Alright,” Case replied.

“Now, this should work if Gina’s been hexing you this whole time. You know, like we were talking about at lunch earlier today?”

“Oh...right.”

“You draw her picture on the tree, right?” Case leaned in. “You draw an ‘X’ where her heart is, and you drive a nail into the middle of the ‘X’.” Case narrowed his eyes. “You just drive it in a little...not all the way.” Case nodded. “And, you keep driving it in a little every day. If she’s hexing you...I mean *really* hexing you...she’ll feel it.” Tiffany stopped and clutched her stomach in pain. Case placed his hand on top of hers.

“And, then she’ll come after me,” he surmised.

“*Yep,*” Tiffany groaned.

Case patted her hand. “Okay,” he told her. He kissed her again, then headed out.

“Phone!” Tiffany called out as he burst through the door. Case snatched it off the counter on his way out. Then, he patted the door closed behind him.

Chapter 26: “The Spy”

“Detective Case!” Richie screamed. “Where you been? I missed you last night.” He pointed at him. “What the hell is that on your forehead?” Case held up his shaking hands to show his buddy, Richie. “Aye! You’re detoxing!” He whirled around and snatched up a bottle of vodka. “Here, lemme find you some orange juice, and I make you a bourbon real quick, okay? Fix you right up.” Richie turned and headed to a little mini fridge that he kept behind the bar. Case grabbed him by the arm to stop him.

“No, Richie,” Case replied. “I-I’m quitting.”

Richie looked Case in the eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Case.” Case slowly shook his head. Richie turned around, set the vodka down, and grabbed a fresh pack of smokes out of a display case he kept behind the bar. “Well, here,” he told him, “at least have a pack of smokes. It’s on *me*.”

Detective Case slowly waved them away. “I’m quitting that *too*.”

Richie looked at the cigarettes in his hand long and hard. “Oh, chit...” He turned around and put the pack of cigarettes back up.

“So, that chick that’s been coming in here lately,” Case continued. Richie whirled around with a look of intrigue. “I’m going to nail her.”

Richie smirked. “Well she IS a hooker.”

“No!” Case shouted through a smirk. “Not– Never mind that. You just make me up a tonic water and orange juice, okay?”

“Tonic and orange?” Richie inquired. “No-no, it will taste terrible.”

“It’ll look like I’m drinking a screwdriver,” Case replied. “That’s all that matters.”

“Ah,” Richie returned. He quickly mixed up Case’s “drink.” “One chit water...coming

right up.” Case reached into a bowl on the bar and snagged a few peanuts. He cracked them open and made quite a mess on the bar. Richie returned with Case’s fake screwdriver. “Oh, sure,” Richie remarked as he set the glass down, “take all the free chit you want.” Case snickered as Richie walked towards the other end of the bar. “Hey!” he yelled at a pair of younger guys at one of the pool tables. “No practice shots! Either put some more quarters in there, or take a hike.” Case turned his head and watched. The two of them put up their cue sticks and slowly walked out of the bar.

“You tell ‘em, Richie,” Case remarked as Richie walked back by. He had a peek through the window blinds at the other end of the bar by the door.

“Somebody’s got to,” he replied. “Hey, here she comes, Case.” Richie let go of the blinds, and Case got into character. He took a quick sip of his drink. He made a sour face and set it back down as the “hooker” walked in and took her usual seat next to him. Richie walked up to her. “What can I get for *you* tonight?”

“Bourbon on the rocks,” she smoothly replied. She tossed her purse on an empty barstool next to her.

“You see there, Case?” Richie inquired. He turned around and grabbed a bottle of bourbon and an empty glass. “*She* likes the bourbon, here.” He scooped up some ice, dropped it into the glass, and poured a shot of bourbon on top. Then, he set it down for the lady.

She dropped a five on the bar, picked up the glass, and held it up to Case. “Cheers, bandage-face,” she remarked. Case clumsily clicked glasses with her. He struck her glass so hard, it nearly shattered.

“Sheeeeeeers!” Case shrieked. The two of them had a drink and set their glasses back down.

She turned and studied him carefully. “Boy, *somebody’s* having themselves a good time tonight. She dump you yet?”

Case had another sip of his drink as Richie ducked behind the bar. “Something,” Case began with a hiccup. “Something...like THAT!” Richie popped up from behind the bar with a curious look on his face. He shrugged and dropped down again.

“Oh, really?” she continued. “Are you still a dick?” Case belched with excited laughter. He turned and pounded the bar with his fist.

“YEAH!” he shrieked. “And, it’s...uh...” He had another sip of his drink and jerked his head towards her. “And, it’s REALLY big, too!”

The mystery woman began to snicker. “No-no,” she explained, “I mean...are you still a cop?”

“Oooooooh!” he exclaimed. He had another sip. Richie popped up from behind the bar, walked to the other end, and dumped some trash from a dustpan. “No, I can– I can– I can cop a FEEL!” He took another sip of his drink and started coughing as if he were choking. The lady reached behind him and patted him on the back. He shook his head and cleared his throat. “Yeah, thanks. Thanks A LOT!” Case turned, kicked his stool out from under himself, and went crashing to the floor. The hooker began to laugh.

“*Oh, my God,*” he heard her mumble under her breath, “*he’s REALLY tanked tonight.*” Case grinned. His suspicions had been confirmed. He couldn’t believe he’d never noticed before. She hopped off her stool and held her hand out. “Here, let me help you, sweetheart.” Case took her hand and jerked her down. “Oh, shit!” she screamed, landing face-to-face with him on the floor.

“WHOOOPS!” Case shouted in her face. “I, uh– I, uh– I, uh don’t know, uh...what to

SAY!”

“Holy, crap!” she said to him. Richie returned and leaned over the bar to have a look.

“You’re really *gone* tonight, aren’t you? How many of those have you had, anyway?”

Case grabbed her right breast. “Uh, one...” he remarked. He grabbed her other breast.

“Two...”

“Um, yeah,” she replied, pulling Case’s hands away from her chest. “Yeah, I don’t give out no freebees, honey.” Case held onto her hands. He began to rub her palms with his thumbs.

“You know,” he continued, “YOU have the most beautiful eyes...I’VE EVER SEEN!”

He placed the palm of his hand on the side of her face and looked at Richie. “I mean look...Richie!” he shouted. “Look, she’s— She’s BEAUTIFUL!”

“Okay...” she trailed off. She eased his hands away from her face, then planted her palms on the floor to help her stand. “Yeah, this is getting a little weird.” She stood and began to walk back to her barstool. Case snagged her around the ankle and dropped her to the floor again. She grunted. She felt her teeth smash into the hard, tile floor. “Dammit!” she yelled. “Do something!”

The front door smashed open, and Captain Ford dashed inside, throwing his hands on his hips. “Good God, Case!” he screamed. “What’re you DOING, you freak?!”

Case shot to his feet and got right in his face. “What’re *you* doing, fat-ass?!” he demanded. “What’re you, spying on me?” Richie chuckled, beginning to understand.

Ford jabbed his finger into Case’s chest. “You...” he began. “You...” Case crossed his arms over his chest and smirked. “You’re not even drunk, are you?” he managed to spit out.

“Show him your hands, Case,” Richie suggested. Case held them up to show him. They wriggled uncontrollably.

“Oh my God, you’re detoxing,” Ford remarked. He pried one of Case’s eyes open and looked at his pupil. “Dilated– I can’t believe it.”

Case smacked Captain Ford’s hand away and looked him in the eyes. “I can’t believe you were *spying* on me. What a load of crap!” He turned to the fake hooker. Blood leaked from her mouth and dripped down her chin. “Um...sorry about that,” he told her. She smiled back through a set of bloody teeth. Then, she reached up and flipped him off. Case smirked and turned to Richie. “Richie,” he began with a snap of his fingers, “get the lady some ice.”

Richie scooped some ice into an empty glass and made his way around the bar. “Yeah, sure,” he remarked, “the ice is free, too.” She winced as he held the cup of ice to her face.

“Well, I hope you’re satisfied, you old fart,” Case told his boss. He turned and headed for the door.

“Hey!” Ford snapped. “Don’t talk to me like that. I’m your captain!”

Case looked over his shoulder and laughed. “You don’t get it, do you? I’m no longer a *detective*.”

The fake hooker held her hand out. “Can I get my money now?” she demanded. Ford looked over and sighed. He reached into his pocket, then held out a wad of cash for her. She patted the glass away that Richie held against her cheek, recovered her purse from the stool at the bar, and snatched the money from him on her way to the door. “Sorry, Detective,” she remarked. She brushed past Case and through the door.

Detective Case turned to Captain Ford with a shrug. “I’m leaving, too.” He reached for the door, then stopped and turned back to him. “No, you know what?” He threw the door open and pointed outside. “Why don’t *you* hit the road, chunky-britches? I believe I’ll stay here and shoot a game of pool or two with my good friend, Richie.” Captain Ford blew a breath through

his lips. Case turned to Richie.

Richie looked Captain Ford over. “You want a chot of bourbon?” he asked.

“No!” Ford replied.

“Not gonna buy nothing, eh? Then, hit the road, chunky-britches!” Captain Ford sighed. He showed himself out. Richie turned to Case. “Couple of games, huh?”

Case smiled back. “Sure. Why not?” Detective Case and Richie racked up a game of eight-ball and got into it pretty good. They were both a couple of pool sharks in their day, and even though it had been a while since either of them had played, it all began to come back to them. The bar was uncharacteristically empty for a Friday night, so they didn’t have to worry about being interrupted.

“So, what happened thee other night with Gina?” Richie asked. He smacked the nine-ball across the table, dropping it into a corner pocket. Case had a sip of cola. Richie had poured him a glass from the fountain, earlier.

“She’s a killer,” he casually replied. Richie hopped the thirteen over the eight. It stopped short of dropping into a side pocket.

“You’re right. She *is* good looking.”

Case stepped up to the table, positioned his cue, and looked around at what he had to work with. “No, Richie, she’s a *killer*,” Case repeated. He sent the six home. The cue ball struck three cushions and rested against the rail for his next shot on the two.

Richie looked at him through a pair of wide his eyes. “What’re you, kidding me?” he demanded. “Who’d she KILL?” Case chalked up his stick and sent the cue ball slowly down the rail. It dropped the two-ball in a corner and came to rest for the one, which was close to the opposite corner.

“A *lot* of people,” Case told him. He snagged his cola off the bar and took a sip. Then, he made his way to the other side of the table for his next shot. “You remember that girl you were asking me about the other night?”

“No,” Richie replied. “Oh, you mean the one that got her head chopped off?”

“Hole in her face,” Case corrected. He sent the cue ball to the one, and it dropped right in. He pushed through the cue ball too hard though, and it followed the one into the pocket.

Case sat down, and Richie made his way to the table. “What did she do **THAT** for?” He took the cue ball in hand and placed it about six inches behind the thirteen. He gently dropped it into the side pocket and chalked up his stick. “What is she, a *psycho*?”

Case shrugged and had another sip of cola. “I don’t know.” Richie sent the cue ball across the table and dropped the ten into a corner pocket. He wandered to the other side of the table and chalked up his cue.

“She got away, huh?”

“Still at large,” Case replied.

“My-my-my,” Richie remarked. “You better get out there and cash her, then. Corner pocket.” He dropped the eight-ball into a corner pocket and laid his stick on top of the table.

Case had another sip of cola and made his way to the rear of the table to rack up another game. “I sure can pick ‘em, Richie. I’ll tell you that.” Case pumped seventy-five cents into the table, rounded up all the balls, and racked them up. “I mean you’d think a detective could spot a killer.” He finished arranging the balls, then swept up the rack and slid it into a slot in the back of the table. “You know what I mean?”

“That’s why you quit drinking?” Richie asked.

“Sort of,” Case replied. He sat down and had another sip of his soda.

“Hmm.” Richie chalked up his stick, positioned it, and sent the rack of fifteen on a trip around the table. One solid dropped. “Some people just can’t handle the nightlife.”

Case shrugged. “I guess I’m one of them.”

“That’s alright,” Richie told him. He sent another solid to a corner pocket, then took a moment to think about his next shot. “You don’t have to drink when you come in here. You can just have yourself a soda and shoot some pool. I don’t care, as long as I get your money.” Case laughed. Richie lined up another shot, then stood to think about it some more. “You spend too much time on the work. Not enough time on the women. That’s your other problem.”

“Oh,” Case replied with a nod. “Yeah, I think you’re right about that.” He had another sip of his cola. Richie masséd the cue ball around the eight and the nine. It just caught the one-ball and dropped it into a corner pocket. Then, it struck a cushion and came back around for the six. “Nice shot,” Case remarked.

“Thank you,” Richie replied. He positioned his stick, dropped the six in the side, and lined up his next shot on the four. “We should do this more often, you know?”

“Yeah, man,” Case agreed. “I like this.” Richie dropped the four and seven in one shot, then lined up another shot on the two. “I’m not even going to get to play this time, am I?”

“Yeah, I played this game once or twice,” Richie remarked. He chalked up his stick and sank the two-ball. The cue ball went two rails and lined up perfectly for the eight. Case waved him off. He finished off his cola as Gina’s cell phone began to ring. He jerked the phone from his coat pocket and looked at the caller ID screen. It read “Tiffany.” Case squinted. He flipped the phone open and put it to his ear.

“What’s up?” he remarked.

“Detective CASE!” Gabrielle beamed through the phone.

Case smirked. “You and Adam been at the magic shop this whole time?”

“*Uh...yeah!*” she replied. “*Tiffany was supposed to tell you.*”

Case pinched the bridge of his nose. “I guess she did, just not in so many words. Do you— Don’t you two need to go home? Where are your parents?”

“*We don’t need to go HOME!*” Gabrielle shouted back. “*We need someone cool to come over and hang with us.*”

“*Yeah, we’re really bored!*” Adam yelled in the background.

Case looked up as Richie sank the eight-ball. “Bored, huh?” Case asked. “Alright, I’ll come by. I’m not going back to me and Gina’s apartment, that’s for sure.”

“*Well, come on over, then,*” Adam told him. “*Let’s go eat some shrooms!*”

Case rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “You can’t do that every night, Adam. You build up a tolerance.” Richie looked up with a pair of curious eyes.

“*Really?*” Adam inquired. “*Hmm. Well, come on over. Let’s do SOMETHING.*”

“Alright, I’m on my way.” Case flipped his phone closed and looked at Richie. “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Richie replied with a nod. “You come back anytime, and I’ll be sure and kick your ass again.”

“Yeah, I *let* you win tonight, Richie,” he replied. He stood to leave. “I’ll come back tomorrow or something and play you for real.” With a pat on the pool table, Case made his way out. Once outside he had his usual look at the sky. It was conveniently clear once again, no clouds whatsoever. He checked on Betelgeuse and Venus. Oddly enough, they had now begun to shrink in size. That was about right. From what he understood, they were supposed to reach their peak brilliance on this night, then recede into the vast cosmos. He smiled and popped a

stick of gum in his mouth. He strolled to the car, unlocked the door, and hopped inside. He fired up the engine, looked around, and threw it into reverse. Then, he backed out of his parking spot, and headed for the freeway.

Chapter 27: “Superstition”

Detective Case stumbled into Tiffany’s magic shop. The little bell rang as the door closed behind him. He found Adam and Gabrielle sitting at the front counter on their barstools. They were still dressed as earlier, Adam in a pair of black jeans, punk t-shirt, and red sneakers, and Gabrielle in a white button-up shirt with long sleeves, grey, knee-length skirt, and black flats. Gabrielle swung around on her barstool. “Louie!” she screamed. She ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. “I’ve been so worried, man,” she told him. “You alright?” She let go of him and reached up to touch the bandage on his forehead. Case bent down so she could reach it.

“Hey, man,” Adam remarked, having now made his way up to Case as well. He held up his fist, and Case bumped knuckles with him. Adam looked at Case’s hand as he returned it to his side. “Holy crap! What’s wrong with your hand, Louis?” Case held up his shaky hands so they could see them.

“What’s up with that?” Gabrielle asked.

“Alcohol withdrawal,” Case told her.

“You look *terrible*,” Adam remarked.

“Yeah, I don’t feel so well, either,” Case added. “You got Tiffany’s– You know how to get in touch with Tiffany at the hospital?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle replied. “I can call her for you.”

“Do that for me, will you?” Case asked her. Gabrielle made her way over to the cordless phone on the wall behind the counter. “Tell her I made it here, and I’m not coming back, tonight.” Gabrielle dialed the number for the hospital and managed to get through to Tiffany.

“So, are you going to be okay?” Adam asked.

“I think so,” Case told him, pointing at the counter. “Can we go sit down, please?”

“Yeah, sure.” He and Case wandered to the counter. As they walked, Case leaned over Adam, sniffing the air above him. He reached back and smacked him over the head. “Ow!” Adam shouted, rubbing the back of his head. “The hell was that for?”

“You’ve been smoking. You have to QUIT that. Tiffany will kill you.”

Adam smacked his lips. “You smoke *too!*”

Case smiled as they sat at the counter. “Right,” he responded. “That’s right.”

“Hold on,” Gabrielle said into the phone. She turned to Case with her hand cupped over the receiver. “You want to talk to her?”

“Sure,” Case replied, taking the phone. Gabrielle walked around the counter and had a seat next to Adam. “Mm. What’s up?” Case moaned into the phone.

“Hey, you take care of those two over there,” Tiffany told him. *“Keep your eye on them.”*

Case nodded. “Yeah, I already caught Adam smoking.”

“Dammit, Adam!” Gabrielle and Adam could hear Tiffany scream over the phone. *“You told me you quit!”*

Case grinned and slapped his knee. “I’ll give him a good talking to, Tiffy,” he told her.

“No-no-no,” she rattled off. *“It’s not ‘Tiffy,’ either. It’s Tiff-an-y!”*

“Sorry,” he told her. “Feel better, Tiffany.”

“You too,” she returned. *“Have some more of that tea, if you want. It’ll help you sleep.”*

“Alright, bye,” he replied, handing the receiver back to Gabrielle. She hopped back to her feet, dashed around the counter, and hung the phone up. Adam punched Case in the shoulder. “Little prick,” Case muttered, clutching his arm.

“Tell her I was smoking!” Adam remarked behind a pair of angry eyes.

Case shrugged. “She’s going to find out sooner or later.”

“Bleh!” Gabrielle spat as she sat back down. “She finds out everything!”

Adam turned to her. “I know, right?” He turned to Case. “So, are we doing this or what?”

“Doing what?” he demanded.

Gabrielle hopped up and took Detective Case by the hand. “Come on!” she instructed. She led him across the store and into Tiffany’s office. Adam followed suit. She led Case through the pitch black office and to a door in the corner. She flipped on a light switch. A light came on outside. It gleamed in through a long, rectangular window that was set vertically in the door.

“The tree thing?” Case inquired. He twitched, jerking to his right as Adam snuck a felt-tipped pen into his hand.

“Tiffany’s idea, not mine,” Adam assured him. Gabrielle opened the door, took Case by the hand, and led him outside to the back of the shop. It was a huge area. A tall, red-brick fence ran around the outer perimeter. Case held up a shaky index finger and counted thirteen trees scattered about as Gabrielle led him. She stopped at the largest, creepiest looking tree of the whole bunch. Case had a good long look at it. It was light brown to grey in color and well over twenty feet tall. It had more than 200 branches and a large hole burrowed into the trunk.

“My God,” Case remarked. “I didn’t even know any of this was back here.” He walked up to the trunk and found a nice, flat spot to draw on. “So, I just draw a picture of her right here on the trunk?”

Adam shrugged. “Theoretically.”

Gabrielle threw her fists down at her sides. “It’ll WORK!” Adam rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. Case popped the cap off the marker, plopped it down on the opposite end, and held the tip to the flat spot. His hand began to shake.

“Um...” he remarked, laying the side of his hand against the trunk to steady it. He shook his head, turning and handing the pen off to Gabrielle. “Here, you do it.”

Gabrielle held her hands up at either side of her head. “*You* have to do it,” she told him. “Tiffany said so.” Case sighed. He turned back to the tree trunk and held the pen up to draw again. It was no use. There was no way it was going to happen.

“Dammit!” he shouted. “Isn’t there something *else* we could try?”

Adam shrugged. “Maybe she’ll just magically appear out of thin air.”

“Shut-up, Adam!” Gabrielle replied. She placed her hand on top of Case’s to help steady it. “You can do it.”

“And, hurry up,” Adam added. “It’s cold out here!”

Gabrielle shot him a look over her shoulder. “Go inside, pussy!”

Adam smacked his lips. “This is so stupid, Gabrielle.”

“Okay!” Case yelled. “I’m trying to draw, here!” With Gabrielle’s smooth guidance, Case managed to scrawl out some semblance of a woman in a pointed hat.

“I don’t know, man,” Adam remarked, shaking his head. “That looks pretty crappy.”

“Put an ‘X’ on the heart,” Gabrielle instructed. Case slowly squiggled a jagged “X” where the heart would be in his picture. “Now, write her name underneath.” Case wriggled his hand underneath his drawing and slowly scribbled the letter “A.”

“What are you writing?” Adam demanded.

Case snapped the cap back on the pen, stepped away and studied what he had written.

“Awe, snap!” he spat, smacking his fist into his open palm. Gabrielle snickered. Case took the cap back off the marker. “Ha-ha,” Case sarcastically remarked. She took his shaky hand in hers and helped him add a “G,” an “I”, and an “N” before the “A.” Case sighed. He smacked the cap back on the pen and had a look. He handed the pen back to Gabrielle and turned to Adam. “Now, go get me a hammer and a nail,” he instructed. Adam quickly wandered back into the magic shop.

Gabrielle looked up with a smile. “Good job,” she told him with a nudge in the side.

Case reached behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Thanks, Gab,” he replied. “Man, I really feel BAD.”

She turned and put her arms around his waist. “Here, maybe you should sit down or something.” She helped Case sit down on the grass and took one of his hands in both of hers. “You okay?” she asked.

“No,” Case replied. “I feel kind of dizzy.”

Gabrielle put her hand on his shoulder. “You’ll be okay,” she assured him. “I’ll take of you.” Case smiled at her. He swept strands of her long brown hair out of her face.

“Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it.” Adam returned with a hammer and a long penny nail. He had also thrown his leather jacket on.

“Alright,” he remarked, handing the hammer and nail to Case. “Let’s do this, already.”

Detective Case took the hammer and looked at it. “I’m going to smash my thumb off with this damn thing.”

“Come on,” Adam told him. “All you have to do is tap it in there just a *little* bit.” Case bobbled his eyeballs around. He managed to focus them up the trunk of the tree and find his target. Gabrielle and Adam each threw one of Case’s arms over their shoulders and helped him

to stand.

“ ‘X’ marks the spot,” Gabrielle reminded him.

“Thanks, Gab,” Case replied. He held the point of the nail to the center of the “X,” placed the hammer head on the nail head, and gently tapped the nail in a quarter of an inch.

Adam grinned from ear to ear. “You did it.”

“Mm,” Case muttered. He bent over and threw up the cola Richie had served him earlier in one, huge retch. “Bleh!” Case gagged, handing the hammer back to Adam. He plopped down on the grass.

Gabrielle stared at Case’s puke. “Yuck!” she exclaimed. She wandered over and sat down on the grass next to him.

Adam sat next to Case on the other side. “Feeling better, now?”

Case stared at the hole in the tree trunk with a dumb look and an open mouth. “Uh...” he managed to get out. Adam whipped out a pack of cigarettes, fished out a smoke, and popped it in his mouth. He turned and offered one to Case. Case stared at the cigarettes, then waved them away. “No, thank you,” he remarked.

“No?” Adam inquired. He looked at Gabrielle. “Gabs?”

“Sure,” Gabrielle replied with a grin. Adam tossed her a smoke. He lit his up and chucked his lighter to her. It was one of those flip-top lighters. Case narrowed his eyes, watching Gabrielle. She clumsily flipped it open on her second try and spun the flint wheel a few times. Case held out his hand, and Gabrielle dropped the lighter in it. He smacked the lighter closed and held it in front of her face. He popped the lid open and struck it to life with two quick snaps of his fingers. “Oh, cool,” Gabrielle remarked. She removed the cigarette from her mouth. “How’d you do that?”

Adam bobbed his head up at him. “Yeah, that was cool.” Case popped the lighter closed with another snap of his fingers. He flipped the lighter into the air, caught it, flipped it open, and lit it up in a smooth series of swipes. Gabrielle snickered, leaning forward to light her cigarette. Case smacked the lighter closed and handed it back to Adam. Adam slid the lighter and his cigarettes back into the pocket of his jeans. Case looked at Gabrielle. She inhaled a drag, then slowly exhaled. He looked to his other side and watched Adam puff out a couple of smoke rings.

“So, you two are just a couple of hardcore smokers, huh?”

Gabrielle looked up. “What’s the matter with *you*?”

“Hmm?” Case inquired.

Gabrielle had another drag of her cigarette. “Too sick to smoke?”

“Oh,” Case said. “No, it’s not that. Nah, I feel much better, now.”

“You quit!” Adam surmised.

Case turned to him with a smirk. “Yes, I did.”

“Oh...” Gabrielle said. “I’m sorry. You want me to put it out?”

“Oh, no,” Case returned. “No-no, it’s alright, man.” Gabrielle smiled at him and had another drag. As she exhaled, Case pretended to cough. He started off a bit subtle, then began to screech with hacks. He clutched his throat with both hands as if he was having trouble breathing. Gabrielle smacked her lips. She hopped to her feet and wandered into the yard. Case laughed.

Adam gave him a shove. “Quitter!” he remarked.

“It’s okay, Gabrielle,” he called across the yard. “Come back over here. I was just *kidding*.” Gabrielle looked back and shook her head.

Case shrugged. “Hey, you guys ever play chicken?”

Adam turned to Case with another drag of his cigarette. “Huh?”

“Like, we put our arms together like this,” Case replied. He grabbed Adam’s forearm and put it next his. Then, he pushed up the sleeves of his and Adam’s jackets. “Then, you drop your cigarette right there, and you have to keep your arm still as long as you can.”

“What?” Adam asked. He jerked his arm away and dropped his sleeve. “No way. I’m not doing that!”

Case shrugged. “Chicken.”

“I’m not chicken,” Adam replied. “I’m just not stupid.”

“Chicken!”

“Nope.”

“Come on, little chickadee!” Case remarked. He grabbed a hold of Adam’s arm and put it next to his again. “Put that cigarette right *there*.”

“All...right!” Adam exclaimed. He flicked some ash off the end of his smoke, then dropped it between his and Case’s arms. By that time, Gabrielle had plopped down next to Case again. This was just too intriguing. She leaned across Case’s lap to have a closer look.

“Cool,” she remarked. “Don’t be a wuss, Adam!”

“Ow!” Adam screamed, jerking his arm away.

“Hmm,” Gabrielle muttered. She looked at him. He scrambled to recover his cigarette from the grass, then rubbed at his arm. “Wuss.”

“Like to see *you* try it,” he replied. Case turned to Gabrielle. She rolled up the sleeve of her white dress shirt and held her arm out. Adam cackled. He rubbed his hands together and sat back down next to Case to watch.

Case rolled up his other sleeve and held his forearm next to hers. “Man, look at that little

girlie arm,” he told her. “Cigarette’s going to burn right THROUGH that skinny little thing.”

Gabrielle flicked some ash from her cigarette and dropped it between her and Case’s arms.

Adam looked at Gabrielle and sucked air through his teeth.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth, looking at Case. “God, that *hurts!*” Case chuckled.

Adam waved in front of his face. “Ew, I can smell your flesh burning.”

“That’s disgusting, Adam,” Gabrielle replied. “Thanks for pointing that out!” She closed her eyes tightly. She put her free hand over her face and tapped her foot on the ground.

“You’re the man, Gabrielle,” Adam told her.

Case winced, turning to face her. “Burns, huh?”

She looked into his eyes. “Little bit. Why don’t you give it up, old man!”

“Ha!” Case returned. “Why don’t you go play with your little dolls, *girlie* girl?”

She pounded her fist into the ground. “Nice bandage your...girlfriend put on your head, there!” Maybe he *was* getting old. Or, maybe he was just exhausted, but Case couldn’t take it anymore. He snatched the cigarette off his and Gabrielle’s arms, then placed it between her lips.

“You win,” he told her with a pat on the shoulder.

Adam held out his hand with his palm facing up. “Good job, Gabs.” Gabrielle slapped his hand, then jerked it back in pain.

“Let’s see,” Case demanded, holding up her arm. Blood dripped down her arm to her elbow through a cigarette-sized hole.

“Cool,” Adam remarked.

Gabrielle held her arm to the side to let it drip. “Yuck!”

“Man, that’s a pretty good one, there,” Case told her. He held up *his* arm. It bled a little, but it wasn’t quite the gusher that Gabrielle’s was.

“Here, I’ll go get you guys some paper towels or something,” Adam told them. He stubbed out his cigarette and hurried back into the magic shop. Gabrielle had another drag of *her* cigarette and stubbed it out as well. She turned to Case.

“So, what’re you going to do NOW?”

Case looked at her through a pair of narrow eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Are you about to go?”

Case shook his head. “No, I told you. I don’t want to go home.”

Gabrielle held her bleeding arm in front of her and leaned against Case’s shoulder.

“Well, don’t go anywhere, alright? Stay here with *us*?”

Case reached behind her and put his hand on her shoulder, being careful not to drip blood on her white shirt. “Okay,” he replied. “I’m not going anywhere. I mean like...I probably shouldn’t drive anywhere right now, anyway. I still don’t feel right.”

She closed her eyes. “Right. Good, yeah don’t go anywhere.”

Case snickered. “You okay, kiddo? You’re acting kind of weird.” Gabrielle’s eyes tightened, and a tear rolled down her cheek. Case wiped it away. “Why does everyone keep crying around me tonight?” he demanded. He patted her on the back of the head. “What’s the matter, Gab? Is it— Does it have something to do with your dad?” She looked up and nodded.

“Well, what’s up?”

She sniffled, turning to sit up. “He’s going to beat me up. That’s what’s up.”

Case shrugged. “Why?”

“I haven’t been home in a couple of days,” she replied. “He HATES it when I do that.”

“Well, whose fault is *that*?” She looked down and nodded. “Why haven’t you been home?”

She threw her hands out at her sides. “Well, I can stay *there* and get the crap beat out of me every day, or I can hide out over here or at Diana’s and only get the crap beat out of me...every few days or so.” Case took her hand in his. Then, he let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

“You’re telling me the truth, right Gabrielle?” he asked. She looked up. She jerked her hand away, lifted her shirt, and showed him a couple of long scars in her side. Case ran his ice-cold fingers across them to check them out. She closed her eyes and winced. “Knife wounds,” he remarked. “Deep, too.” He rolled her shirt back down and patted her on the arm. “He must’ve been pretty mad to give you those.”

“He just walked into my room one night,” she told him, “and started stabbing me. He said...it was to teach me a lesson.”

“What’s that?” Case asked.

She looked up through a pair of big, blue eyes. “He said, ‘I brought you into this world. I’ll take you out’.” She faced forward with a shrug. “I laid there and bled for a while, and then finally...my mother came in and found me and drove me to the hospital.”

Case brushed her hair behind her ear. “Well, don’t worry about him, alright? You just let him come on by. *I’ll* take care of it.”

“Alright,” Gabrielle gasped.

“You know, Tiffany’s father was like that,” Case told her.

Gabrielle looked at him. “Yeah, I don’t know exactly all the things he did to her, but he was *really* bad.”

Adam dangled a wad of wet paper towels in front of Detective Case’s face. “What’re YOU two talking about?” he inquired.

“Hey thanks, man,” Case remarked, snatching the towels from him. He took his hand off

Gabrielle's shoulder. He swabbed his wound as Adam sat down next to his girlfriend.

"Here, give me that thing," Adam ordered. Gabrielle held her arm out, trying really hard not to look at it. "Yeah, this isn't so bad," he told her. "I'll have this cleaned right up." He wiped all the runoff blood away. Then, he dabbed the wet, blood-soaked paper towel over the wound itself. Gabrielle sucked air through her teeth.

Case looked at Gabrielle's cigarette-shaped wound with curiosity. "Nice," he remarked.

"I'll give you a rematch anytime," she replied.

Case smiled at her. "Is there anywhere to sleep around here?"

"You're not going to sleep already, are you?" Gabrielle asked.

"I feel *terrible*," he told her. "I'm going to have some of Tiffany's knockout tea, and then I'm crashing out."

"Well, alright," Adam replied. "There's a room at the opposite end of the store from the office. It has a bed, a couch, and a coffee maker. You can make some hot water with the coffee maker and make you some tea with that."

With a pat on either of their backs, Case stumbled back inside. "Night, guys," he called.

"Night!" they replied.

Case fished out the other teabag that Tiffany had given him as he wandered through the office. He made his way across the store and through a door at the other side. He found himself in the aforementioned room. He flicked on a light switch on the wall next to the door and looked around. Tiffany had a large, oak bed with crimson bedding in the middle of the room. Laid into the wood paneling in the floor was a large circle that went around the bed. Case curled his index finger over his top lip as he stared at it. Set into the wood inside of the circle was a pentagram. The five points touched the circle at five different places. There was also wooden shelving built

into the walls all the way around the room. They were filled with books, mostly on the occult, but he also noticed other books on higher mathematics as well as the fiction of such writers as H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe.

On the floor next to the door, there was a long, leather couch with a soft, comfy blanket thrown over the back. It was perfect. He slung his white jacket over the arm. He noticed a full-sized bathroom next to the bed. Case wandered in to have a look at the shower. It was a standup shower, set into a corner of the room. The two outer walls were made of blurry, green glass. It called to him. He was drawn to it like a moth to flame. He popped the door open and looked inside. The two walls opposite the glass ones were tiled with large, white tiles. The floor of the shower was tiled mostly with small, white tiles, aside from a gathering of black ones that were meticulously laid out in the middle of the floor. They were arranged in the shape of yet another pentacle, mirroring the one in the bedroom. After a long day like this, Case couldn't wait to hop inside and wash off the filth.

Chapter 28: “A Slight Inconvenience Called ‘Life’ ”

Case awoke on the couch in Tiffany’s magic shop bedroom to the sound of Gabrielle’s voice humming through the closed door. He figured she was talking to someone on the phone because she would talk, but no one would answer. “*Either that, or she’s talking to herself,*” the voice suggested.

“*Yeah, she could be talking to herself,*” Case whispered back. He reached behind his head, jerked his coat off the arm of the sofa, and took out Gina’s cell phone. Upon turning it on and glancing at the screen, he discovered that it was 9:07 in the morning.

“*Feeling better?*” the voice asked.

Case looked across the room at the empty bed. “*I feel GREAT,*” he quietly replied. “*I haven’t felt this good in years.*” He slipped his shoes on, then turned and crept through the door. He found Gabrielle on the opposite side of the counter. She sat on a barstool with her back to him. She was on the phone as he had surmised. He stood there, staring at her as he listened. Today, she wore a light blue, turtleneck sweater, a red skirt with a grid of thin black lines that swept down to her knees, and a pair of black boots that went halfway up her calves.

“Look, don’t do this, alright?” she pleaded with whoever was on the phone. “No, don’t– Don’t come here, please.” She sat there for a minute. “Hey, come on– I don’t want to talk about this right now.” Case snuck up behind her and clamped his hand on her shoulder. She hopped up and spun around to face him. She smacked her hand over the receiver, her face lit up with surprise.

“*Give me the phone, Gabrielle,*” he whispered.

“*Man...*” she quietly replied, shaking her head. “*Please don’t make this any worse.*” Case stared at her, then held out his hand. She swallowed hard before reluctantly dropping the

phone in his hand.

“Yeah, Case here,” he spat into the receiver.

“*What?!*” a man’s voice shouted back. “*Case WHO?*”

“Yeah, I got your kid over here,” Case continued. “Why don’t you come on over here and pick her up. I’m about sick of her SHIT.”

Gabrielle looked at him with a pair of narrow eyes. “*What’re you DOING?*” she whispered. Case put his finger to his lips to shush her.

“*Yeah?*” the man asked. “*Well, uh– Well, I hear you on that. Gabby sure can be a handful.*”

“Ha!” Case belched. “Well, come on down here, and maybe you can straighten her out for me. We’re down here at the magic shop.”

“*Okay, buddy,*” he replied. “ ‘*Case*’, *was it?*”

Case nodded. “Yep.”

“*I’ll be right there.*” There was a click as he hung up. Case hung up as well before returning the phone to the cradle on the wall. Gabrielle slugged him in the shoulder.

“Aye!” Case shouted. He clutched his arm and turned to her. “My goodness, you two sure do like to punch.”

Gabrielle grabbed his arms. “What’re you doing, huh?!” she screamed in his face. “Are you crazy? He’s gonna *kill* me!”

He took her little hands in his. “Just follow my lead.”

“What...?” Gabrielle managed to get out. “What’re you going to do?” Case slid his arms around her. She slowly hugged him back, and he slid his fingers through her long, brown hair. He could feel her trembling. “*Okay...*” she sobbed. “*I’m TRUSTING you.*”

“Awe, great!” Adam called from across the shop, wandering up to join them. He had on a white shirt, dark blue jeans, his red sneakers, and his black leather jacket, today. “You called him, didn’t you?” Gabrielle tore away and turned to her boyfriend. He wiped her tears away and looked behind her at Case. “What’s going to happen, now?”

Case crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s not going to be pretty,” he assured him.

Adam spun Gabrielle around to face Case, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Well, what’s *that* mean?” he demanded. “What’re you going to do?”

Case sighed, looking down at them. “I’m probably going to beat the shit out of him, Adam. I have to see him do something first, though.”

Gabrielle cringed. “You mean...he has to HIT me first?”

Case smiled. “If he hits you while *I’m* watching,” he told her, “that will be the biggest mistake of his life.” He pointed at the barstool she had been sitting on earlier. “I want you to wait at the counter, and Adam...”

“Yeah,” Adam replied, letting his girlfriend go.

“...*you* hide behind the counter and watch. You’ll be my witness.”

Adam made a ring with his pointer finger and thumb, holding it up to show him. “Check.”

Case looked up from behind the front counter a few minutes later at the sound of a vehicle arriving. He watched as an old, rusty brown pickup pulled up to the curb out front and skidded to a stop. “*Oh, God,*” Gabrielle gasped. She hopped up, ran around the counter, and hid behind Detective Case. Case reached behind him, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her to the front door as her father stepped inside. The little bell jingled as the door closed behind him. Case quickly sized him up. He was chubby, tall, and very angry looking. He had a penetrating

pair of blue eyes, in sharp contrast to his daughter's bright, cheery ones. His hideous, snaggletooth face sat below a head of shaggy, grey and black hair. He wore a pair of blue jeans and a light blue mechanic shirt with his name on it, "Harry."

"You Case?" he asked. His speech was ferocious and demanding. Case could tell he was the kind of man who wanted to know things, and he wanted to know *now*.

"Yes, sir," Case replied.

"I'm Harry," he told him. "Gabrielle's my kid."

"*No shit!*" the voice screamed in Case's head.

"Well, I appreciate you coming on by, Harry," Case replied. He reached out to shake his hand. "You know, I was hoping you could teach this girl of yours some manners. You know what I'm talking about?" Gabrielle glared at him. "I mean it just never ends with her! And, that *mouth* of hers..."

"I hear you," Harry replied. Gabrielle lifted her arm and tried to squirm away. Case jerked her towards him, dropping her at her father's feet.

"Jeez!" Case shrieked, looking down at her. "You see what I mean?"

"Yeah, well...she's *my* problem, now," Harry told him. "I'll take her off your hands." He snatched Gabrielle by the arm. "Come on, miss priss. Let's go."

She let him drag her to her feet, then tore away from him. "*No-no-no...*" she whimpered, backing away and crossing her arms over her chest. She looked into his eyes. "I-I'm not going home with you, Dad. No."

Case looked down at her, then back up at *him*. "Are you going to let her talk back to you like that?" Harry turned to Case, then back to his daughter. She looked up with those big, blue eyes of hers, pleading with him...pleading for sympathy. He hated that. He reached back and

smacked her across the face with the back of his hand. She hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. Case winced. His head jerked to the right, and he stared down at her. It made him sick. He figured that was probably good enough. He turned and shot a glance at Adam behind the counter.

“You see that, Adam?” Case asked. Adam reached up and made a circle with his pointer finger and thumb. Case nodded. He spun around and looked Harry in the eyes. Harry only pretended to be scary. Case, however, actually *was* scary.

“What’s going on?” Harry inquired. Case snatched up Harry’s hand and twisted his arm around. “Ah!” he shrieked, falling to one of his knees. Gabrielle winced, looking at Case.

“You okay, Gabby?” he asked. She slowly nodded. Case bobbed his head towards the counter. “Get back behind the counter.” She scrambled to her feet and darted across the shop, ducking behind the front counter with her boyfriend. Case turned to Harry. He was trying to stand up. Case twisted his arm a little further, and he dropped back to his knee with another shout.

“Just what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

Case pounded his other hand over his heart. “Hit *me*,” he told him.

“What?” Harry spat back. “What’re you...” Case interrupted him with a fist in the nose. Gabrielle threw her hands over her eyes as she knelt beside Adam. She couldn’t watch.

“I said ‘hit me’,” Case repeated. He bent Harry’s fingers back until they cracked.

“Ah!” he screamed again. “You cocksucker!” Case popped Harry in the nose again. He grinned at the sight of his eyes tearing up.

“Come on, *Harry*,” Case beckoned. “Throw a punch, you whiny little bitch!” He bent Harry’s fingers back and made them crack a little more.

“Gah!” Harry screamed. He shot to his feet and swung a fist at Case’s face. Case caught Harry’s fist with both hands, swung his arm to one side, and swung his arm the other direction, dropping him to the floor. Harry scrambled to his feet, then dashed across the floor at him. Case jerked to one side, snatched Harry by his shaggy, peppered hair, and smashed his face into the floor. Harry shrieked. He clutched his nose as blood gushed through his fingers and dripped onto the floor. He sat on his knees for a bit. Then, he hobbled back to his feet and twisted around to face Detective Case. He reached up and pointed at him. “I’m gonna cut your balls off!” he snarled. He jerked out a switchblade knife and flicked it open.

Case glared at him, holding his arms out at either side. “Come on over here, and cut my balls off,” he calmly replied. Harry stared at him through a pair of timid eyes and a bloody grimace. He nervously tossed the knife from one hand to the other. “Is that too difficult for you?” Case asked. “I’m sorry.” He dropped to his knees and let his arms go slack. “That better?” Gabrielle chanced a peak. She had to know what was going on. She dropped her hands from her eyes and threw them over her mouth.

“Lou!” she screamed.

Harry shook the knife at him. “I-I’m *warning* you!”

“Jesus, Harry!” Case shrieked. “You need me to close my eyes TOO?” He pinched his eyelids shut. “Fine! There you go. Come cut my balls off!”

“Case!” Adam shouted.

“Gonna *kill* you!” Harry screamed. He charged at Case with the knife held in front of him. Detective Case listened very closely to Harry’s footsteps as they approached. Each one clacked against a tile, left, right, left, right. He heard the right floor tile, and he clapped his hands together in front of him, slapping the knife out of Harry’s hands and dropping it to the

floor. Harry's eyes widened as he slammed shoulder first into Case's face. Case jerked his head back, wrapped his arms around Harry's waist, and tossed him over his head. He landed on the floor behind him. Case planted his palms on the floor and turned himself around on his knees to face him. He kept his eyes shut and dropped his arms at his sides again.

"Come on, Harry," he told him. "Come on over here, and cut my balls off."

Harry rolled onto his stomach and slowly pushed himself to his feet. "God *dammit!*" he shrieked. He glared across the shop before charging in once again. Case listened for that key tile again. As soon as he heard it, he jerked to one side and swept Harry's legs from under him, dropping him to the floor.

"Um..." Tiffany's voice trailed off from the door. Case shot to his feet and turned to face her. The little bell jingled as the door closed behind her. "Okay, what did I miss?" Case turned back and watched Harry very carefully. Harry staggered to stand yet again.

He reached up and pointed at Case. "I'm gonna break your fucking NECK!"

"Alright, Harry," Case calmly responded. "Come over here and break my neck, then." Harry dashed at Case again. Case fired back with a three-punch combination followed by a quick clothesline. Harry crashed to the floor, landing on the back of his head this time. Case backed away and waited for him to stand back up. Harry rolled over and thrust himself back to his feet. Case walked up and pounded him in the face with twelve quick fists. Harry just stood there and took all twelve of them like a punching bag. Then, he fell flat on his back again.

"Louis!" Tiffany cried. "You're gonna kill him!"

Case backed away and waited for Harry to stand up again. "Come on, Harry," he calmly remarked. "Let's see if I can knock some teeth out this time." Harry grimaced. He slowly rolled over and tried to stand up again.

“Stay *down*, you idiot!” Adam shouted.

“Don’t listen to him,” Case told him, waving Adam off. “Go ahead. Get back up. It’s alright.” Harry began to thrust himself up with his arms. Case kicked him in the ribs, dropping him on his face again. “GET UP!” he shrieked. Harry slammed his fists into the floor and lifted his head. He held that position, then turned to Adam and Gabrielle. He grinned, blood pouring from his face and pooling on the floor. Gabrielle shuddered as she stared back.

“Hi, baby doll!” he screamed. Case snagged a handful of his hair and began smashing his face into the floor. Tiffany could see little fragments of Harry’s teeth scattering about her floor. She shot across the shop and hooked her arms underneath Case’s.

“Stop it, Louis!” she yelled in his ear. “That’s enough!” Case held Harry’s head off the floor, then slowly uncurled his fingers from his hair. His face smashed into the floor one more time. Case plowed through the front door and had a seat on one of the yellow parking pylons outside. Tiffany looked at Adam. “Adam, go call an ambulance, please.” Adam shot to his feet, jerked the phone off the wall, and dialed 9-1-1. Tiffany let out a nervous sigh. She stared down at Harry. “I...thought I told you never to come back here again!” Harry groaned. “That does it. I’m pressing charges against you.” Still looking down, she held her hand out for Gabrielle. Gabrielle stared at her, then hopped up and took her hand. Tiffany switched her from one hand to the other, swinging her over to the door. “Go outside, honey,” she told her. The little bell jingled as she dashed outside.

Adam hung up the phone up and turned around. “They’re on their way.” Tiffany pointed towards the door. She still hadn’t taken her eyes off Harry. Adam joined Case and Gabrielle outside. Tiffany quickly followed, keeping her eyes on Harry all the way to the door.

Tiffany found Adam and Gabrielle standing next to the entrance. She walked up to

Adam and held out her hand. “Give them to me,” she demanded.

Adam squinted. “What?”

Tiffany patted the side of Adam’s face. “Don’t play with me, young man. Give them to me.” Adam reluctantly reached into his pocket, retrieved his smokes, and handed them to her. She switched the cigarettes to her other hand and held her hand out again. “And, your lighter.”

“Awe, man,” Adam whined.

“Come on! Come on!” Adam slowly handed her his lighter.

She added the lighter to the pack of cigarettes in her other hand and pointed at an empty spot next to Case on the parking pylon. “Now, go sit down.” Adam slowly turned around, walked over to Case, and took a seat next to him on the pylon. Tiffany looked through the glass front door. Harry was still lying face down on the floor. She looked at Gabrielle. She too was looking at her father lying on the ground. “Okay– Don’t look, Gabrielle. Go sit down over there with them.”

“*Yeah, sure,*” Gabrielle muttered under her breath. She wandered over and sat down at Case’s other side on the pylon.

Case turned to her. “You okay, kiddo?” he asked.

Gabrielle leaned against his shoulder. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she replied. Case wrapped his arm around her. “He got what he deserved.”

“Hey!” Tiffany snapped. Gabrielle turned to her. “Don’t say stuff like that!” Gabrielle faced forward. Case patted her shoulder.

“Hey, Lou,” Adam said. Case stared at the blank horizon for a moment. There wasn’t much to look at from the front of the shop. There was just the other side of Raulin Street and the lonely freeway half a block to the left.

“Yeah,” he finally answered.

“How did you DO that?”

Case turned to him. “Do *what?*”

“That– How do you fight like that?”

Case sighed and stared off into the distance again. “It’s called Aikido,” he explained.

“Well, sort of. I never *was* very good at it.”

“Yeah, right,” Adam replied.

Case laughed. “I’ll show you sometime, alright?”

“Okay.”

Case looked at Tiffany. “You okay, Tiffany?” he asked. She was still staring at Harry.

“Feeling better?” She continued to stare. It was as if she was in a trance. “Tiffany!”

She twisted around, startled by his rising voice. “What?” she barked. “What is it?”

Case held out his hand. “Come over here, and sit down with us.” She pretended to laugh, then turned back to Harry. He got it now. She was *afraid* of him. She was worried that if she took her eyes off him for one second, he might jump up and get her. Case patted Gabrielle and Adam on the backs of their heads. “*Stay here, guys,*” he told them. He stood and wandered over to join her. She jumped and whirled around at the sudden weight of his hand on her shoulder. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere,” Case remarked.

Tiffany sighed, turning back. “I know,” she replied. “I just– I have to make sure.” Case looked her over. She was still wearing her white sweater and red flannel pants from the day before. She turned to him. “I know! I know! I haven’t CHANGED since yesterday.” She took a deep breath. “I *was* going to do that until I got here and found you...” She looked at Gabrielle and Adam.

Case took her hand in hers. “Me too. I’m sorry about all this. Let me take you to breakfast to make up.” She laughed, bowing her head and pinching the bridge of her nose.

“*Hey, look at THAT,*” Gabrielle whispered. “*She’s laughing.*”

Adam looked at Tiffany. “*Yeah, you’re right. You think I should ask her for my smokes back?*” Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Hey, Tiffany!” he called.

She turned to him with a smile. “Yes, Adam?”

“Come on, man. Are you REALLY going to take my smokes from me?” Tiffany held his cigarettes up so that he could see them. She waited for Adam to hold his hands out, then crumpled them into a ball. She turned and tossed those and his flip-top lighter into the same trashcan that Case had tossed *his* into a couple of days ago. Adam buried his face in his hands. Gabrielle turned and rubbed his back.

Tiffany turned to Case with a heavy sigh. “You still um...smoke free?” Case smiled. Tiffany looked at him suspiciously. She turned and had whiff of his dingy jacket sleeve. “Wait a minute.” She looked up with a look of disdain. “I can smell...” He pointed a thumb at Adam and Gabrielle, and Tiffany turned the disgusted look on them. “You guys!”

“Lou!” Adam yelled. “What’re you *telling* her?!” Case laughed as the sound of sirens approached. He took Tiffany’s hand.

“Come on,” he told her. “Let’s go get some waffles.” Tiffany laughed. Case looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “Guys? You want to go get some breakfast?”

Chapter 29: “Better Feelings”

“I can’t believe you *did* that,” Tiffany remarked, having a peek at her menu. The foursome was at the diner from the other night, gathered around a booth table. Case sat next to Tiffany, and Gabrielle and Adam sat on the other side. Case looked up from his menu at Gabrielle. She was across from him.

“What do YOU think, Gabby? He’s *your* father.”

Gabrielle stared back, then turned to Tiffany. “SCREW him!” Case looked around with wide eyes. Everyone began to murmur and stare at them.

“*Gabrielle, don’t say that,*” Tiffany whispered. “*And, keep your voice down.*”

Gabrielle dropped her menu on the table, leaned back, and raised her fists in the air. “Screw him! I hope he DIES!” Tiffany buried her face in her hands as the greeter walked up to them. It was the same person who had greeted them the other night during *Tiffany’s* little outburst.

“Is there a prob—” he began. She and Case turned to him. “Oh, it’s *you* again. How delightful.”

Case bowed his head, raising his hand. “Won’t happen again.”

“Mm-hmm,” the greeter muttered, and he walked away.

Tiffany reached across the table and placed her hand on top of Gabrielle’s. “Come on, Gabrielle. You don’t mean that. He’s your *father*.”

She slipped her hand away and crossed her arms over her chest. “I think he got what was coming to him.”

“Gabby,” Case told her. “You’re no better than *he* is when you say those kinds of things.”

“That’s...right,” Tiffany agreed, leaning back. She turned to Case. “That’s exactly right.”

Gabrielle scoffed. “He hit me FIRST.”

“Yeah,” Adam added.

Case faced Tiffany. “That’s true,” he told her. “Me and Adam both watched him hit her first.”

Tiffany shook her head. “I can’t BELIEVE you did that!”

Case put his arm around her. “I’m sorry,” he remarked. “Forgive me.” Their waiter arrived. They had the same waiter from the other night as well.

“What can I get you to drink?” he asked.

“Orange juice,” Gabrielle replied.

Adam shrugged. “Orange juice.”

Case thought for a moment. “Milk.”

“Water,” Tiffany said.

Their waiter pointed at Case and Tiffany. “Hey, wasn’t he with...? Weren’t you two...?”

Case raised his hand, bowing his head. “Long story,” he explained. “I’ll tip you twenty percent if I don’t have to tell it.”

“No, *I’ll* tip him twenty percent!” Tiffany corrected. Case shot her a grimace. “What?!” she shouted.

He shook his head, turning back to their waiter. “*She’ll* tip you twenty percent.”

Gabrielle snickered behind her menu.

“I’ll be right back with your drinks,” their waiter told them, and he wandered away.

“What’re you two like a *thing* now?” Adam demanded, pointing at the two of them.

“Yeah,” Gabrielle added with a smile. “I’ve never seen ANYONE put their arm around *Tiffany* before.” Tiffany scoffed.

“Really?” Case inquired. Gabrielle replied with a nod. “Hmm...” He turned to Tiffany and gazed into her dark brown eyes.

She began to giggle, shying away from him. “Louis, what’re you doing?” He placed his hand on the side of her face, then leaned in and kissed her. He turned back to Gabrielle.

“Bet you’ve never seen anyone do THAT then, either.”

Gabrielle smacked her lips, throwing her hands out at her sides. “I thought you were engaged to Gina!”

“Gina who?” Case asked. “That...doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Louis...” Tiffany remarked. He sighed, turning back to her as she shook her head.

“You know, you never *did* tell us what happened last night,” Adam remarked.

“Yeah...” Case replied. “Yeah, I’m going to have to tell you guys that story sometime. Not right now, though.”

“Oh,” Tiffany began, “did you do like I asked? You know, with the tree and everything?”

“We did that last night,” Case responded with a nod. “I could barely draw the slut, but we managed to get her up there.”

“We?” Tiffany inquired.

“Gabrielle had to kind of hold my hand steady.”

Tiffany nodded. “That’s an old superstition, you know.”

Their waiter returned with their drinks. “O-J,” he remarked, setting Gabrielle’s drink in

front of her. “O-J,” he repeated, setting Adam’s down. “Milk,” he added, handing Case a tall glass of milk. “And a water,” he continued, handing Tiffany her water. “And, are we ready to order?”

“Can I just get some dry toast?” Tiffany asked.

“You want...just toast?” their waiter inquired.

“Long story,” she replied with a smile and a shrug.

He scratched something down on a notepad. “I’ll see what I can do,” he assured her. He took everyone else’s orders and took off again. Tiffany had a sip of her water. She gulped it down kind of hard, then slammed the glass down and patted her chest.

“You okay?” Case asked.

“I-I think I’ll be alright,” she gasped.

Case shook his head. “I am SO going to get her.”

“She’ll come,” Tiffany assured him. “If she’s hexing you.”

“Yeah, right,” Adam remarked.

Tiffany turned to him. “It...will WORK!” she replied with a smack on the table. “I swear, Adam. You are such a pessimist.”

Adam shrugged. “That’s because there is absolutely no logical reason why I should buy into any of this...hippie, Wiccan, magic crap.”

Tiffany folded her arms on the table and leaned towards him. “I’m going to put a spell on you, Adam.”

He blew a breath through his lips. “What...EVER!”

“You...” she trailed off. Her eyes widened as she pointed across the table. “I am going to *get* you!”

“Right, Tiffany,” Adam replied behind a confident smile. He had a sip of his orange juice. “And, you just let me know when you’ve cast this ‘spell’ of yours, okay? That way I’ll know that something’s supposed to happen to me or whatever.”

Tiffany shook her head, looking down as she took a sip of her water. “Oh, it’s on, buddy! I’m going to get you *so* good.”

“Hey, you owe me by the way,” Adam remarked, changing the subject.

“I owe you WHAT?” Tiffany demanded, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest.

“For throwing my smokes away! AND, my Flippo lighter.”

Tiffany turned to Case, smirking sarcastically. “You know what my father did to me one time when he caught me smoking?”

Case slid his fingers through her short, black hair. “What’d he do to you, sweetheart?”

She turned back to Adam with a pair of narrow eyes. “He SNATCHED my lighter from me...and he told me, *‘Tiff, if you wanted to smoke, why didn’t you just say so!’*” She paused, took another drink of water, and slammed the glass down. “Then, he sparked up my lighter and lit my hair on fire.”

Gabrielle threw her hands over her mouth. “That’s *horrible!*”

“What’d you do?” Adam inquired, having another sip of his juice. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She steadied herself as the memory flooded back.

“Well, first I screamed really loud. Then, I reached up and patted it out.” Case patted her on the back as she had a sip of water. “And, then that pissed him off. So, he lit my lighter again and held it back up to my hair...” She held her fist up to Adam’s face and flicked her thumb as if to demonstrate.

“Then, what happened?” Case asked.

She let out another shaky sigh, flipping her hair out of her face. “I ran,” she gasped. “I started to run away from him.” She had a quick sip of water. “I *dashed* through the living room as fast as I could, and he just...chased me down. He chased me into the kitchen, and he tackled me on the floor...and it was one of those hard, ROCK floors, too.” Gabrielle cringed as Tiffany let out another sigh. “And, then he...finished the job.”

“He burned all your hair off?” Adam asked.

Tiffany licked her lips and turned to Case with a nod. “THAT is the most terrible story I’ve ever heard in my *life*.” Case told her with a pat on the back of the head.

“Yeah,” Adam remarked. He shrugged, picking up his orange juice. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

Tiffany looked at Case with a pair of big, sad eyes. “I had to go to school like that...bald,” she sobbed. A couple of tears rolled down her cheeks.

Case wiped her eyes dry. “It grew back, man.”

Gabrielle sighed, weaving her arms in front of her and stretching them. “What’s going to happen to *me* now?” she asked, changing the subject.

Tiffany’s head jerked towards her, then back to Case. “I told Harry...” She stopped to clear her throat. “I told him I was pressing charges. Do you think I really have a case against him?” Case shrugged. He curled his index finger over his top lip and thought for a moment.

“Have you seen him hit her any other times?”

“Couple of times,” Tiffany replied.

“Yeah!” Gabrielle added, leaning forward.

Case nodded. “Well I’m a...former cop,” he explained, “and I watched him hit her, and

Adam can back me up on that—”

“Yep,” Adam interjected.

Case flattened his lips. “I mean...it’s *possible*.”

Tiffany turned to Gabrielle. “Then, I’m going to adopt you.” She looked at Case. “Well, I’m going to try to.”

“Hmm...” Case remarked. He nodded and had a sip of his milk. “Yeah, that could work.”

“Really?” Gabrielle asked with a smile.

Tiffany reached across the table and planted her hand on top of *hers*. “Sure,” she told her. “Why not?”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “What about...ME?” he asked as gingerly as possible. Tiffany looked at him. She sighed and plopped her forehead against the table. She let go of Gabrielle’s hand and eased back into her seat with a deep breath through her nose.

“I *knew* you were going to ask me that,” she gasped. She turned to Case. “I don’t know what to do, man!”

Case turned to Adam with a set of reassuring eyes. “Let’s— Let me talk to your mother, kiddo. See if I can talk some sense into her, okay?” Adam nodded, looking down at his lap.

“Let’s not do anything rash just yet.”

Adam looked up. “Alright.”

Case turned to Tiffany. “I want to hear more about your father.”

“Ugh!” Tiffany wheezed. She laid down on the table and crossed her arms over the back of her head.

Case rubbed her back. “If...that’s okay.”

She came up for air, easing into her seat again. “What do you want to know about him?”

“Well, where is he *now*?”

“Mental institution,” Gabrielle spat, taking a sip of her orange juice. Tiffany nodded to confirm.

“Hmm...” Case trailed off. “Bipolar disorder?”

Tiffany squinted. “How did you know that?”

Case smiled. “Because *you* have bipolar disorder.”

“What?” she snarled, throwing her hands on her hips. “I do NOT!” Case turned to Adam. He pointed at her with his thumb.

“Adam, don’t you think she seems a little bipolar sometimes?”

“Sometimes?” he asked sarcastically. He stared back through the tops of his eyes.

“*Sometimes?*”

Case turned to her with a shrug. “You pick up on these things when you’re a detective long enough.”

“Louis, stop saying I’m bipolar,” she remarked, pointing her finger at his face.

Case threw his hands out at his sides. “You asked.”

“Uh!” Tiffany gasped, turning and snatching her water off the table. “I’ve never been so offended in my LIFE.” She had a sip of water and turned back to Case. He just sat there...staring at her. “I’m NOT *bipolar*,” she said through laughter.

“It tends to run in families, Tiffany.” He threw his hands up at either side of his face, turning back to his milk. “I’m just saying...”

“You know, that was pretty cool watching you kick Harry’s ass a while ago,” Adam remarked.

Case had a sip of his milk. “It’s not cool, Adam. I...” He turned away, shaking his head. “You know, fighting...” He turned back, pointing across the table. “You always think it’s going to make you *feel* better, but it never does.”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “What do you mean? You mean it didn’t make you feel *good* to beat the crap out of that jerk?”

Case turned to Tiffany, then back to Adam. “Beating the crap out of somebody?” Adam nodded, leaning forward. “It feels terrible.”

Chapter 30: “Displacement”

Dusk approached and a pack of angry clouds rolled around a setting sun as Adam quietly snuck out of the magic shop. He eased the door shut so as not to let the bell ring and tip off Tiffany, Case, or Gabrielle. They were in the office playing cards. He stepped over to the trashcan in the parking lot and peeked inside. It was half-full. Sitting on top were his cigarettes and lighter. Tiffany had crumpled the pack of smokes into a ball earlier that morning, but Adam was betting that there were at least a couple of coffin nails inside that were unbroken. Not far from the smokes, Adam noticed his flip-top lighter as well. He stuck his tongue out one side of his mouth, carefully reached inside the trashcan, and retrieved the two of them. He was in luck. He managed to salvage three decent cigarettes from the wad of cardboard and cellophane. They were bent, but they would still smoke.

“You shit-head!” Gabrielle called behind him in a whisper. Adam nearly jumped out of his red sneakers. He spun around to face her. *“Can’t BELIEVE you would do that!”* She stepped outside and quietly closed the door behind her. *“So...how many you got?”*

Adam smiled, holding up three fingers. *“What’re they doing?”*

Gabrielle had a peek through the glass door. *“Just talking,”* she whispered. Adam crept further from the door and leaned against the wall. He popped a cigarette in his mouth. Then, he dropped the other two smokes in his coat pocket and flipped open his lighter. Gabrielle snuck over to join him as he lit up, dropped the lighter in his other pocket, and had a hit.

“Ah...” he sighed, handing the stogie to his girlfriend. Lightning scorched the sky. A few seconds later, thunder ripped through the air.

Adam rubbed the back of his head, turning to Gabrielle. *“I feel kind of bad, doing this after that story Tiffany told us at breakfast this morning.”*

Gabrielle shrugged, handing the smoke to Adam. “What Tiffany doesn’t know won’t hurt her. I love Tiffany, you know? But, sometimes she’s about as much fun as a wet sponge.”

“Tiff’s cool, man.”

Gabrielle snapped her fingers, pointing at him. “You mean ‘Tiffany’. Don’t call her that, remember?”

Adam bobbed his head up at her and had another drag. “Whatever,” he responded, handing his smoke to Gabrielle. “She *can* be fun, when she wants to. You remember when we had that séance that one time?”

“Yeah,” Gabrielle replied through a puff of smoke. “I like it when she does the Tarot cards. Those are cool.”

“Yeah,” Adam agreed with a nod. “Even *I* find that interesting. I’m sure there’s some kind of a trick to it.” He looked at the sky. The sun’s rays danced across the tops of black clouds. Adam snagged a hold of Gabrielle’s hand, and she handed him the cigarette. They gazed at the black madness above as it expanded and darkened the sky. Adam had a drag of the stogie, flicked some ash off the end, and handed it back to Gabrielle.

“You think there’s a Heaven?” Gabrielle inquired.

“Nope,” Adam replied. “You really had to *ask*?” Gabrielle took a puff off the cigarette. She stared at the sunshine that escaped the clouds.

“You know, my mother used to tell me that those little rays of light were Heaven. You know, floating on top of the clouds?” She handed the smoke back to Adam.

“Nope, it’s the sun,” he assured her. He had a drag and blew out a couple of smoke rings.

“Well, *I* think there’s something up there.” She leaned against his shoulder and curled both of her arms around *his* arm.

“Nope, there’s *nothing* up there,” Adam contended, placing the cigarette between Gabrielle’s lips. Gabrielle took a puff and plucked it from her mouth. She looked at him with a smile.

“How do *you* know?”

“Because I’ve flown on airplanes before. There’s no Heaven up *there*, just a bunch of clouds.”

“Bah!” Gabrielle spat, handing the cigarette off to Adam. He took the last drag, tossed it onto the parking lot, and stomped it out. “Maybe it’s higher than that.”

“Nope,” Adam insisted. “It’s lower. Only exists on paper.” Gabrielle smacked Adam’s arm. “Oh...it’s on!” he told her. He curled his arm around her neck and held her tight against his body.

“Adam!” she squealed. “Let me go!” She pulled on Adam’s arm as hard as she could with both hands, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he remarked as she wriggled in his grasp. He let go of her throat and snagged her around the waist with a kiss on the back of the head.

She smiled and relaxed against his chest, curling her fingers through his hands. “Jerk.”

“Slut.” They winced as lightning filled the sky and thunder tore the air in two.

“Yikes!” Gabrielle remarked.

“Yeah,” Adam added. He let her go with a shove towards the door. “We’d better get back inside.” They crept to the door and quietly made their way back in. They were extra cautious not to let the bell ring as the door slid closed behind them. Then, they slithered to the front counter and sat at their usual places. In Tiffany’s office, Case was gathering some playing cards. The four of them had played cards earlier as well as a few board games that

Tiffany had stashed in her little office. Now, Case and Tiffany were cleaning up. Case stuffed some cards into a card box with the others and handed the box to Tiffany. She had managed to catch a quick shower. She now wore a ruffly white shirt and a pair of bell-bottom blue jeans. She looked like a hippie, but in a new age sort of way. Her little pentagram necklace threw it over the top, dangling a third of the way down her chest.

“So, you’re a math major?” Case inquired.

Tiffany set the box of cards in a drawer in her desk and pushed it shut. “That’s right,” she told him with a curious stare. “How did you know that?”

“Oh, I saw your books,” he explained, pointing in the direction of her bedroom.

“Ah,” she replied. “Yeah, I think I’m going to be a teacher.” Case grinned. “What?” she blew through a laugh. Case pointed at her chest. Tiffany stared at her pentagram necklace, then looked up. “I told you, I’m not a witch. My interest in the occult is strictly academic.”

“Mm-hmm,” Case muttered, having a swig from a bottle of water.

“I’m not a WITCH! Besides, I only ever wear this kind of stuff up here. You know, people expect it.” Case nodded. He had a sip of water and set the bottle on a foldout card table that sat next to him. “How did you get mixed up in this kind of stuff, anyway?”

Tiffany smiled, crossing her arms over her chest. “*I’m* not mixed up in ANYTHING.”

“Tiffany, you have a pentagram laid into the wood beneath your bed and a pentagram tiled into the floor of your shower.” Case crossed *his* arms over his chest. “Now, what are THOSE for, huh?”

Tiffany looked at the floor, then back up again. “In case...” Case had a seat at the card table. He narrowed his eyes and stared at her.

“What do you mean? In case *what?*”

She sighed, sitting across from him. “You see,” she explained, “in magic, circles are a form of protection. They extend from the plane upon which they are scrawled to the heavens.”

Case nodded. “Like a barrier,” he remarked with a sip of water.

Tiffany squinted. “Eh...” she trailed off, shrugging. “Kind of. And, ONLY if they’ve been closed.” Case looked away, rubbing the back of his head. “You don’t believe me.”

“Uh...” Case remarked. He looked down at the table with an uncertain nod. “So, what about the pentagrams *inside* the circles?”

“Much more complicated,” she assured him. “A five-pointed star can give you access to all sorts of things...the elemental forces, for example.”

“Oh, right,” Case replied. “What was it? Earth, water—”

“Air, fire, and divinity,” Tiffany interrupted. “But, there are plenty of other things you can do with a good, old pentagram. Depends on the magician.” She laughed, and Case looked away from her, shaking his head. “I find these things interesting, okay, and I’ve DONE things.”

“Like what?”

“I’ve set spirits free,” she told him.

“Spirits?” Case inquired.

Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. “Like...ghosts.”

“Ah,” Case remarked, having a sip of water.

“Some of them were *evil*.”

Case pointed towards the bedroom. “Oh, so that’s why...”

“In case,” Tiffany told him with a shrug. “The last two places I want to get caught without a barrier are my bed and my shower.”

“Right,” Case replied. “Both are very nice by the way. So, you actually LIVE here or

what?”

Tiffany nodded. “This is not just a store. It is my *home*.” She leaned back in her chair and sighed. “Of course now that I’m going to adopt Gabrielle, I’m probably going to need a bigger place.”

Case nodded. “One day at a time, Tiffany.” He had a sip of water. “So, how did you get into this stuff?”

“The occult?” Case nodded. “My friend Valerie showed me.” She had a sip from a glass bottle of cola. She used a red and white striped straw.

“Now, this Valerie girl,” Case interrupted, “she was, what...same age as *you*?”

“She was mid-forties when I met her,” Tiffany told him. “Anyway, sometimes my dad would pass out drunk, watching television late at night.”

“Yeah?” Case inquired. He folded his arms on the table.

“And, I would sneak out and go hang out with my friend Valerie. We used to do séances and play around with the old Ouija board. You know, those kinds of things.” Case nodded. “But, then I started to *really* get into some stuff. I read everything I could get my hands on about Wicca and the occult, Witchcraft and the paranormal.” Case had a sip of water. “And then, things got kind of rough one night...” She looked at the table. She let out a shaky sigh at an obviously agonizing memory.

Case placed his hand on top of hers. “What’s wrong, honey?”

She looked up with a lick of her lips. “You know, I don’t usually talk about these things.” She nervously gulped down another sip of cola. “My father— He had his ups and his downs. I actually didn’t mind being around him so much when he was kind of down in the dumps, but I didn’t go anywhere *near* him when he had a smile on his face.” She shuttered,

shaking her head. A flood of childhood recollections filled her thoughts. “He had this...game he would play, sometimes. You know, when he was in a particularly DELIGHTFUL mood.” She looked into Case’s eyes. “He called it ‘Pick a Cup.’ He would lay these five little paper cups upside-down on the kitchen table. Each one of them had a different object underneath.” She stopped for a moment. She slid her hands across her face from top to bottom.

“It’s alright, Tiffany,” Case told her. “You don’t have to tell me this story.” She hugged herself and let out another nervous sigh. Then, she lifted her hands and rubbed them together.

“If I picked the cup with the pink elephant, I had to drink until I passed out. If I picked a pair of dice, I had to roll them, and he would punch me however many times they said. If I picked this little yellow ball...” She threw her hands over her mouth, covering a deep sigh. “He peed on me.”

“Oh, my God, Tiffany,” Case remarked. He turned away and curled his index finger over his top lip.

“If I picked one with a match under it...” She scooted her chair back and lifted her shirt. Her belly was littered with burn scars of varying shapes and sizes. Some of them looked like small cattle brands. She pointed at one that was a simple circle. “This one’s from where he held a hot light bulb to my flesh for like ten minutes.” Case winced. He bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. She pointed out another. “Fire poker,” she remarked. She moved to another that was hook-shaped. “Coat hanger, roasted over the stove.” She pointed out another that looked like a slice of Swiss cheese. “Hot iron.” Case hopped up, slid his chair over, and sat beside her. He placed his hand on her stomach and slid his fingers across her jagged flesh. He began to wonder if her whole *body* looked that way, but he didn’t dare ask.

He looked up and realized that a tear was rolling down her cheek. He sighed and slowly

dragged her shirt back down. Then, he leaned back and gazed at her. She was looking away, staring into space. Case placed his fingers below her chin and turned her head towards him. She looked down, then slowly met his eyes. “I-I’m sorry,” she told him. “If you want to leave now, I understand.”

Case turned away and wiped a tear from his eye, then turned back with a nervous breath. “I want you to finish your story,” he managed to get out. She threw her arms around him and kissed him on the side of the head. Case hugged her back. Then, she eased into her chair again.

“If I picked the marble,” she told him. “He fucked me.” Case blew out a breath and hopped to his feet. He stared into space, then dashed across the office. He eased the door closed so the kids couldn’t hear and slowly returned to his seat.

“He...” Case trailed off.

Tiffany wiped tears away. “The really *wonderful* nights were when he would invite his friends over. Some of them were worse than HE was.” Case folded his fingers in front of him, bowed his head, and pressed his forehead against them in deep thought. It was...quite a shock to say the least. He’d known there was something odd about his new buddy Tiffany, but he had no idea what he was in store for. He wasn’t sure if he could handle it. He wasn’t sure if a *psychiatrist* could handle it.

He turned back with one simple question. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen,” she replied. “When this all started.” Case bowed his head and pressed his forehead against his fingers again. Tiffany leaned forward. She slid her fingers across the back of his head. “I understand if you don’t...want to be around me anymore.” Case leaned back and relaxed. He faced her and awaited the rest of her story. “So, I picked the marble one night,” she continued, “and afterwards...you know, after he and his buddies were all finished up with me...I

decided to try a hex on him.”

Case nodded. “That’s understandable.” He flicked her hair out of her face. “Did it work?”

She smiled, wiping at her eyes. “Of course not.”

He smiled back, turning away and shaking his head. “So, what about *this* place?” he asked, changing the subject.

“This was my friend Valerie’s magic shop for the longest time,” she explained. “She left it to me when she passed away a couple of years ago.”

Case snatched up his water bottle and had a sip. “That’s cool, man. Everybody has to have...someone. I guess you two had each *other*.” Tiffany turned her gaze to the office doorway. Case joined her. Adam stood there, dangling the hammer from his fingers. He swung it back and forth like a pendulum.

“Gabrielle says we have to knock the nail in a little further,” he remarked. Lightning flashed through the windows followed by thunder.

Tiffany turned to Case with one last swipe of her eyes. “Yeah, we should DO that,” she agreed. She stood and wandered to the back door. It was so dark outside from clouds that had rolled in, she flicked on the light. Adam walked up. He handed the hammer to Detective Case as Gabrielle entered the room.

“*I’m* hungry,” Gabrielle moaned, rubbing her stomach.

Tiffany cackled, holding the back door open for Case. “Let’s...get a pizza.”

Case threw his hands on his hips. “Gee, what a wonderful idea. *I never* would’ve thought of that!”

“Why don’t you two take care of that for us?” Tiffany suggested. “Me and Louis are

going to go smack this nail in a little more.”

Adam pointed towards the front counter. “It’s on the speed dial, right?”

“Number 6,” she replied. Adam and Gabrielle left the office. Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. “Let’s do this.” They stepped into the backyard and eased the door shut. “You know, I haven’t even SEEN your picture yet.”

Case blew a breath through his lips. “You’re not missing much.” They made it to the tree. Tiffany threw her hands on her hips and looked Case’s picture over. She shrugged.

“Yeah, that works.”

“It sucks,” Case replied. He tapped the nail in a little further, then turned to Tiffany with a nod.

“It’s cute!” Tiffany told him. “I’m going to cut it out when this is all over and hang it up in my shop for everyone to see.”

He smiled, then handed her the hammer. “You really think this will work?”

Tiffany scoffed, throwing her fists down at her sides. “Of COURSE it will work! What...are you trying to say?”

Case planted his hand on her shoulder. “Nothing,” he replied. He threw his arms around her. “Tiffany, I’m sorry. I didn’t know all those things about you.”

She sighed, hugging him back. “I know. You still don’t know the *half* of it.” She rubbed his back. “I can’t believe I even told you that story. I’ve never told *anyone* about...the cups.” Case rested his chin on Tiffany’s shoulder. His eyes popped open. He was suddenly aware of something. It was something odd...a *presence*. There was a voice, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. It was a familiar voice, a girl’s voice. His head spun to the right. He gazed at the top of the red brick fence.

“Oh, get a room, you two!” It was you know who. She stood atop the fence. Her face was shrouded by the hood of her black robe. The long, demonic garment floated at the side of her body in a gentle breeze. Bolts of white lightning scorched a black sky behind her. “You make me sick, Lou Case!” she barked. “I’m gone for *one* day, and you’ve already replaced me? With Tiffany Haynes?!” Her face was blacked out by the shadow of her hood. So, it was hard to tell, but it appeared as though she reached up and pointed into her open mouth. “Bleh!” Case began to feel very nervous. It wasn’t Gina that gave him the heebie-jeebies. No, he *knew* Gina. He was still technically engaged to her in fact. It wasn’t the odd presence he’d felt when she first appeared that made him nervous, either. It was the short figure that stood next to her. The figure was also blacked out, but he had a feeling he knew who was standing next to her. Knee-length skirt, boots halfway up her calves, long, soft hair blowing at the side of her face...

“*Gabrielle*,” Case whispered. He and Tiffany let go and gazed at the two of them.

Tiffany looked at him. “*What?*” she whispered back. “*Are-Are you telling me that’s...*” Gina dropped from the top of the fence. She obviously had a firm grip on Gabrielle’s hand, because she tugged her down with her. Gabrielle stumbled when she landed on the grass, falling on her butt. Gina jerked her to her feet.

“STAND up, you little shit!” she shrieked. They were in the light now, so Case could see what was going on. Gina held one of her strange weapons to Gabrielle’s neck. “Don’t try anything with me, honey, or I’ll slice your little THROAT!” Gabrielle shivered. She shot Tiffany and Case a very pleading glance.

“*Guys...*” she gasped.

“Move!” Gina ordered. She led Gabrielle through the yard and stopped a few yards away. Case caught a glimpse of her face. It was lit up with a maniacal grin. The left corner of

her mouth twitched as she glared through a pair of wide eyes.

“Gina!” Tiffany screeched. “You let her go, NOW!”

“Sure,” she snarled back. “Let *him* go.”

Tiffany turned to Case. “You want...Louis?” Gina filled the air with a cackle. It was hideous. It blew around with the wind, bouncing off the trees. It echoed against the shop behind them. It was everywhere.

“I just want HIM,” Gina replied. “Then, I’ll let little *Gabby* here go.” She smacked Gabrielle over the back of the head. Case didn’t even think. He shrugged and walked towards her.

“No...no-no-no!” Tiffany shrieked. She snagged him around the waist. “Louis, you’re staying right here with me!”

Gina shrugged. “Fine– I’ll kill *her*, then.” She pressed the tip of a dagger blade against Gabrielle’s flesh.

“Gina!” Tiffany screamed. She tossed the hammer on the ground and pointed across the grass. “I swear, I will KILL you!” Gina filled the air with that enchanting cackle of hers. There was something just *wrong* about it. It was profoundly wicked, writhing with evil.

“You’ll kill me?” Gina beckoned. “You’re little BOYFRIEND over there couldn’t even do *that*.”

Tiffany planted her palm against her chest. “But, I *can*, you stupid bitch! Don’t screw with me!” Adam appeared next to Case, and Case turned to him. His eyes widened. Adam had a small, white doll in his hands. It was one of the ones Tiffany sold up front, the ones with the “X” eyes.

“Hey!” Adam yelled. Gina turned to him with a hideous stare. “Get your claws off my

woman.”

Gina narrowed her eyes. “Or what?” she demanded. “What are *you* going to do about it, little boy? I thought I left you knocked out on the floor in there.” Adam held up something else. Case strained to see it. It was one of Gina’s curly, brown hairs.

“I’ve got a piece of your divinity,” he informed her. “I snagged it off the floor after you left.” He stuffed it into a slit in the back of the doll. “It’s just a *small* piece, but from what I understand, it should do the trick.”

“Adam, STOP!” Tiffany cried. “Don’t do it!”

Gina shook her head. “Oh, give me a break. And, just what the hell do you think you’re going to do with THAT?” Adam produced a bottle of lighter fluid from his pocket. He held it up to show her, popping it open. Then, he used it to soak the doll.

“Adam!” Tiffany shrieked. Gina let go of Gabrielle, who eagerly dashed away. Gina widened her eyes, swatting at the air.

“Bleh!” she cried. “Wh-What’s that smell? What’re you doing?”

“*Oh, my God...*” Case whispered.

Adam flipped open his lighter and struck it to life. “Say your prayers...” he remarked. He held the flame to the doll’s foot. It was instantly ablaze. Gina howled with pain and terror. She began to pat at herself. Case shook his head in disbelief. It was actually working. She didn’t burn. The *doll* burned. Gina merely began to...disintegrate. She slowly dissolved into a black and grey ash. A calm wind gently swept her away. It was as if *she* were made of cloth and stuffing just like the “Berend,” as Tiffany called it. Case fell to his knees. He watched...and *listened*. Her shrieks were the most horrible thing he had ever heard. They filled the air as her cackling had before. Her shrieks swirled in the wind and ricocheted off the surrounding scenery.

With a hiss, what little remained of his fiancée crumbled to the ground and scattered into a pile of black ash. Case followed little bits of ash with his eyes. They drifted from the sky, fluttering like little, black snowflakes.

Case turned to his left at the sound of Tiffany's shaky voice. "*Oh, Adam. Adam...*" she moaned, falling to her knees. "*What have you DONE?*" Case turned to his right. Adam and Gabrielle were *also* on the ground. They sat side-by-side, arms around each other. They watched little bits of Gina sprinkle from the trees.

Adam turned to Case with a shrug. "Don't jack with my girl, man." Gabrielle turned and kissed him on the cheek. Case faced forward, rubbing the back of his head. He slowly staggered to his feet and wandered to Tiffany's side. He sat beside her and put his arm around her. She was crying of course. That no longer surprised him. She shuddered in his arms, going limp against his chest. Her eyes darted around the backyard, staring at the little, black pieces of Gina that rained down.

She swallowed hard, cleared her throat, and looked up. "Now, what?"

Case opened his mouth to speak, then closed it with a shake of his head. "I have to call some people," he managed to say. He slid Gina's cell phone out of his coat pocket and punched in Sergeant Paloni's number.

Chapter 31: “Altered Egos”

The parking lot in front of Tiffany’s little magic shop was littered with police cars. There were as many stuffed into the teeny-tiny parking lot as could possibly fit. There were even more parked at the other side of Raulin Street. It was a ghastly clutter of blinding red and blue flashing lights. Somewhere amongst all the cars, cops, an ambulance, and a fire truck stood Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. They each had a blanket wrapped around their shoulders that an EMT had given them earlier. Case turned suddenly. He looked down at the odd sensation of someone tugging on the end of his blanket. It felt like a little puppy had gotten a hold of it. He searched the small area around him to find Gabrielle. She looked at him through those big, blue eyes of hers. They were enchanting and with just a touch of sadness as usual. She cupped her hand over her mouth. Case knelt down so he could hear her talking over the crowd noise.

“What’s going to happen to Adam?” she inquired.

He looked up as Adam joined them. “He’s probably going to go to jail.”

“What?!” Adam barked. “Seriously?” Case’s head jerked around at a very stern hand on his shoulder. He met a pair of angry, brown eyes.

“He’s *kidding*, Adam!” Tiffany assured him. She smacked Case on the arm.

“Ow!” he shrieked, clutching his arm.

“Don’t tell him they’re going to take him to jail!”

Case turned to Adam with a shrug. “She was threatening your girlfriend with bodily harm. You did what you had to do.”

“Am I going to have to go to court and all that stuff?”

Case placed his hand on his shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“*This* is your statement?!” Captain Ford demanded. Case hopped to his feet. He turned to greet him with a grin.

“Hey there, Cap!”

Ford waved a handful of type-written pages at the side of his face. “You actually signed your *name* to this...piece of crap?!”

“What?” Case inquired. “What’s the matter? That’s what happened!”

Captain Ford flipped through a few pages, glancing over the material as he went. “Page six!” he remarked. “ ‘Adam came running out of the store carrying a white doll...’ Who the hell is Adam?” Adam threw his hand in the air, dropping part of his blanket on the damp parking lot. It had been raining for a while since the incident. “Who is this kid, Case?” Case drew *his* blanket around his shoulders, then knelt to ring the bottom of Adam’s out. He tossed it over Adam’s head and let his own blanket drop again.

“This is my good buddy, Adam,” he explained. He stepped to the side and patted Gabrielle on the shoulder. “This is his girlfriend, Gabrielle.” Gabrielle fluttered her fingers to wave hello. Case pointed at Tiffany. “And, this is Tiffany. She’s...”

Tiffany turned and shook Ford’s hand. “I’m his *new* girlfriend.”

“Um...yes,” Captain Ford replied. “Yes, hello.” He turned to Case with an inquisitive stare. He shook his head, holding up Case’s statement to read some more. “Da-da-da-da-*da*, ‘He then proceeded to light the doll on fire with a Flippo lighter’.” Tiffany held her hand out. Adam stared at her hand, then gave her a five with a kind smile.

“Give me that damn lighter!” she demanded.

“Give you my LIGHTER?” Adam shot back. “It saved our *lives*, Tiffany. Come on!”

“Give it to me!” she shouted. Adam bowed his head, staring at the wet pavement. He

slowly dropped his lighter into her hand.

Captain Ford stared at it with a pair of narrow eyes. “Actually, *I’ll* take that,” he remarked. He tucked Case’s statement underneath his arm and held his hand out. Tiffany dropped the lighter into his hand. “Thanks– Tiffany was it?” Tiffany replied with a slow nod. He returned to Case’s statement. “Da-da-da-da-*da*, ‘I watched, and right before my eyes, Gina began to disintegrate into little pieces of black ash and blow away in the wind’.” He looked up. “How much have you had to drink tonight, Detective Case?”

Case shrugged. “Well, let me think...” He curled his index finger over his top lip. “There were so MANY things, really. Um, there was that bottle of water, uh...a couple of sodas I drank this afternoon...”

Tiffany pointed at him with a snap of her fingers and a pair of bright eyes. “Oh, don’t forget that glass of milk you had this morning with breakfast.”

“Right,” Case said, smacking his hands together. “There was the milk this morning...”

“Case!” Ford screamed. “How much ALCOHOL have you *consumed* tonight? Today– ANY time today?!”

“Oh, I haven’t had any *alcohol*, today. I had some cranberry juice at lunch, though.”

Ford threw his hands out at his sides. “So, you quit drinking?”

“Why...yes,” Case told him. “Yes, I suppose I did, Cap.” Ford dropped his hands. He turned to Sergeant Paloni, who was now standing next to him.

“It’s true,” Paloni told him. “We ran his blood. He’s blind-stinking sober.”

Ford turned back. “Oh, well that explains it. He’s probably hallucinating.”

“Wait a minute!” Case replied. “Let me make sure I understand *this*. Before I was a nutcase because I was drinking. Now, I’m a nutcase because I’m NOT drinking?” Ford crossed

his arms over his chest, glaring at him. He sighed and reached into the inside pocket of his brown blazer.

“Fine,” he replied, removing Case’s badge. “You want this *back*? Here you go.” He held the badge out. Case stood with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were slightly narrowed. His face was confident and unresponsive. He stared at Captain Ford. Ford threw his free hand out at his side, shaking his head. “Well, what’re you waiting for?” he demanded. “Take it.” Case stared back, then reached into the inner pocket of his *own* coat. He produced a little something for Captain Ford...his business card. He kindly smacked it into Ford’s free hand and re-crossed his arms. “What...?” Ford trailed off. He lowered Case’s badge, held the card up, and looked it over. “What is **THIS**?”

Tiffany stood on her tip-toes to whisper, and Case bent down to listen. “*Let’s get out of here,*” she remarked. “*I’m freezing, and the kids are starving.*” Case nodded. They turned, took each others’ hands, and headed for Case’s car. Case gathered up everyone’s blankets and handed them to an EMT on their way past. At his side Adam held Gabrielle’s hand, and Gabrielle curled her little fingers around Case’s.

“Case!” Ford yelled. “*Case!* Are you nuts?!” The pizza guy approached them, and they stopped. Tiffany slid her hand away from Case’s and reached into her pocket for some cash. Case looked away, shaking his head.

“You know,” the pizza guy remarked, “I’ve been trying to get this thing to you guys for like two hours now. I better get one *hell* of a tip.” Case took the box from him. He flipped it open and jammed his finger into the middle of the pizza.

“This thing is cold,” he remarked. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t whip your ass!”

Tiffany handed him fourteen bucks. “Here, man. Sorry about all this.” He counted the

money, nodded, and rummaged back through the crowd, searching for his car. Case handed the pizza box to Adam, who proudly held it at his side. Then, everyone took each others' hands again and resumed their merry little journey to Case's car.

Ford cupped both of his hands around his mouth. "CASE!" Paloni cackled, wandering away to find Gary. "DETECTIVE CASE!"

"Excuse me, fellows," Case remarked when they had reached his vehicle. There was a police cruiser parked behind his car, and two uniformed officers stood with their backs against it.

"You Case?" one of them asked. Case nodded. "Did you talk to Captain Ford? He's got your badge. I think he's going to give it back."

Case shrugged. "It can wait." The officers turned to each other with shrugs of their own. They climbed into the cruiser, backed out of the way, and parked across the street. Case unlocked the driver's side door, reached inside, and pressed a button to unlock the others.

"Pizza!" Adam exclaimed as he hopped in behind Case. Gabrielle took the seat across from him and Tiffany joined Case in the front.

"So, where are we *going*?" Case inquired. He fired up the engine and everyone shut their doors. Tiffany flicked on the heater and held her hands underneath the vents, waiting for it to warm up.

"Let's go to *your* place," Tiffany replied. "Pick up some of your stuff." She nervously threw her hands out at her sides. "And then, you can stay *here* tonight." Case turned to her with a couple of raised eyebrows. He replied with a single nod, then threw the car into reverse. Ford shook his head as they backed away from the shop and drove off. He crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. Then, he whirled around with a quick clap of his hands.

"Okay, people! Let's wrap it up!"

Tiffany flicked on Case's dome light and turned around in her seat to face Adam and Gabrielle. She could see from the pizza box in Adam's lap that they were on their second slices already. She shook her head, staring at them.

"Wrah?" Adam grumbled through a mouthful of pizza.

"I can't *believe* you two," Tiffany replied.

Adam chewed and swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"You went back after I threw away your cigarettes and lighter and got them BACK?"

Gabrielle pressed her lips together, looking away. Adam shrugged.

"That *lighter* saved Gabrielle's life."

"Yeah!" Gabrielle added.

Tiffany turned to Case. "Lou-is! What am I going to *do* with them?"

Case turned to her with a smile. "They've got a point."

"Ugh!" she returned with a smack of her lips. She turned to the kids. "Adam, do you have cigarettes with you...right now?" He took another bite of pizza and nodded. Tiffany smacked the back of her seat, then pointed at him. "You've got cigarettes with you *right* now?" Gabrielle held up two fingers as she chewed. "TWO of them?!" Tiffany demanded. She held her hand out over the back of the seat. "Give them to me."

"No, Tiffany!" Adam returned.

"Adam, don't *mess* with me."

"They're MY cigarettes. Why should I give them to *you*?"

"Because I *asked* you to."

Adam took a bite of pizza and began to chew it up. "No."

She turned to Case. "Help me out, here."

“You really want those cigarettes, huh?” he asked.

“Yes!”

Case shrugged. “So, take them from him.” She smacked her lips. “Seriously,” he continued, “beat the *crap* out of him, and take them from him.” Tiffany turned to Adam with a pair of angry eyes. He looked up and took another bite. She glared at him, then reached down and snagged a couple of slices of pizza. She plopped down in her seat with a sigh, handed a slice to Case, and took a small nip at her own. Case watched Gabrielle and Adam in his rearview mirror. They high-fived each other. “*They’re fourteen,*” Case quietly remarked. Tiffany turned to him. “*There’s nothing you can do with HIM.*” Case took a bite. “*I guess you could ground HER.*” He turned to her with a grin.

Tiffany stared at the road that passed in front of them. “*I-I can’t,*” she whispered back. “*I just can’t.*”

Case shrugged. “Welcome to the wonderful world of parenthood.”

Chapter 32: “A Spell Is Cast”

Case awoke with a pair of narrowed eyes, sunlight pouring upon him through a large window on the wall. He glanced at a digital clock on a table at the other side of Tiffany’s bed. The slanted green numbers read “9:13.” Ordinarily, when blinded by sunlight first thing on a Sunday morning, he would shriek a few obscenities, then squash a pillow over his head. Not today, though. Today, he smiled. He slid his head forward and kissed Tiffany on the back of the head. He cradled her in his arms, his bare flesh pressed tightly against hers. It was so satisfying. The night prior, they had finally gotten the chance to be alone together. Tiffany was no virgin, but Case could tell that *no one* had ever made love to her before. She and Chad had only been intimate one time during the course of a two-month relationship, she’d confessed. He just couldn’t get past her scars, which by the way did not cover her entire body. However, they were more than just skin deep.

Case only hoped that with enough reassurance and by gaining her trust as much as possible, he could somehow make her feel loved again. It was a long shot to say the least. He hadn’t gotten the whole scoop yet, but Tiffany had been brutalized throughout her childhood and the majority of her teens. She was haunted by thousands of terrifying memories, vivid recollections in which she was beaten, degraded, tortured, offended, violated, stabbed, burned, molested, swore at, electrocuted, held under water, bled, locked up for days, thrown out of windows, and defecated on. Most of them involved her own father, but some of them involved other kids who’d picked on her throughout her school years. Case would have been more than pleased to exchange a few kind words with *each* of them. He fully understood why she was the way she was now, defensive and jumpy, ready to strike at any little thing. The fact that she kept it together as well as she did was a profound accomplishment in and of itself.

Case smiled, recalling new, more pleasing memories that he had given her the night before. For a moment, he thought about waking her up and giving her one or two more. But, she looked so peaceful lying there, eyes closed, not a care in the world, that he didn't dare disturb her. He hesitated to move. He feared shattering the one single moment of peace the poor girl had ever had. Rather, he eased from underneath the covers, tucked her in all nice and snug, and snatched up some clothes. Then, he crept into the shower. Things were a little homier this morning. He had taken the liberty of grabbing some of his own bathroom supplies when they had visited his apartment the night before. Today, he wouldn't have to smell like peachy shampoo or shave with a pink razor.

He made himself presentable, quietly emerging from the bathroom about twenty minutes later. Today, he opted for something a little more colorful. He wore a red t-shirt with two horizontal white stripes, a pair of blue jeans, and his trusty black sneakers. He also threw on a yellow, flannel jacket, rather than the white one he'd been wearing for the past few days. Gina had tore it to shreds. He smiled at Tiffany. She lay in exactly the same position as he had left her. Case held his fingers below her nostrils on the way past just to make sure she was still alive. Her breathing was gentle and melodic. Case crept out of the bedroom and eased the door shut. He was not surprised to find Adam and Gabrielle in their usual spots at the front counter. Apparently, they had snuck in and taken showers of their own while *he* was still asleep. Gabrielle wore a light yellow turtleneck, a pair of black corduroys, and a pair of Mary Janes. Adam had on his black leather jacket, a tan shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and his red sneakers.

Gabrielle looked up with a pair of narrowed, anxious eyes as he emerged. She rubbed her hand over her stomach, mouthing the words, "*I'm hungry.*" Case smiled and pointed towards his car outside. Their little faces lit up. They dashed for the door, taking care to push it open

slowly so that the bell wouldn't ring. Adam wandered out followed by Gabrielle, who handed the door off to Case. Case held it gingerly, easing it shut to keep the bell from ringing.

"Is there a way to lock this?" he inquired.

"I have a key," Gabrielle replied. She produced a single key from her pocket, reached up, and turned the latch closed.

"So, where are we going?" Adam asked.

Case looked across the top of his car as he unlocked the door. "I'm thinking donuts."

"Yes!" Gabrielle shouted, drawing her fist towards her. She climbed into the front, passenger seat, and Adam hopped in back. Case pulled away and headed down Raulin into the city. There was a bakery his parents used to take him to when he was a kid. It was only a few blocks away on Desmond Road.

"Yeah," Case remarked, "let's pick up a couple dozen and bring them back to the shop for good, old Tiffany." Gabrielle turned to him with a nod.

Adam leaned forward, resting an elbow on the backs of their seats. "She might get mad." Case cackled. He adjusted his rearview mirror so that he could see him.

"For buying her donuts?" Adam nodded. "Then, she can pay me back if she wants." He shrugged, facing the road. "Anytime I do something that irritates her, I'll just have to make it up to her. I'm not going to live my life based on what may or may not piss Tiffany off." Adam patted him on the shoulder, then eased back into his seat. Case narrowed his eyes, sniffing the air. He turned to Gabrielle with a grin. "So, how many cigarettes did you two smoke this morning?"

"Shut-up," Adam replied from the back.

"We're down to one," Gabrielle added. She stared out of her window. "One, wee, little

coffin nail.” Case turned to her. She turned to him with those big blue eyes of hers. She *knew* how to work them just right, positioning her face against the perfect angle of morning sunlight. Her enormous irises gleamed with gloomy anticipation, icy blue like perfectly shaped sapphires.

“I am NOT buying you cigarettes, Gabrielle!” Case fired back.

She smacked her lips, slouching in her seat and folding her arms over her chest. “Come on, man,” she begged. “I’ll– I’ll give you five *dollars*.”

“Five dollars?” Case inquired. “Do you even HAVE five dollars?” She stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth. She slid her hand into the pocket of her black corduroys and came up with a wad of cash. She waved a faded, crinkly five dollar bill in front of his face. “And, for the smokes?” Case asked. She jerked another five from the wad of bills to show him. Case turned his mouth to one side of his face and glared at her. He turned away with a grin, shaking his head. Adam snickered in the backseat, smacking his knee. Gabrielle leaned across the console. She curled her little arms around Case’s, pulled him down, and stared at him. Case sighed, flipping on his blinker to make a left turn.

“*Louie!*” she pleaded. He chanced another look down with a pat on the back of her head. Her big, sad eyes were more than alluring. They were enchanting. With any other little girl, no matter *how* big and charming her eyes were, Case would have stuck to his guns. But, with a child like Gabrielle, having already lived such a rough life with that sorry father of hers, he shrugged.

“Hell with it,” he responded as he pulled into the parking lot of Jean’s Bakery. Gabrielle threw her arms around him once he’d parked. “Okay, okay...” He hugged her back. “Three things,” he added. Gabrielle pulled away and eased into her seat. She flicked her long, brown hair out of her face and gave him her utmost attention. “One,” Case began, throwing out his left

pinky finger, “this does not become a regular thing.”

“Deal,” Adam remarked from the backseat.

“Two,” Case continued, extending his ring finger. He narrowed his eyes, staring at it. He still had on his engagement ring. He quickly slid it off as he picked up with his second stipulation. “No more than FOUR cigarettes a day.” He looked from Gabrielle to Adam.

“Between the two of you.” Adam replied with a grimace. “And, three,” Case continued, tossing his engagement ring into the glove box, “if Tiffany catches you smoking again, and...she will, *I* don’t know anything about this.”

“Fine,” Gabrielle returned. She reached across the console and smacked the two waded-up fives into his hand.

Case uncrinkled the two bills and smoothed them over the rim of the steering wheel. “You...don’t have to give me this, honey,” he told her, handing one of the fives back to her.

“Alright!” she shouted, clutching it against her chest. She added the five back to her cash wad and stuffed it all back in her pocket.

“Okay,” Case sighed. “Let’s roll.”

They got their donuts, six chocolate, six glazed, six cherry, and six vanilla. Then, they headed to the nearest gas station, where Case purchased the two little brats a pack of smokes. He shook his head as he stepped back through the double glass doors. He had gone from cop to felon in the span of just a few days. He knew morally that he was supposed to feel bad for what he was doing. He was supposed to be preaching to these kids about cancer, addiction, peer pressure, and all that jazz. However, the truth of it was that he *didn’t* feel bad. He didn’t even care. He’d done the same kinds of things when *he* was their age. As for peer pressure, well that’s just an excuse that bleeding hearts use to explain away bad behavior. In the end everyone

makes their own choices. It just so happens that they typically choose their friends over their health.

“Alright,” Case remarked, tossing the cigarettes on the floorboard at Gabrielle’s feet. “YOU owe me one.” Gabrielle sat with two large white boxes of donuts in her lap. She waited for him to sit down and shut the door. Then, she tugged him towards her by the sleeve of his flannel jacket and kissed him on the cheek. Case paused, then slipped his key into the ignition switch and fired up the engine. “Yeah sure, that evens it right out.” She giggled to herself and threw her seatbelt on.

Adam popped up between them. “So, can we smoke one right *now*?”

“Yeah!” Gabrielle added. “That would sure hit the spot.”

“Oh, no,” Case told them. “From this day forward, this car is officially a non-smoking area.”

“Oh, come on!” Adam shouted. “You’re going to make us wait until we get back to the magic store, where we can’t even hardly smoke, anyway?”

Case shrugged. “You guys want to WALK back?” Adam smacked his lips. Case grinned at him in the rearview mirror. “That’s *your* problem, not mine.”

Gabrielle turned to her boyfriend. “Don’t worry, Adam. We’ll go for a walk later or something.”

“There, that’s the spirit,” Case told her.

“Uh-huh...” Adam trailed off, easing into his seat. “I’m sure Tiffany won’t have any problems with *that*.”

They snuck back in. Gabrielle silently turned the latch with her key, Adam held the door for her as she herded the two boxes of donuts through, and Case eased the door shut so as not to

let the little bell ring. Gabrielle set the two white boxes side by side on the counter. She flipped the lids open and snatched a cherry donut. She sat down on a barstool and had a bite as Adam grabbed a chocolate and took up residence next to her. Case opted for a vanilla. He decided to sneak into Tiffany's bedroom and find them something to drink. She had a miniature refrigerator in there, tucked away in one of the corners. He took one step to the right, and Tiffany came twirling out in a white robe and a pair of fuzzy white slippers.

"Good moooooorning..." she half-sang, half-remarked. She reeled her head back, placing the back of her wrist against her forehead and thrusting her other hand out towards them as if in a pose.

"Bi-pooooolar..." Case half-sang, half-replied.

Tiffany smiled, coming out of her stance and pointing at him. "Stop CALLING me that!"

Adam looked up with a pair of curious eyes. "Man, what have *you* been doing this morning?"

"YOU want to know what I've been doing?" she replied. She planted her hands on the counter, leaned over, and faced him.

He grinned, shaking his head. "Gee, maybe not."

She pointed a finger in his face. "*I* just got done casting a spell on you." She cocked her head to the side, raising her eyebrows a few times.

"Ah," Adam remarked, having a bite of his donut. "Right, well— We'll see about THAT."

"Come on, Adam!" she shouted, pounding her fists on the counter. "Even after what you did last night, you still don't believe in this stuff?"

Adam stared back, continuing to chew. “Spontaneous Human Combustion?” he suggested.

“Ugh!” Tiffany spat. “You’ll believe in S.H.C. before you’ll believe in folk magic?” He shrugged. She turned and shook her head, stopping once she’d noticed what was on the counter. “You guys brought DONUTS?!” she screeched. She grinned, clamped her hands together, and dropped her chin on top of her knuckles. Her eyes crept from side to side. She scanned the little, frosted pastries, then curled her eager fingers towards a glazed. She stopped though, throwing her hand on her hip and turning to Case. “How much *were* all these?”

Case looked up, popping the last of his first donut into his mouth. “Fourteen-sixty-three,” he replied. Tiffany closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She snagged herself a glazed donut, then stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the forehead.

“Thank you,” she told him, wandering around the counter to join them.

“You’re welcome,” he replied scooting out a barstool for her. “I’m going to get us something to drink.”

“Water,” Tiffany replied, plopping down in front of the counter.

“Milk,” Gabrielle told him.

“Milk,” Adam added. Case smiled back, then wandered to the refrigerator. He grabbed three single-sized bottles of milk and one bottle of water. Then, he returned to the front. Just as he finished setting everyone’s drinks down, Gina’s cellular began to ring. He jerked the phone from the pocket of his yellow flannel jacket and looked at the screen. It was Sergeant Paloni. He narrowed his eyes, flipped it open, and held it to his ear.

“Mm...yes?” he inquired.

“Yo, Case,” Paloni replied.

“What’s up, Sarge?”

“I’ve got bad news.”

Case snagged another donut, cherry this time. “What is it?”

“It’s your— Where are you?” Paloni asked.

Case shrugged, taking a bite. “I’m at Tiffany’s.”

“Is that Adam kid there?”

“Yes.” Case turned to Adam as Paloni rattled off something in his ear. He closed his eyes and dropped his donut on the counter. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he remarked. He slowly flipped the phone closed.

“What is it?” Adam asked.

“It’s your mother,” Case replied. “She’s dead.”