

PART 1:

WHILE THE CITY SLEEPS

"While the city sleeps
Men are scheming
New ways to kill us
And tell us dirty lies."

--Chicago, *Chicago V*, 1975

"THERE'S THESE RUMORS, THESE URBAN LEGENDS IF YOU WILL, OF THIS BLACK VIGILANTE CALLED THE VOICE OF THE CITY. WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON THIS ODD PHENOMENON? DO YOU LIKE LIVING IN A COMIC BOOK? GIVE US A CALL AT..."
***--DAREON ABULABI, TALK OF THE TIMES,
WFYI (PUBLIC RADIO) INDIANAPOLIS***

CHAPTER 1:

Richard Short pushed open the door to his rental and swung his feet to the pavement. He sat there a few seconds, gathering energy, elbows on knees. He watched his white sneakers, which reflected flashes of blue and red from the nearby police car light racks. Short didn't want to look up from his shoes. He was tired. He felt heavy in his bones. He endured a weird job with weird hours and missed the good old days when all he chased were Russian terrorists in Europe, Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan, or redneck terrorists in Peoria.

But, you know, changes. He took in a deep breath, held it, then let it out through puffed cheeks. With that, he rose, shrugged his heavy jacket square onto his shoulders, and marched with pretended confidence toward the cop cars.

The expected obstacles presented themselves. The perimeter cop to keep out looky-loos, the uniformed sergeant who solidified chain of command among the half-dozen or so respondents, the junior detective protecting his boss's space. But Short breezed right through those barriers thanks to a strategic call ahead from the Indianapolis chief of police.

And there it was, the crime scene, just beyond an LED floodlight on a thin tripod. A horrific tableau, lit like theater from several angles. The body on the ground, all but headless with its brains splattered over the filthy bricks. The coroner's vultures off to one side, leaning against a cinderblock wall with their gurney close at hand. The usual grungy alley, flanked by ramshackle shop buildings, the alley reaching into blackness at the far end. Short couldn't muster a stir of emotion for the victim. Nothing new there, just a reaffirmation of daily life in America.

Oh, well. Short hesitated a moment outside the ring of bright light and cranked his act of snarky, devil-may-care attitude firmly onto his face.

A man crouched a foot from the corpse's left shoulder. Gray suit under a worn overcoat, mid-thirties, with an all-American face not the least distraught at the sight of gore. This was probably the crime scene detective.

The man wasn't alone. A crime lab technician crouched beside him, a lean black man with a long, lined face and white mustache over his double-wrapped muffler. Short knew him for a crime lab geek because of the obvious theater. The man jabbed a stainless steel telescoping pointer at the corpse with finicky exactitude, pointing to this bit of gore, then that one.

"It's premature," he was saying, breathing puffs of steam that showed white in the floodlight. "I'd hate to step onto the ME's territory, but this here isn't your everyday, general delivery gang shooting. See, he landed palms up, arms at his sides. He pitched forward, hard, never turned to fight. And you see the hint of dirt at the knees of his pants? I'd bet dollars to doughnuts we find pebbles and brick impressions there. This fella wasn't taken by surprise. He was made to kneel and take it in the back of his head, execution-style."

The detective's controlled face sagged at those words. Mafia. Russians. Southern cartels. Trouble. Short should have felt sorry for him, just a little, out of politeness. But he didn't. Not his problem.

"Okay," the detective said. "You about done here? The ME..."

"They can have the body. My people need to further sweep the scene, but we've taken most of the evidence, I think."

"You expect much from that evidence?" Short asked, taking a long look around.

The old man glanced up at him, eyes rheumy. "There's always something in the evidence."

Short snorted skepticism. The lab man returned a pained frown. The scene detective looked up at Short, deadpan as before. "You the fed they called about?"

"That's me. From the gov'ment. Here to help."

The detective ticked his chin toward the headless corpse. "Your man do this?"

Sheesh. Tough room.

Short scanned the scene. Far beyond the floodlamps, black shadows shuffled, thin pen lights emitting from their hands. The crime lab staff scouring for evidence. "My man isn't known for homicide," he said. "He's frequently violent, yes, but non-lethal." Short shrugged. "This alley's his style, though. It's blinded, but with easy access, in and out. Even so, I don't think it fits."

"Might've changed his MO," the detective said.

"Yeah, might've. And geese might learn to hold their shit."

The two men met eyes, sizing up each other with neutral professionalism. The examination lasted three or four seconds, then the crime scene detective turned his attention on the lab man. "You guys finish up and get me your report soonest. I'll leave two patrolmen to shoo away gawkers."

The lab man worked stiffly to his feet. "That'll be a help, though I can't imagine gawkers at this time of night, in this nasty cold weather."

The detective stood and the two men shook hands. "You know what they say, Doc. This is Indiana. You don't like the weather..."

"Stick around, it'll change." The old man laughed without much enthusiasm, then trudged off toward his flunkies at the edge of the light.

The detective stepped carefully around the corpse and stopped almost at Short's shoulder. He rummaged in a coat pocket and pulled out a wrinkled, half-emptied pack of gum.

"So, Mister Short," he said, popping a stick of gum into his mouth and carefully depositing its wrapper in a pocket. He held out the pack to Short. "Cinnamon. It backs off the death stink."

Short didn't need the gum, but took a stick out of politeness. "Thanks."

"Seen you around. My captain said to cooperate. What agency?"

"The United States government."

The detective leveled a frown at Short. "Oh, well. Had to ask."

"No, you didn't." Short watched the corpse as he spoke, wondering why that pathetic shell of a former human moved him not even an inch. "Look, buddy. I'm not from Justice, so I don't know shit about due processes, chains of evidence, or anybody's shitty rights. Don't care, either. I'm just here with information. In exchange for cooperation."

"Hard to cooperate if I don't know who you are or who you work for."

"Back in my hotel room, I've a stack of I.D.s from different agencies. Want to pick one?"

The detective flicked a finger at the ME geeks. Immediately, the two men snuffed their cigarettes and stuffed the remains in their coverall pockets. As the detective continued talking to Short, they maneuvered their gurney toward the body.

The detective stuck out his hand. "Jack Ellis. Detective-sergeant."

"Dick Short. Spook." Short gave the hand one firm pump. It felt firm, and cold.

"Huh. Dick Short. Really?"

Short just looked at him. They always wondered. A name like that, was it faked up by the government? They could keep on wondering.

"Okaaay." Ellis soldiered on. "My boss says you're the expert on whatever the devil we got out here. Or maybe not. He didn't seem all that convinced."

"I'll cry myself to sleep."

Ellis didn't react. "Sounds fair. Long as you deal with my problem first."

Short grinned for the audience.

"Let's talk," Ellis said. "There's a White Castle around the corner. Teeny-tiny hamburgers, but a fair cup of coffee. Game?"

"Walking or riding?"



The ride took longer than walking there, considering reaching Ellis's car and backing it out of the morass of official vehicles. The two men took over a table as far from the order counter as the white-tiled restaurant allowed. They balanced their paper cups of coffee on that round surface, which was hardly wider than a hub cap. They were the only customers and the help leaned more toward somnolence than eavesdropping.

"Last year," Ellis said after dumping two sugar packets into his drink, "October, I think it was. There was an incident. A citizen got shot. Unarmed. Police action. A protest sprang up that escalated to an active shooter situation." He took a careful sip, then leaned back in his fiberboard chair. "Right in the middle, as the police returned fire--"

"I thought the police fired first. Or, that's how the reports came out."

Ellis raised an eyebrow. He hadn't expected Short to know the gritty details of his tiny world. His eyes swept the restaurant, a quick, professional scan. So the guy was ex-military. He had that habit of checking his surroundings. Short was starting to like him.

"Okay," Ellis said, "so maybe the cops shot first. I wasn't there. In fact, a whole lot of cops shot first. That happens sometimes when some nut yells 'Gun!' like the sky's falling. So, anyway, right when all the ordnance goes off, this weird black jet appears over the scene. All the bullets freeze in midair and fall to the ground. All the guns stop working. Cell phones explode. Lots of other stuff, too, like catalytic converters, radiators, laptops, radios. They either stop working or blow apart. Then this guy jumps out of the jet like freaking Superman and KOs half the cops there. He also knocks the original shooter down, hard. And a bunch of feds. All by himself. They call him the Voice of the City for some odd reason, I don't know why."

Short sipped his coffee. "The shrinks say maybe he's acting out some delusion of fighting evil as the city's champion knight." The coffee was hot, bitter, and good.

"They say what?" Ellis asked, deadpan.

"I don't know. Shrinks. You know how they are."

Ellis leaned across the table. Considering its size, that wasn't far. "I've heard other stuff. We get whispers among the gangs. Every now and then, some crack dealer or meth cooker gets found trussed up on a sidewalk or hanging from a lamppost, bawling like a baby about something big, nasty, and vengeful that beat them half to pulp. Then there was that thing on the far east side..."

Short kept his face stony. "What thing?"

"It was a fed affair, hush-hush."

"Anything leak out between one hush and the other?"

Ellis made another scan of the fast food joint. Short got the message. The neighborhood must be iffy, to be polite. He suddenly regretted sitting away from the counter. Their choice of seats put large display windows behind them on two sides.

Ellis looked down at the surface of the table and fiddled with his cup. "On the far east side, there's this abandoned mall. Not exactly abandoned, but no shops, just storage and maintenance works for a huge solar farm. A few months ago, there was an earthquake or a gas explosion or both and the sub-floors of the thing collapsed. It's a wreck. The solar farm guys are suing the city. It's all fenced off now, posted dangerous. But back then, there were numerous reports of a black jet hovering over the area."

"Hysteria? Conspiracy theorists?"

"Air traffic control from Indianapolis Center reported no unusual traffic in the area."

Short took a drink. He put down his cup and glanced around the restaurant. Huh. The guy had him doing it now.

"So," Ellis said. "Is it this Voice of the City guy, or just a bunch of noise?"

"That's what I was sent to find out."

"And to help us get a handle on the issue."

"And to help you get a handle on the issue."

Several long seconds of silence followed, Short looking around and Ellis looking at him. Three late-teens assholes stupidly made up in basketball shorts and hoodies sauntered in from the night to order a mountain of tiny hamburgers. For pity's sake, it was maybe thirty degrees outside!

"Hey. Short. The boys upstairs said you would help. I don't know about you feds, but down here with us locals help doesn't mean looking strong, dark, and taciturn."

Short grunted. He ran the fingers of one hand along the balding top of his head. "Jack, I've got mileage on me. It's been a long while since anyone called me either strong or dark."

"But you get a lot of taciturn."

"That's fair." Short lifted his cup, but it was empty. He put it down and shoved it six inches to the edge of the table. "It's a weird-assed world," he said. "Shit we used to dismiss as hysteria, we give it an extra look now."

Ellis nodded. "Yeah. I saw all that on TV last year, along with the rest of the world. Dragons. That big monkey thing, whatever the hell it was. Made an impression."

Yes, made an impression. In the fall of the previous year, the status quo of, well, just about everything had been upended for all time, or so everyone figured. The Lawrence-Livermore research facility near San Francisco had gone on alert due to a terrorist attack, the TV news had insisted. But it hadn't been a terrorist incident. Military personnel and government agents fought in the streets around the facility.

Fought each other.

That had been odd enough, then the roof of the research building had exploded and out of that wreckage climbed the full-stop to all common sense. Television and the Internet had flooded with high-definition phone video of dragons.

Dragons. Plural.

Two of them.

The things had taken to the sky on leathery wings, just like they did on *Game of Thrones*. They hadn't lasted long. The air force, circling above, had taken out both creatures and sent their remains crashing down on the city. Or that's the story the spin doctors released.

But dragons. They'd been real.

Conspiracy theorists claimed it was all a government hoax, the world's biggest April Fool's joke in November, but that had been wishful thinking. The world now knew, with no room for doubt, that dragons were real.

And not just dragons. Something else had risen from that building, a hulking, apelike form the cameras had trouble focusing on. A giant monkey maybe a hundred feet tall, maybe bigger, with what looked like a squid for a face. It had huffed and puffed and swatted at helicopter gunships, but hadn't gone anywhere in its few minutes of fame. Basement-dwelling geek types and black-wardrobed pagans heralded that sick King Kong as Cthulhu, the made-up elder god of HP Lovecraft fame. Short wasn't sure they were wrong.

But what did he know? He'd been there. He'd been in the middle of it. Locked in a room where he couldn't see a damned thing. He'd heard the explosions and felt the tremors, but he hadn't actually *seen* anything.

Not until he watched it on YouTube, like everybody else.

But *she* had seen it. *She* had fought the monsters. Alongside the redhead, alongside the Voice of the City.

And she lived just across town.

Should he tell Ellis about her? She was the quickest link to their mutual quarry. But she was also a government asset, not to be disturbed.

Short tabled that thought. He didn't need her to find a vigilante.

"Okay, this is the TV recap," he said. "About three years ago, we start getting reports out of Chicago. This mysterious vigilante beating up gangbangers, muggers, pedophiles, drug dealers, any kind of petty criminal type. Never saw him, no evidence. Even when we found the scene of a fight, it was swept so clean the victim may as well have beaten *himself* up. Nobody thought anything of it, not seriously. Alligators in the sewers, mutants in the city sub-layers, that kind of moronic shit. Then a couple of cops got hit, dirty types. One trolling for a little extra something from women he pulled over for trumped-up traffic violations. Another on the payroll of protection enforcers. This Voice fella beat them bad enough they spent some time in the hospital. In traction. *Then* the authorities got interested." He looked at his empty coffee cup, and sighed.

Ellis rolled his eyes. He got up, went to the counter, and came back with two more cups and a couple of cellophane-wrapped doughnuts. "Okay, come on, give. You went after him..."

Wrapping one hand around the new, hot, cardboard container, Short continued. "In every incident involving this guy, nothing turns up. No physical evidence at all. The most we get are images off ATM cameras. And they're uniformly blurry and dark. Witnesses might as well be making stuff up to aggravate us, even the cops who run into him. He's a ghost. A boogiemán. Or he was until last fall. He turned up here in Indianapolis. We don't know why. Then he appears at Fort Meade, in Maryland. Breaks into an NSA file vault, falls in with unsanctioned black ops operatives."

"Unsanctioned?"

"You don't need to know. After that, he appears pretty damned publicly at the Lawrence-Livermore Research Center in California."

"Your guy had a hand in that?"

"Yeah. True blue superhero shit. Saved the world, blah-blah-blah. Then disappeared." Short held back the rest, the part about his own role in the incident. "Later, he turns up in Indy and blows up that solar farm. We think his secret hideout was underneath it, but it's all rubble now."

"His hideout? And nobody tried to excavate?"

"We tried, but there's nothing there. He cleared out all his tech before imploding the place. We didn't think it was worth the millions it would cost to dig the joint out completely, not with his record of leaving no trace behind. Anyway, that's when they handed it all to me, to work with my regular shit. A reward for my years of faithful service." He let the coffee warm his hand.

"You pissed somebody off?"

"I'm always pissing somebody off."

"You ever get anything on your guy?"

"No. He's like Bigfoot."

They sat and watched. The kids in shorts talked shit about women. Hamburgers fried. Steam rose from behind the counter.

"About eight months ago, about the time he showed up here, the Voice of the City just disappeared from Chicago." Short held up his cup to Ellis. "Chicago. Here. Fort Meade. San Francisco. And now I guess he's your problem again."

"Huh." Ellis ran a finger around the lip of his coffee. He leaned against the table, his cheek on one fist. "So, why do you figure he came down here? I mean, sure, we're a sprawling city and we have our problems with crime, but there's a reason we call this place Naptown. Seems to me, a vigilante with Batman ambitions would go where the action is."

Why had he come to Indy? Because of the girl. "Brother, I have no idea."

"Maybe it isn't him? Maybe it's a local fan, a copycat?"

Short laughed loud enough to attract stares from the kids at the counter. "Is your version of the Voice of the City a huge, musclebound black dude with impossible tech and seemingly magical fighting skills? How many of those do you think there are?"

"Point taken." Ellis spared a critical look at the kids, then turned back to his company. "So, I ask again. You think he had anything to do with that mess around the block?"

Short shook his head. "The more I consider it, the more I say no. I can't say why, not enough on the guy. But I really don't think he'd blow a man's head off."

"Even if the voice of the city whispered in his ear that he should?"

That made a dent in Short's certainty. He'd always thought the "voice" idea hinted at a mental problem, so...

"Sorry. Didn't mean to stump you," Ellis said. For the first time, a hint of a grin flirted with his lips.

Neither man spoke for a while. Short finished his coffee and Ellis played with his cup. The kids grabbed their three big bags of burgers, their multiple Cokes, and their one order of onion rings and sashayed outdoors. They didn't go anywhere. Apparently, a dark, freezing, inner-city parking lot in the middle of the night suited them as the perfect patio dining experience.

"Well, it's like this," Ellis finally said. "We have a small team, just me and three officers, plus help from the ME--"

"I don't work in teams."

Ellis stopped talking. His eyes focused hard on Short, his only sign of confusion. "Then how..."

"I know where to find you. You're a cop. You have a public address. If you need me, your captain has my number."

"That won't make for good coordination."

"We aren't coordinating. If I have something, I'll get it to you. You get something, I'll loom out of the shadows."

Ellis didn't think that was funny. Short could tell by the slight squint of his eyes.

"We good?" Short asked, not really caring if they were or not. He stood and shrugged on his jacket, signaling an end to the meeting.

"No," Ellis said. "I've a feeling you'll pull that fed thing, where communication is a thing that goes one way."

"Ellis, I'm hurt. And after I let you buy me coffee." As an afterthought, Short scooped up one of the doughnuts and stuffed it into a pocket of his jacket.

"Got a ride?" Ellis asked when they stepped out into the cold. He didn't sound enthusiastic. Maybe he'd decided he didn't like his spook.

"I'm good," Short said. "I'm parked around the corner."

"Bad neighborhood."

"Then I'll feel right at home."

Ellis left, backing his car out of the lot and leaving Short in the wan light from the restaurant windows. No streetlamps. No, a streetlamp stood at the nearest corner, twenty feet up on an iron pole. Busted out.

Short noted that. He noted also the kids still in the parking lot. Gangbangers, he could tell. They watched him subtly, like coyotes watching a mountain lion.

Yeah, Short thought, shrugging deeper into his jacket. He was a lion all right. One deadly son of a gun, he was. He could feel his various surgical pins and plates in the cold, but, still, he was nothing to play with. Those dumbasses knew that. They'd sniffed him out as he'd sniffed them. They'd all keep a respectful distance.

But someone else prowled the dark. Someone else lurked as his own level of predator, a beast that stalked cop and criminal alike. He was, as close as Short could figure, the most dangerous of animals in any city wilderness: a crazy man with a mission.

The Voice of the City.

Short, sure the gangbangers wouldn't test him, took off toward his car.

Who are you? he asked the dark. What do you want? Are you real, are you here, are you even human? He shook his head. He was doing it again. He'd been too deep in the mystery man's business. He'd interviewed too many awe-struck witnesses, too many terrified victims. He'd heard the tag lines and manifestos too often. The Voice of the City. The Will of the People. The Soul of All Who Suffer. A communal wish for justice, that was who Short hunted. He stalked an idea. The Voice of the City had proven as ethereal as smoke, as solid as need.

The city desired him, and so he was.

Short trudged over cracked sidewalks bordered by weeds. He caught whispers of music in the dark, of laughter from behind apartment windows. Sirens wailed from deep in the night and from as close as the next street. The wind bit. Homeless mumbled and scraped out of sight. Conversations at car windows went silent as Short passed.

All around him the city muttered, and the city's tone was tense.

It was also unfocused.

If the man who personified the city's soul acted on all that the city desired, that man was a schizo.

Except that he had an anchor. He had his Lois Lane or his Fay Wray or whatever anyone wished to call her. Maybe that's why he'd left Chicago. Had the confused knight of the city found a prism to tighten his focus? Was she all that held him together, all that kept him sane?

Had he ever *really* been sane?

Short would have to ask her those questions. Some time. When it was right. No need to show his hand just yet. Good people watched her. She wasn't going anywhere.

Short, though, was going to bed.

"I DON'T KNOW, MAN. IT'S LIKE, THESE GANGBANGERS ARE GETTING THEIR (BLEEP!) KICKED, AND THEY GOTTA HAVE AN EXCUSE, Y'KNOW? SO THEY COME UP WITH THIS, THIS OUTLANDISH STORY, AND IT AIN'T NOTHING. THEY JUST STUPID, MAN."

***--CALLER, TALK OF THE TIMES,
WFYI (PUBLIC RADIO) INDIANAPOLIS***

CHAPTER 2:

Sally Reiser coaxed her Prius over the pothole-ravished street as if negotiating a minefield. Damn it, she'd returned from Europe with a suitcase full of money. She was the triumphant terrorizer of terrorists, favored (and funded) by the blackest black ops corner of the Holy Her Majesty's Secret Service. She had under-the-table funding from the less civil sectors of the United States government. You'd think a few potholes wouldn't get the better of her.

But the potholes weren't the point. The point had been to do something with that cash-stuffed suitcase. Something worthwhile, something not about killing people or fighting monsters. You fight monsters for too long, you become the monsters or you lose your mind.

That's a tad melodramatic, don't you think? said the voice in her head.

"Shut up," Sally muttered.

She rattled along the multi-lane thoroughfare, the rising sun behind her. She eased right to catch the correct turnoff. Washington Street made that difficult, living up to its reputation as the city's *de facto* demolition derby straightaway. US 40, the National Road, a long, age-worn six-lane artery for speeders, bogarters, tailgaters, and blind lane-switchers who had never learned the function of the common turn signal.

And ugly, too, the street, that is. From the far east of the city to the western limits, Washington Street stood bordered by a continuous blight of strip malls, garages, used car lots, and tenement apartments. It was more the misused whore of Naptown than the city's debutante.

Which, of course, drew Sally to it. Yep, for all her complaining and snooty aesthetic notions, this had been her idea. She had railroaded Gary into her wild stunt and had brought it to bear on this very--

Are you going to miss your turn?

"No, dammit! Will you please stop doing that?"

Doing what?

"Could I please have just a few minutes peace?"

I'm hurt. I thought I was all about peace.

Sally stretched her lips thin and tapped the brake. She *had* been about to miss her turn. God, she hated angels in her head, especially when they were right.

She turned off of crumbling, cracked Washington Street onto a two-lane, potholed asphalt lane flanked by broken sidewalks, weeds, and sagging, old, misused houses desperately in need of paint, window glazing, and foundation levelers. An old neighborhood, but not a venerable one. The houses had been cheap when they went up a hundred years earlier. They had graduated to barely livable. Nearly half of them stood vacant, which was probably a good thing. Only crazy people or socio-economic prisoners chose to live in that festering ghetto.

And so, Sally had chosen it.

Not to live in, God no, but to give some support to those who did. Her suitcase full of money had gone into a dream no bank wanted to back and no respectable neighborhood would allow. That dream had proved a challenge from the start. But challenges didn't bother Sally; they were forced on her every day.

Sally was the seer of God, blessed to witness all the works of God, no matter how beautiful or terrible. She was the Almighty's instrument on Earth, the tool with which He fulfilled his plan, the weapon with which He protected his creation. Yeah, quite a job for a lapsed Jew. No benefits, except that now she had earned retirement. If He (or His overly social minion) would just shut the hell up.

I heard that.

"Blow me."

She snapped off the radio, which hadn't been worth listening to in the first place. The usual commercials separated by one or two minutes of so-called programming. Today it was all about the Voice of the City, Indianapolis's sort-of-new superhero. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he here? In short, nobody knew the answers to any of those questions, but they sure as hell liked to pontificate on the matter.

Okay, truth. Sally had a handle on the Voice of the City. They'd worked together for weeks, once. "I watch over the defenseless and the true," he had told her. "I am the Voice of the City." Also, the histrionic drama queen of the city, yessir.

The Prius jounced over unavoidable pits in the asphalt, just skirting the 1990s gas guzzlers lining one side of the street. Oldsmobiles, Buicks, a shitload of SUVs. All prettied up, all personalized. Sally could have found her destination even if unable to see the house. There was Benicio Magallanes's powder blue Riviera with its peeling vinyl top and its big-rimmed low rider wheels. Cherry, he always told her. 1992. And Jervain "Big Daddy" Robinson's Chevy Suburban might once have carried a middle class family, but had forgotten that life under its present bling of fake chrome and underbody lighting. It couldn't even carry that family anymore, not with the gigantic speakers crowding the cargo area. Only thirty-four years old, Sally was too old to understand, but not too old to shake her head.

She turned onto her property, which was no easy feat from the narrow street, the bumpers of cars impinging on the driveway apron. She breathed relief when she heard the crunch of gravel under her wheels without crumpling anyone's steel baby. All right, she was on stage. Time to put her game face on.

Despite its three stories, the red brick house seemed to hunker on its lot. It left an immediate impression of heaviness, with small windows widely spaced and concrete pillars like tree trunks holding up the covered porch. A three-foot-tall brick wall spanned from pillar to pillar, enclosing the porch so that anyone seated in the A-frame swing bench or the many rickety lawn chairs were pretty much hidden from the shoulders down.

Some of the boys lounged in the porch swing, or crashed in cheap lawn chairs behind the porch's enclosure, beer bottles littering the top of the wall. Those were her guys, sure enough. They holed up behind the protection of the brick, the better to avoid getting Swiss cheesed in a drive-by. No one rose from his chair to come out and greet her.

"How's it going, *chica*?" Benicio called as Sally swung shut her car door and walked across the yard to the porch steps. Benicio was a beefcake of the underwear model variety, all dark, piercing eyes and black, shoulder-length curly hair. The baggy jeans and heavy jacket did little to hide his aesthetic virtues. He knew he was a looker and knew Sally knew, and forever hoped to leverage his assets, at her expense.

It was just a game, of course. He was a boy, barely in his twenties. A tall, slim, hard-bodied, grownup boy. What would he want with an old lady of thirty-three like her?

"Morning, guys," Sally said, joining them beneath the porch roof. The March chill nibbled through her loose jeans and Broad Ripple High School sweatshirt, encouraging a shiver. The guys just sat there, beer cans in hand, as if it were the Fourth of July.

Hadn't the weatherman predicted freezing rain? Not a lot, just enough to remind everyone that spring had not yet arrived?

Benicio lounged on the swing, one ankle propped on one knee. Tito Mondragon, short, hefty, and always worshipful of Benicio, slouched to his idol's left, grinning at Sally past his reedy little-boy mustache and the two or three hairs on his chin.

John "Jesus" Kivett, the only white guy at the house, had crashed his long, lanky form into a cheap aluminum-and-nylon chaise lounge, his beer balanced in the middle of his hoodie-and-pea-coated chest. Sally couldn't see just then past the Lakers ball cap covering most of his face, but John Jesus was the spitting image of his nickname's surfer dude persona. Careful there, she reminded herself. Her John wasn't a peaceable advocate for love and forgiveness. He may have the beard and the flowing chestnut blond hair, but the Christian Jesus never lost ten years for aggravated assault and an attempt to escape.

Or so Sally assumed. She was a Jew, what did she know?

Two more rounded out the rogue's gallery of porch sitters. Draven Booth, black as night, trim, with shining white eyes forever caught in an unpleasant surprise. He hung out in a folding chair next to his much more impressive boss. That "boss" was Jervain "Big Daddy" Robinson, 350 pounds if he was an ounce, his eyes in a permanent squint thanks to fat cheeks the color of milk chocolate over doughy jowls over a prodigiously huge gut. He was the only one of the pack not insulated in jeans and a winter jacket. He sprawled in his heavy-duty camp chair in basketball shorts, flip-flops, and a tent-like t-shirt emblazoned with bold, black-on-green lettering proclaiming HRTPT4.

And he was sweating.

Big Daddy wasn't to be messed with. Draven, when new to the house, had once made the mistake of calling him Fat Albert, in fun. He'd spent the rest of the day at the ImmediateCare clinic.

Benicio raised his beer to Sally. "You all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for so early in the morning, *chica*. You have a fun night, huh?"

Sally halted almost to the door and flashed him one of her wide, toothy, nuclear smiles. "My tail is none of your business, Benicio, and neither are my nights."

"Whoa! Burn!" John Jesus winced from beneath his cap. "Romeo's on the mat!"

"Ah, we just play like we always do," Benicio said in good humor.

"Fuck," Big Daddy sneered. "Maybe *you* playin', you dumb fuck, but that lady got her guns out."

"I'd never do that," Sally said in mock seriousness. "One should never have guns out around little boys."

"And the spankings just keep on comin'," John Jesus said. He raised his beer to Sally before replacing it on his chest.

Sally knew her boundaries with her guys. She knew what she could safely dish without hurting anyone's feelings. She spoke with a smile and as a white lady who didn't look down on them, and that had earned her privileges. "Speaking of morning, isn't it a little early?" She indicated the beers with a pointing index finger.

"Gotta stay hydrated!" Tito piped up. That earned him a laugh all around.

"A little courage before the job-hunting chore," Benicio said, and nodded. That nod, with his lower lip stuck thoughtfully out, had become his trademark, whether while playing cards or, Sally was told, threatening a man with a loaded Glock. "Don't worry none, *chica*. I'll keep an eye on 'em."

Sally let go of the doorknob and warmed her hands in the pockets of her sweatshirt. "Just as long as somebody's watching you, Mister Pretty. And, umm, since it came up..."

Big Daddy made a raspberry sound and waved the meaty hand that didn't hold his beer. "Shiiiiit. Ain't no fuckin' fuck for no fuckin' legit biz'ness want no fuckin' losers like us. Fuck!"

"I can make some calls, guys. It's part of my job, you know."

"Yeah, well, you give us three hots and a cot, too, so's we maybe should do somethin' for our own selves," John Jesus said to his cap.

"Yeah, so our fuckin' dicks don't fall off," Big Daddy agreed.

"Speak for yourself, amigo," Benicio said and made a show at protecting his crotch.

Everyone laughed, so things weren't too serious.

"Hey," Benicio said and reached out to tap Sally's wrist. She successfully avoided flinching away.

"You do good work here," he said. "Not everybody says so, but they all think the same. We help you 'cause you help us. You're my sister, a'ight? A'ight."

Sally wanted to hug the guy, but he'd probably get ideas.

"Well!" Sally turned the doorknob. "Let me know if medical interventions are called for."

She strode into her house, her project, known to the city fathers as *Shavaq*, and they had no idea why. When she closed the door behind her, she cut off the chuckles and trash talk.

Gary sat at the rumpled couch in the living room, left of the door. He scribbled into a spiral-bound notebook, his workspace of official-looking papers sprawling across the coffee table. He wore his usual jeans and waffle-knit Henley, a loosely wrapped, crocheted muffler hanging from his neck.

"I'm not a fan of you flirting with them," he said without taking his eyes from the papers.

"It's all innocent," Sally said, "like scruffing your dog behind his ears."

Gary held up a finger to pause her, then went back to his notes and sifting through papers.

Sally waited. She didn't mind. She liked just looking at Gary. He was no beefcake like Benny, but strength showed in defined muscles under his dark skin. With that and the smoothly shaved symmetry of his handsome head, Gary had a look that protected him in rough neighborhoods, the look of a man who would kick your ass as well as look at you. But Gary didn't cultivate any tough guy persona. It was an illusion, a by-product of long, hard experience. Gary was a scholar, a thinker, a deeply religious man, and gentle as a puppy.

"Okay," he said, and drew his hands away from the papers, a pen still held between two fingers. "I got that. You gotta relate to these guys. But I wouldn't use the puppy dog analogy in their presence-- What you smiling for?"

"Was I smiling?"

Gary raised one eyebrow, but let her evasion slide. "I've been working on that grant, the one I told you about last month?" He paused a moment at her blank stare, then soldiered on. "Block grant, to supplement our income here. That suitcase of cash is getting kind of light, you know. We're good on community connections, what with our agreements with secular NGOs and the Archdiocese. Where we're hurting is in partnership monitoring programs. I think we could get something going with the Urban League or Social Services, but I'll have to spend time downtown."

He stopped. Sally decided he expected her to say something. "Oh, that's fine. I can keep things going here. You sure you can get money out of our wonderful Republican government?"

"You can't get nothing unless you ask. And I do have a degree in Public Affairs." Gary twirled the pen between his fingers.

Sally found it amusing when he pulled his smart card. Maybe, one of these days, his eyesight could go bad and he'd start wearing glasses. He'd look good in glasses. Wire frames. Oval. And he could wear a tweed jacket.

"Sally?"

"Oh. Sure." She stretched, worrying the fabric of her sweatshirt pockets. "But, Gary. We run a transitional house for ex-con gang members. Most of them violent offenders--"

"Formerly."

"I should hope so. But how interested is a conservative government in tossing money in that direction? Aren't kittens and kids with cancer more their thing?"

"Like I said--"

"I know, I know. You can't get nothing unless you ask."

Gary put down his pen. He rummaged off to one side in a cardboard box full of paper clips. "So, I have most of the paperwork gathered to make a presentation. I just need a solid PowerPoint workup..."

"Big Daddy Robinson can set you up. He's like the AV Club in middle school when it comes to that stuff."

"I can handle it. And let's not use those names. He's Jervain, not Big Daddy."

"I'm thinking you might put some zap in your presentation if it looked really cool and you could credit it to a client. You know, these guys are talented and deserve your support, that sort of thing. And he likes being called Big Daddy."

Gary started paper clipping stacks of forms and what looked like bills. "Good point. I'll consider it. And if we continue to call him Big Daddy, he'll always be Big Daddy. Let's not jinx our recidivism rate."

That dulled Sally's good humor, but she shored up her smile. She moved beside Gary and bent over to kiss his bald head. "We'll handle these guys," she said. "They're good guys. They went bad for a while there, but they're back and all grewed up, so to speak." She hugged him around the neck and pressed her cheek to his. Probably, she hindered his paper clipping, but she didn't care. "Names won't make any difference."

Gary reached up and patted her arm. "I remind you that I grew up, like, twenty feet from these guys. So I'm telling you names *do* matter. But you're the boss where it comes to the guys. I just make us solvent."

"Just so you know who's in charge."

"I gotta get all this stuff together. Then I'll talk to *Jervain* about a presentation."

She kissed his cheek. "Be quick, or *Big Daddy* might be busy trying to find a job."

With that, she turned him loose and pivoted for her little den, just off the right of the front door. Her doorless arch opened into an eight-by-eight-foot space. Almost filled by its heavy wood desk, vinyl office chair, and two-drawer file cabinet, the room presented a cozy feel that warmed Sally even on the coldest days. The two windows helped. With the room tucked into a corner of the house, the builder had blessed it with windows on two walls, each glazed in hand-blown glass bordered by stained glass panels of blue and green plant motifs. The house was a hundred-year-old wreck, but not without its amenities.

Sally dropped into her office chair, and stretched. She listened to the jack-jawing and shit-shooting of the guys on the porch as they ran on about nothing in increasingly obscene terms.

Okay, so her guys cussed like sailors. They insulted each other. They threatened. They huffed and puffed to blow the house down. But that was progress. These young men had come straight from prison and their various rival gangs. Benicio and Tito were *Tripulacion del Oestes*, or Westside Crew. Heck, Benicio had been in line for the leadership before that gas station robbery that sent him up to Pendleton. Big Daddy, Daven Booth, and Michael Eaker were 40 West. John Jesus was Keystone Marks. Until they came to Sally's house, none of them would have spoken to each other, let alone swilled beer together. And insults like those thrown between Big Daddy and Benicio would have led to violence, or murder.

Her boys were learning to get along, even to cooperate. They had been bound to a violent sub-culture and had made a commitment to sever its ties.

They had suffered for their sins. They had done their penance. They deserved a new start to their lives.

Boys, she thought, and her heart panged. They thought themselves tough, that they could handle anything. But they'd experienced next to nothing, by her standard. A few gunshots, fights, petty burglaries, and stupid dime store robberies. If they only knew...

Dropping any one of them into Sally's life would be like hurling a schoolyard bully into eastern Ukraine.

She took in the worn wood floor, the cheap furniture, and the tired plaster walls beyond her office. With enough money, the house could be something. But, as Gary had pointed out, a suitcase full of money only goes so far.

She raked her fingers through her shoulder-length blonde hair, rubbed her angular face, then leaned forward into the morass of bills, applications, and renovation job estimates covering her desk. Sally Reiser was the seer of God. She spoke to angels, even the Almighty. She had halted nuclear Armageddon and war in the Middle East. She had faced off an incursion from a universe of monsters.

A *real* universe of monsters, no kidding. A universe that led with dragons.

She had done all those things, most of them shadowed from the normal world of normal people.

Sally Reiser was a champion for mankind, but bills scared her to death.

Nonetheless, she attacked them as she did all things in her life, directly and without apology.

Electric: she wished that idea of solar power had been more economical at the install level. She had wanted to convert from natural gas heat to electric and sell the energy gleaned from solar cells back to the city for credits. It might have meant no utility bills but water for most of the year, but the conversion and installation would have topped \$40,000.

Gas: not much she could do there without switching over to electric, just continue the house on a budget deal and harangue the guys to keep the thermostat down and mind the hot water. Both prospects had dubious outcomes. The house leaked heat like the proverbial sieve, and the guys weren't much into economics.

Water--

Her eye caught something neighboring the plumber's bill. One of the several applications for admission to the house. She drew the application into her hand. Ernesto Ochoa-Mendez, Pendleton State Correctional Facility, the cover letter on prison stationary. She flipped to the official exit summary. Oh, for God's sake...

Robbery-homicide. First degree. She remembered this guy. He'd been all over the news what, eight years earlier? She looked at the release date again. And he was out. And he applied to get in her house.

Not bloody likely.

She placed the application on her desk. She patted it twice. Hers was a loose organization. The guys pretty much saw to their own affairs. They got a neutral space to live and three squares a day, and Sally tried to help them find experience and work in the world. They'd done their time. They'd earned a clean slate. Was this guy seeking the same, or just a home base for spreading more ... mischief?

She took up the stapled papers again. The crime that had sent Mendez up to Pendleton had been gang-related. He had forced his way into a rival gang member's home, beating the kid's mother and sister. The sister later died. Mendez stole jewelry, money, and a car. The summary stated he intended to kill the sister, intended to take the car. He had cased the place for a day, waiting for his rival to leave. Sally sighed. Not a snatch-and-run. It hadn't been a fight that got out of hand. He murdered that girl and stole the car to disrespect a guy. That didn't sound like her clientele.

Sally dropped the papers. She scooted them far to one side. Well. She'd have to deny the application. She'd turned down scary types before; she was in no way equipped to handle hard-core criminals. She hoped Ernesto Ochoa-Mendez was a born-again prison-converted saint, a regular Gandhi, but he'd have to be so somewhere else. Was this uncharitable of her?

Her angels kept silent. They always did, when *she* needed help.

"IT SUCKS. THE COPS, GOD BLESS 'EM, ARE OVERWHELMED. THEY JUST CAN'T HANDLE THE CRIME, YOU KNOW? IT'S MESSED UP, ESPECIALLY UP IN CHICAGO. IF THIS GUY, WHOEVER HE IS, TAKES IT ON HIMSELF TO HELP HIS NEIGHBORS, I'M WITH HIM 100%. GOD BLESS AMERICA AND GOOD PEOPLE WITH SPUNK!"
--TWITTER

CHAPTER 3:

Roza Nikulyukina extinguished the butt of one unfiltered cigarette in the coffee cup at her elbow, then shook another cancer stick from her pack. "This is unacceptable," she grouched, and her voice sounded rough even to herself. She slapped the pack of cigarettes to the table and lit the one she had wrestled from the container. "I cannot abide such disrespect. In Chicago, they bowed to us. They called you sir and called me ma'am. Here, they strut." She took a mighty drag on the cigarette, then blew smoke from between clenched teeth.

"They don't know us," Tamas said with a tired wave of one hand, then went back to clasping his hands at his waist.

Nikulyukina looked at him. He was a good boy, but needed seasoning. Too long in the military with all its silly rules. But this wasn't the military. Never did you accept that they didn't know you. You *made* them know you. Politeness is for the dead.

She took another drag on her cigarette and looked around at her boys. Four stood in a semi-circle around her, all respectful, awaiting her thoughts. They looked out of place in the bright, clean hotel suite with its muted earth tones and picturesque views through the top-floor windows. Her men were all leather jackets, scuffed jeans, and a wealth of tattoos streaming from shirt collars and cuffs. Those tattoos told of experience, of what her boys had endured in the prisons before following their *desnatnik* to the fertile opportunities of America. Still, her boys looked tired. They looked mussed. They had dirt under their nails, dirt or something else. Nikulyukina waved an impatient hand to the chairs around her dinette table. "Come. Have a seat. Tell me of these disrespectful animals."

Tamas looked unsure of himself. He glanced from his matron to the cream-colored padded chairs. "Umm, perhaps we should stand. We're not so clean. The alley..."

"Nonsense. I pay a thousand dollars a night for the help to scrub the chairs. Have a seat. I insist."

No one refused when Nikulyukina insisted. Tamas pulled out one chair, Nikolay and Marat the two remaining seats. Daniil, caught odd man out, glanced around in almost comic desperation, then lowered himself onto the couch several paces away.

Nikulyukina sucked deeply on her cigarette and tightened the fluffy hotel robe around her stout frame. "Very good. Have a Danish."

Tamas obediently took a raspberry and cheese Danish from the plate centered on the table. He also took a napkin and laid the pastry upon it. Marat did the same, then pointed at the coffeemaker, giving his boss a questioning look.

"Of course," Nikulyukina said. "It's all complimentary. Would you, too, like coffee, Daniil?"

"I'm fine, *desnatnik*." Daniil waved two fingers at her.

Such fine boys. Big, strong boys. Daniil was smart, the kind of smart that made a good businessman. Clever, like a racoon. Marat was stone cold, a pragmatist and an opportunist, a field man, good with his rifle. A good boy, but needed watching. Nikolay showed softness from too much American food. But even that was all right. That big, balding wall of a man inspired cooperation on the street.

Tamas, Tamas her true son. He carried skills and experiences that set him both above the others and apart from them. But Tamas was a philosopher. He understood people, which was no good at all when he needed to hurt them.

For a moment, the *desnatnik* studied her thoughts, amused that she saw the men as "her boys." Only Tamas shared her blood. He was her son, her only remaining son. But the others might as well have issued from her womb, she held them in such high regard.

"Now," she said, sucking her cigarette almost to her fingers, "Give me the details. Tell me about the disrespectful scum."

"We made the offer, just as you dictated," Tamas said, accepting the coffee Marat poured for him. "They work for us. We supply them goods, protection, armament. All we want is the big man--"

"Do not call him the big man." Nikulyukina stubbed out another butt in her coffee. "It makes him sound bigger than he is." She shook another cigarette from the pack.

"Yes, *desnatnik*. All we want is the man, this Voice of the City man. Any leads to him."

"And you say the mannerless beast cussed you out."

Tamas nodded and bit into his pastry. "Yes, that's the gist of it. He denied us on gang grounds. We are not of his gang. We aren't even of this city, that sort of thing. These people, *desnatnik*. They are not of our usual caliber."

"How do you mean? Are they incompetent?"

Tamas poured himself a cup of coffee. His eyes wandered as he searched for words.

"Children," Nikolay inserted. "They are children."

"That's it," Tamas said, nodding. "They are full of romantics. Gang loyalty, honor, a Hollywood sense of their toughness. They aren't professionals. They're children."

Nikulyukina lit up. "They will become men. They'll do so because we require it. These people are the prey of the one we seek, of the Voice. He beats them in the night with his own fists. They will work with us. They'll be our bait. Then we will have justice."

No one spoke. If anything, the four men became very still. Tamas, the thinker of them, the heart, had an unfocused, faraway look in his eyes. His mind had turned to Pyotr, Nikulyukina supposed. And why shouldn't that be so? If she could not let Pyotr rest, why should his surviving brother? For an instant, the shadow of her dead boy showed in the face of his older brother. For a moment, Pyotr and Tamas were one. The sensation squeezed at Nikulyukina's heart. Her lower lip trembled.

Then, before that black emotion could find its way to her eyes, she shoved it away, forcing it into the trash bin of her soul.

Later, she would dredge it out, smooth its crumpled memory, and remember and grieve her son. When the Voice of the City lay dead in the gutter.

"There is more," Daniil called after clearing his throat.

"Yes," Tamas said, blinking. "The police."

Nikulyukina huffed, blowing smoke like a dragon. "Don't concern yourself with the police. The authorities down here are provincial at best, stupid as cows."

"The fed is with them," Marat said, his accent so thick it was hard to understand him in English.

"The fed? From Chicago?" Nikulyukina frowned. That was a possible threat.

"He knows much of the Voice man," Tamas said. "I believe he consults with the police. He'll be in our way. He might even know us."

"Surely the authorities know we're here," Daniil called. "We made no secret. We shelled out money for one of the most expensive rooms in the city. They can't be so stupid to have missed that."

"They can," Nikulyukina said. "Never underestimate the stupidity of policemen."

"Or the cleverness of that fed," Marat said.

That irritated Nikulyukina. Marat had always had a mouth on him, on the rare occasions he used it. She sensed disapproval from him on almost everything. If he weren't so valuable as a sniper... She stabbed out her cigarette

before it was finished. She didn't like feds with good reviews. "Ignore him. We stick to the plan. Set up a meeting with the next piece of bait. Make sure they know what happened to the last."

"Already done," Tamas said as he finished his Danish. "Word has gotten around. He has called for a more public meeting."

Nikulyukina laughed. It made her belly expand and she re-tightened the robe. "As if that would do him good. Make the offer and back it up with sugar."

"A gift?" Tamas rubbed the napkin over his mouth.

"Yes. Something nice. I'll leave it to you."

"I'll take care of it, *desnatnik*."

"Good. But until then, relax. You boys work too hard. Go to your rooms, shower, and take a nap. Call room service. We paid for these rooms. We might as well use them."

"Yes, thank you." Tamas rose from his seat. On that cue, so did the others. "I admit to being tired. We'll meet with the next one tonight at eight. Someplace called the Artsgarden."

"Get there early," Nikulyukina said, lighting her fourth cigarette. "Make sure the place is covered."

"As always," Tamas promised, then he and the others, with bows and polite goodbyes, moved to exit her presence.

"One moment, Tamas. You others may leave."

When the last man clicked shut the door, Tamas stood before her. Tall, strong, relaxed, his hands gripped before him at his waist.

"My good son," Nikulyukina said after firing up another cigarette. "You are so dead, so without emotion. I cannot read you."

"I am fine, *desnatnik*."

"I know you, Tamas. I need to know that you are good with this job."

"I am loyal to the family, *desnatnik*. You should have no worries."

"I can order Marat to do this. He loves killing."

"That will not be necessary."

She watched him, uneasy. He held his jaw tight. He did not reveal all that he thought.

But then, he always thought so much. And he had been thinking of Pyotr. Maybe it was nothing.

"I trust you, son. You may go."

He bowed again, then left her sight.

Nikulyukina sat there a good long while. She polished off three more cigarettes. She grabbed the pack and peered into it, counting the remainders. She'd have to call down for a new carton. They could send some mouth-breathing minimum wage worker to get them if they didn't stock Camels. She tossed down the pack and stared about the empty tomb of her deluxe luxury suite. She stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows to the state capitol building. She felt antsy. She needed to get dressed. She needed to get out. She needed to kill somebody.

She wanted it to be that bastard in the mask, that Voice of the City character who had tormented her for two years before disappearing without so much as a farewell wave. He had packed up and moved to this mole hill in Indiana, almost as if she weren't worth bothering with anymore. Well, she'd teach him. She'd show him that he couldn't turn his back on her. She was too dangerous for that. She was worth a cautious backing away from. And she paid her debts.

Yes, debts. She owed the bastard big. She owed him sorrow. She owed him pain. If he had a family, she'd take it. If he had a son...

She slammed both palms against the edge of the table, almost pitching it over. The coffee cups rattled, hers spilling black juice and cigarette butts like carcinogenic cat guts or something. The carafe of the coffeemaker jounced, ending up half on, half off its base.

To hell with that. The help would take care of it. They'd mop it up and like it, considering the tips she bled.

She pulled herself out of the chair, breathing hard both from effort and trembling anger. A shower. Yes. A shower would calm her down. She'd shower, she'd think straighter, she'd get that cheesy bastard and everyone he loved. Hell, everyone he was on a first name basis with.

But first, she needed a cigarette.

INTERLUDE 1

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, TWO YEARS AGO:

Antwon Hendricks didn't ask for much out of life. A decent paycheck, enough to provide for his struggling family, maybe a safe place to raise his boy. Respect would have been nice, but he found precious little of that as a black man in the US of A. It didn't matter, not much did. Because Antwon rarely got the respect he desired, would never find that safe place to live, and his paycheck was only sporadically sufficient. That was why he smiled and made nice for every measly tip at the pizza shop he bussed tables for. That was why he found himself shivering on the sidewalk after leaving his second job parking cars.

It wasn't all bad. Antwon tried his best to make it work. Twenty hours a week at the pizza shop, twenty at the car park, and probably, at least it felt that way, twenty on the CTA to get to those jobs and collect his crappy pay. Hours ago, a free meal at the pizza shop because he'd worked enough hours to merit lunch. And he carried the remains of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the paper bag crumpled in his right hand. The slice of pizza had made it so he didn't have to choke down the stale sandwich as dinner at his second job.

And still his woman, Ozo, had to work polishing nails and braiding eyebrows, all to keep them in that apartment with the roaches and the leaky pipes. But, yeah, it could be worse. He passed that threat every half block or so, the luckless, down-beaten bastards who had no home, no god-damned roaches, no leaky pipes. All they had was whatever shit they hoarded in their plastic trash bags, whatever they carried on their broken backs.

Shit.

Maybe if he hadn't dropped out of school, but that school was for fuck anyway.

He walked down the sidewalk with his head held high, his shoulders squared. He had to. If he sagged even a little, if his eyes darted even a little, he'd mark himself as easy meat for the wolves prowling those westside streets. Antwon wasn't a little man and he wasn't flabby, either. He could look the part of a man you didn't touch, even though he bussed tables for a living and gave out parking chits. He wasn't anything to cross the street to avoid, but he faked it well for the sake of his woman, the sake of his boy, and the sake of his life.

That night, he approached to within a block of his place, looking no one in the eyes. He strolled along the sidewalk like all the other wolves, but hugged the gutter so that nothing could surprise him if it jumped at him from the shadows of the buildings. That was his everyday routine. It worked for him. He'd taught his boy Malakai to stick to the middle of the street like all the other kids. The middle of the street, not the edge of the sidewalk. Only ten years old, Malakai needed a little more cooking before he took the chances of a man.

Yeah, only ten years old. What had Antwon been thinking when he brought that little baby into the world? Of course, he knew the answer to that. He hadn't been thinking at all. He'd done all his thinking after the fact, when he'd made the decision to stay with Ozo, when he'd made the commitment to be a father.

The hardest third job of his life.

He felt sometimes he should apologize to Malakai, but what was the point of that? Instead, he made sure he was there for his kid. And he brought him comic books.

Sometimes he risked the considerable setback and put down good money for a Spider-Man or a Batman. Shit, but those things were expensive! How could any kid afford them on his own? More often, the comics were finders-keepers, stuff rich white kids with no respect for a buck -- *five* bucks! -- left behind in the pizza shop. Antwon carried a Batman and a Nick Fury rolled in his left hand, looking like they concealed a weapon. Malakai really dug that shit. He got lost in the adventures of millionaire industrialist super-dudes and over-the-top crime fighters. With a comic planted in front of his face, he escaped the shit life his father provided, and that was fine with Antwon. The kid's reading skills were off the charts.

Malakai might make it. Antwon grinned at the old joke: Malakai would make a name for himself and support his old man in the manner to which he wished to become accustomed.

Then he turned the corner at the end of the block.

Police cars, maybe a dozen.

An ambulance.

Antwon stopped at the corner. He squinted into the strobing red-and-blues to estimate where on the block-- But he found no comfort there. The cops had gathered in front of his place.

Antwon dropped the lunch bag. He dropped the comic books. He stepped off toward the bad news, slowly at first, but his footfalls sounding harder and quicker the more he felt sure that his family had been hit.

It could have been the kids downstairs, or the old people upstairs. It could have been somebody across the street, or somebody walking down the sidewalk at the wrong time, in the wrong place. But that was all bullshit. Antwon knew his luck. If he got a winning lottery ticket, it would be on the day the state went bankrupt.

A cop stepped in front of him when he hit the police line. The bastard put out a stiff arm and caught Antwon by the shoulder. "Police line! Official business only!" he said, his free hand on the butt of his holstered pistol.

"Who is it? Who is it?" Antwon asked and tried to shove the cop aside.

Two other policemen came to support their partner. "Stay back, sir! Do not press this!"

"Who *is* it?"

"Fuck off!"

"Antwon! Jesus! Antwon!" Ozo burst from the knot of police cars. She ran to him, open-armed, her face a horror of tears and ruined makeup.

She collided with him, mixing it up with the cops, who disengaged immediately. They said something, or asked something, but their voices were only background noise to Ozo's terrible cries. "Antwon! Oh, Jesus! They shot him! They shot my baby!"

Antwon drew her into his arms. He clung to her. Her words made him dizzy. The world came unglued. He held her not to soothe her sorrow, but to regain his balance. "What?" was all he managed to say. "What?"

"They shot Malakai! Oh, my lord!"

Another cop came up, a woman cop. She was black, her face pinched from distress. "Ma'am, they're ready to transport. Ma'am?"

"Who shot him?" Antwon finally roared. It was the only volume his voice could manage. "Who shot him? The fucking cops?"

"Are you the father?" the lady cop asked.

"Get the fuck away! Who shot him, baby? These motherfuckers?" Antwon's skin burned. His muscles tightened. He was gonna kill somebody. He had to.

"Sir." The lady cop locked him down with the word. "Are you the father?"

"Yes, I'm Malakai Denefoe's fucking father. Fuck!"

"Sir, I regret to inform you that your son has been shot. Gang-related. They're transporting him now. Would you want to ride along?"

Antwon didn't know what he said. He wasn't sure he said anything. He heard himself roaring, then groaning through clenched teeth. He heard Ozo wailing. The other cops had backed away, but remained close enough to back up their female partner.

Fucking cops. Antwon's boy was shot, and they thought about messing up the kid's grieving father.

"Sir. They're leaving now. Will you come?"

"Yes! Yes, I'll come. *We'll* come."

"Calm down, then."

"What? The fuck--"

"You cannot get in that ambulance unless you calm down. You good with that? You can deal?"

"We're moving!" somebody yelled, and police cars started lurching forward or back to make a hole in the gaggle.

"I'm good. We can go." Antwon's heart banged against his sternum with a steel pipe. Ozo wailed like she didn't even know where she was.

"I can take you in my car if you can't keep it in."

"I can go!"

But the cop wasn't having it. She stared at Antwon, at Ozo, for a good thousand years, her eyes full of criticism but also compassion. Then, when Antwon thought he might fall to his knees, she decided. "Okay. Come with me. Come on, that's it. Hold that door!"

They were inside the ambulance, pressed against one wall. The EMT ignored them. He bent over something, tearing bloody rags from it.

Malakai.

Ozo cried like a baby, her face buried in Antwon's chest. The sirens sounded, desperate and forlorn. The vehicle rocked and jerked.

That was all Antwon recalled of the ride to the public hospital. His mind had clicked a circuit breaker. He, like his son, was maimed.