

Chapter One: Goin' Down to the Crossroads

Michael Dalton drove through the darkness, the car's heater on full blast, innocuous instrumental music playing on the radio. He hadn't slept in the last twenty hours but he was wide awake, outwardly placid but tingling with excitement. He glanced over at the girl in the passenger seat who seemed to be asleep, her head lolling and her arms at her side. Good. It was nearly three in the morning and nobody else was on the road. He congratulated himself on his luck. She was perfect, a thin, dishwater blonde, who was friendly, carefree, and easily buzzed. He'd found her in a strip club in Orlando doing her job, naked, buoyant and giggly but with calculation, or was it desperation, in her eyes. He'd gone through a couple of hundred dollars buying lap dances from her. He could tell she needed money and that she thought he might have more so he'd made an "arrangement" with her. After the club closed she put on a cocktail dress, hung a sweater from her shoulder and went out with him. He took her to an after hours place, one of those places where you bring your own booze and the club supplies the mixers. It hadn't been hard to slip the Rohypnol into her drink.

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Dalton saw the place he'd picked out, a dirt trail that led back into the state forest just inside the Narvaez County line. He pulled off Highway 50 and nosed along the trail until, about an eighth of a mile off the highway, he arrived at a barren wallow large enough that he would be able to turn the car around. As they bumped along, the girl started to wake up. "Where are we?" she whined drowsily.

Dalton concentrated. What the hell's her name? Linda...yeah, Linda. "Linda, we're here. Just relax."

The girl mumbled something and dropped back into unconsciousness. Dalton stopped the car. He unfastened his seat belt and reached over. He slipped the sweater off her shoulders and proceeded to try to remove her dress. She didn't resist but she didn't help either. Finally, he took a pocket knife from a door pocket and made a cut in the neckline of the dress so that he was able to rip it apart. Linda was not wearing underwear. That made things easier. He took advantage of the time to examine, in the semidarkness, the details of her body...smallish breasts, pubic hair bikini-trimmed into a narrow airstrip. Dalton resisted the urge to fondle her. When she was sprawled naked, her mutilated dress disarrayed beneath her, Dalton got out of the car.

He wasn't expecting the cold. It had been a record cold December for Florida, but it was now February and there had been several weeks of above normal temperatures that had ended with the current cold spell. Freezing weather had returned. He had known this intellectually, but was still stunned by the contrast between the warm car and the frosty outside air.

The cold made the sky ink black and the stars crisp and bright even though the moon was nearly full. There was enough light to see his breath, enough light to do what he had come here to do.

He pulled on her arm. "Come on, Linda, time to go."

The girl was able to stand up on her own. "It's cold," she complained. She braced her left hand against the car as her legs suddenly went weak. Dalton watched her without emotion.

"Let's go," he ordered. He grabbed her left arm under her shoulder and began walking her away from the car.

"I'm fucking freezing," she protested. She folded her arms across her chest and began to shake violently. Dalton could hear that she was sobbing.

"Only a little further," he promised. They took about five more steps before her legs gave out. She dropped to her hands and knees and started to crawl away.

Dalton placed his foot on her buttocks and pushed until her knees buckled. He stepped forward, put his foot between her shoulders and shoved down hard. She did not resist, instead stretching her arms ahead of her as she knelt, her rear in the air, her face and chest in the icy sand. Dalton bent down and adjusted her head so that she was pointed straight ahead, her chin in the dirt. He stood back and watched her body shake from the cold.

He wondered if she knew what was coming. Why doesn't she resist? He slipped the pistol from under his jacket, racked the slide, and pointed it. She flinched at the sound but didn't move from her supplicatory position. Dalton leaned forward so that the muzzle of the pistol was maybe two feet from the back of the girl's head. Dalton knew that he had a tendency to pull the gun to the right when he fired, so he braced with his left hand, pointed at the middle of her skull just above her neck. He squeezed the trigger.

The gunshot was a sharp crack and its echo the sound of someone smacking a sheet of plywood.

The girl went limp and died with her face and chest in the frozen dirt and her ass in the air.

Dalton paused to absorb the experience. There was the smell of gun smoke and shit. He produced a miniMag from his jacket pocket and by its focused light examined the girl's head. He noted a tiny worm of yellowish brain tissue inside the edge of the entrance wound. Surrounding the wound, a patch of hair the size of a drink coaster was matted through with blood. Next to her, an area of dirt, no bigger than the palm of his hand, was stained dark red by the same stream of blood that glistened from the little mound of oak leaves around her face.

It took Dalton several minutes to find the shell casing which had nearly buried itself in the fine sand. He pocketed it and walked back to the car. He opened the trunk and pulled out a straw broom with a sawed off handle. He backtracked from the body, hunched over and sweeping as he went. He then took from the trunk a section of carpet that he had rolled up and fixed with rope. He tied the carpet to the rear bumper, got into the car, and drove back out to Highway 50, erasing the tire tracks as he slowly bumped along.

When he was back in the grass at the edge of the highway he stopped, detached the rope, and threw the carpet back into the trunk. He took a deep breath of clean cold air, then got into the car and drove away.

He examined his feelings. He felt no guilt and felt no fear. What he felt was elation. He would be able to do what he needed to do.

When you make a deal with the Devil, you have to bring a sacrifice.

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Narvaez Sheriff Captain Paul McCready pulled off Highway 19 and nosed his cruiser into the driveway. He surveyed the scene, an old strip mall sitting in a crumbling parking lot, the grass swales reduced to sand and weeds. There were eight storefronts, three of them empty and one boarded up with plywood. The scene of the crime, Riggs pharmacy, was still open but the faded sign and the smudged handprints on the plate glass announced that it had left its best days behind. Narvaez 16 was nowhere in sight although he heard its siren in the distance. McCready keyed the mike. "Narvaez Three is 10-97," he announced, his voice flat.

McCready got out of the car and drew his Sigsauer. When he heard Narvaez 16 cut the siren, he took a step forward. In his peripheral vision he saw the white and green Interceptor pull up just behind him. He saw Dan Rubin through the closed window, thin and pale, his ginger curls showing under his hat. "What we got?" Rubin hissed, as he stepped from his car.

"Don't know," McCready snapped. Rubin drew his pistol, held it with both hands, pointed down and close to his body.

"Wait for backup?" Rubin asked.

McCready hesitated. "You hang back. When Bubba gets here, you guys move up. I'll scout the drug store." McCready quickly closed the hundred yards to the storefront sidewalk. He hesitated for a moment then brought up the portable radio. "Narvaez Three. Dispatch."

"Go ahead Three."

"Roll EMS to stand by."

McCready could hear a touch of fear in the dispatcher's voice. "Affirmative," she said.

McCready turned and pressed his back against the stucco to the left of the drug store's front window. He inched toward the glass. "Narvaez Twenty-one is ninety-seven." Louis "Bubba" James had come in without lights or siren, but to McCready, his radio transmission sounded as loud as a Rolling Stones concert.

McCready decided to chance it. He bent down to run past the window then straightened up when he reached the rubber door pad. He brought the Sig up to eye level and marched forward as the automatic doors opened.

"Thank Jesus I've got my vest," he muttered.

A figure emerged from behind a shelf and McCready's trigger finger tightened. The robber was moving toward the doorway, his left arm throttling a woman's neck, his right hand pushing what looked like a generic 9 mm pistol against her temple.

McCready quickly took in the details. The robber –the subject- was thin, white but deeply tanned, dark straggly hair, strong looking arms, tee shirt frayed and yellowing. The woman was young, her hair black and curly, her dark eyes wild. She was wearing a nice yellow sun dress under a green windbreaker. Running shoes. No purse. Both of her hands were holding the subject's left arm, apparently trying to keep him from choking her.

Wonder if they're related? McCready thought.

"Stop right there!" McCready boomed. He had his gun sights on the subject's forehead which had become big as a billboard.

"You let me through, cop, or I'll blow her fucking head off!"

You stupid piece of shit! McCready mouthed silently. Ain't happening! The subject was a good head taller than his hostage. McCready squeezed the trigger.

He saw a little spray of pink behind the subject's head. The man dropped to the floor like a rag doll, without even the strength to pull his hostage backward. She turned and saw her captor lying on the floor oozing out a big puddle of thick blood. She put her hands to the sides of her face and screamed.

McCready realized that his ears were ringing.

He heard Bubba's drawl. "You okay?"

McCready nodded, then realized that he should say something. "Yeah, fine. Check the store." Bubba, his pistol drawn, pushed past and proceeded into the store. Danny Rubin walked past, put his hand on the woman's shoulder, and led her out into the parking lot.

McCready took a few steps into the store and paused to look for threats. The main aisle was wide and uncluttered so he had a clear line of sight all the way to the pharmacist's counter in the back. He relaxed and allowed himself to gaze down at the dying robber, who was sprawled on his back, his head and shoulders resting in a slowly growing pool of his own blood. The subject's fingers were touching the gun. McCready kicked the pistol away.

"Hell of a shot," he heard a male voice say. A balding bespectacled man rose up from behind the pharmacy counter. The pharmacist, McCready guessed, noting the man's lab coat.

"I could have done it at twice the distance," McCready said.

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The Narvaez County Sheriff's Department main office, just outside the town of Ruffin, was about a quarter mile downhill off the truck route. Paul McCready drove slowly down the driveway, past the parking lot and around to the side, where the view from the truck route was blocked by the building and the view from distant Highway 50 was blocked by a clump of forest. McCready parked his car in his reserved space and walked the sixty feet to where Sheriff Tom Watson was standing beside a ridiculously small car which had been painted the white and green colors of an NCSO cruiser.

Watson was tall and thin, a little too thin by McCready's standards, with sharp facial features topped by short black hair. When Watson moved, McCready saw that the Sheriff was

conversing with a shorter man who wore corduroy jeans and a pin striped dress shirt with the cuffs rolled up. The longish curly brown hair and short beard led McCready to finally place the guy as Rick Piers, a reporter from Narvaez Now, the local section of the Tampa Herald.

As McCready approached, the Sheriff turned and gestured him forward. "Paul," the Sheriff shouted with a little too much effusiveness. "Glad to see you. What do you think of my new ride?"

McCready laughed. "We're driving jelly beans now?"

The Sheriff forced out some hearty laughter of his own. "No, the deputies are still going to be driving the muscle cars. This is my POV. As I was telling Rick, my switching to a Prius is going to save the county eight or nine hundred dollars a year in gas. It's one way we're cutting back."

"Gas prices go up any more, we'll be patrolling on skateboards," McCready observed.

Piers broke in. "Captain, any word on that shooting out on Nineteen?"

McCready frowned. "I don't have anything for you right now. The crime scene unit is still out there."

The Sheriff looked discomfited. Finally he spoke. "Rick, if you'll excuse us, the Captain and I have some matters to discuss concerning the CID budget." Watson put his hand on McCready's shoulder and pointed him toward the building entrance. Piers looked like he wanted to ask another question, but the two lawmen were moving before he had the chance.

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The gunshot in the enclosed space had left McCready's ears ringing. They were still ringing when he sat down in the soft office chair in front of the Sheriff's desk. McCready noticed that Sheriff Tommy Watson, who had been under weight all his life, was starting to look just a little puffy since his ascension to the top job. Watson slid a jar of foil wrapped candy across his desk to McCready, who waved it away.

"You all right, Paul?" Watson asked.

McCready shrugged. "Yeah. Just a firearm discharge."

Watson winced. "You ever kill anybody before?"

"Just in Iraq. You know, war."

"How many?"

McCready shrugged. "I don't know. Everybody fires their weapons. Who knows which one hits the guy. I'd guess four or five."

The Sheriff rubbed his hand through his hair. He sighed. "I never have. I don't think I unholstered my gun more than half a dozen times in twenty years of law enforcement. I can't know what it feels like."

"It isn't that traumatic. You shoot the other guy. He doesn't shoot you."

"How about civilians? Do you feel different when a civilian gets killed?"

McCready smiled. "Sheriff, civilians get killed in war. You can't let it spook you. You're there to do a job and not get killed yourself."

The Sheriff frowned. "Listen, Paul. This isn't war. A shooting affects a cop a lot differently than it does a soldier. This just happened a couple of hours ago. Maybe it hasn't hit you yet."

"Sheriff, I'm all right."

Watson leaned forward. "Look, I'm not going to do the paid suspension bullshit. The subject had a gun and a hostage. No way it's not a clean shoot. But I want you to take a few days off and go see Sonia Taggart."

"I don't need to see a psychiatrist."

Watson laughed. "Think of it as protecting her job. The way the county's going lately, they're apt to replace her with a faith healer."

This time McCready laughed.

"You're head of Criminal Investigations," the Sheriff continued. "I need you to go easy on mixing it up with the bad guys. I don't want to have to choose between Henry Klass and Donna Parker to replace you if you get your butt shot off."

"I'd recommend Donna."

Tommy Watson shook his head. "You don't like Klass worth a damn. Too bad. He's got a criminal investigations cert and he's yours."

"Understood."

"You carrying, Paul?"

McCready grinned. "Just my throwdown."

Watson glared. "You mean your backup piece. Thirty-eight?"

"That's right. Shoulder holster."

"Well, you won't be getting the Sig back any time soon. That's going to Tampa to the FDLE lab. So, when you come back, you'll get a standard issue Glock. What do you have at home?"

"An SW three fifty-seven."

Watson nodded. "Good. Hope it's in working order. Here's the deal. Take some time off till the investigation is complete. You know the drill. I'm guessing three to five days. But don't wander off. If anybody gets blown away, Klass or Donna Parker will investigate."

McCready sighed in exasperation.

"Now, Paul. I know you don't like Klass, but he's doing ok at the job. And if anything big goes down, I'll call you in. Otherwise, see Doctor Taggart and exorcise those demons. Then, go home and hang out by the pool."

Watson stood up, signaling the meeting was over. McCready stood, too, relieved to be headed for the door.

The boulevard was six lanes of auto traffic but the sidewalk, bordered on the west by an old concrete balustrade, traced along the shoreline of Tampa Bay. Michael Dalton passed a pair of elderly, and optimistic, men fishing. The sea breeze dominated the air and pushed aside the oily smell of traffic exhaust. But Dalton didn't stop to look into the water or to gaze at the industrial buildings across the bay.

He first saw his quarry as a dark shape among a cloud of squawking seagulls. As he got closer, he could see that the man was sitting on a concrete bench facing the water. The man held a plastic bag in his left hand, from which he drew out scraps of bread and tossed them to the raucous gulls.

It was a cool day but the man was dressed for the cold. He wore a long dark overcoat and a battered felt hat pulled low on his forehead. His hands were covered with soft leather gloves. The gulls powered into the air as Dalton sat down on the end of the bench, as far as possible from the heavily dressed man. For the first time, Dalton got a good look at the man's face. His skin was crinkled, the cheeks and nose sunburned, but otherwise his skin was sickly pale. His hair, dark but salted with white, was cut short well above the ears. Dalton could not guess the age.

"Mind if I sit here?" Dalton asked, trying to be casual.

The man frowned. "It's a public bench." He tossed out another handful of crumbled bread and the gulls came gliding back, to walk around pecking at crumbs on the sidewalk.

"Isn't it against the law to feed the gulls?" Dalton challenged.

"What are you, the bird police?"

Dalton smiled. "No, not at all."

There was a tense silence. The man stared sullenly at the flock of birds while Dalton stared off into the distance.

Finally, Dalton spoke: "I killed a woman yesterday."

The only reaction was a trace of a smile. The man did not turn his head.

"And why are you telling this to me?"

"Because I know what you are."

The man stiffened. "If that is so," he finally said, "then you must realize how very dangerous it is to mess with me."

Dalton gave a short harsh laugh. "Oh, yeah. That I do. I've followed you. I know what you can do."

For the first time, the man turned to face Dalton. "Then why provoke me?"

"I want to be like you," Dalton answered simply.

The man looked thoughtful, finally nodded. "It's not an easy life, you know."

"But it is long."

"That it is," the man agreed. He hesitated, then reached inside his coat. He produced a business card and handed it to Dalton. "Meet me tomorrow at 5:00 pm at this address."

Dalton glanced at the card. The address was for an apartment near Ybor City. "So, your name is David Garfinkel?"

The man laughed harshly. "Of course not."
Dalton stared at the address for a moment.
"You can leave now," the man said.

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Paul McCready was teaching Donna Parker the art of the sucker punch. They were standing next to the swimming pool in front of the seventy pound canvas bag that he'd been beating when Donna had pulled her Jeep Wrangler into his driveway. "I heard what happened out on 19 today," she'd said. "I thought you might want somebody to talk to." After McCready had allowed that he was just fine, and after Donna had spent a couple of minutes making friends with Fryda, his black Labrador, she had looked up. "Got another pair of gloves?" she'd asked.

She'd frowned when she saw McCready's blazer, dress shirt, and gun belt hung across the back of a chaise lounge. She had unhitched her utility belt, hung it over another lawn chair, then unselfconsciously unbuttoned her uniform shirt, which she also draped over the chair. Then, to McCready's surprise, she'd reached around and unlatched her bra, which she pulled from beneath her gray crew shirt. She had noticed McCready involuntarily staring at her breasts and protruding nipples.

"Hey, it's cold out here," she'd said with a laugh. "Let's go. What are we working on?"

"The sucker punch. You've got to have one. I practice mine every day."

"Why?"

"You get in a confrontation, the bad guy's bigger than you and he's dusted or on meth and ready to beat the shit out of a cop. You can shoot him. But that's a lot of paperwork. Or you can strike first." McCready illustrated with a straight right snap into what would have been a subject's face, followed by a hooking punch that would have caught the subject on the left side of the head. He reversed, this time the straight snap with his left hand followed by a crushing side blow with his right.

"You try."

He moved back to watch. She was fast and her punches had power behind them.

When she stopped, her tee shirt damp with sweat and her blonde ponytail wet and limp, McCready said, "You're facing him too much. You're giving him a straight shot at your gut and your--chest. Keep one foot in a bucket."

He proceeded to show her how to stand sideways to an opponent, using one leg as a pivot so you could thrust forward to attack, then drop back and stay balanced out of your opponent's reach.

Showing her how to stand involved, of course, using his hands to guide her hips and shoulders to the right position. He could tell by her smile that this was what she wanted.

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About six weeks after Watson had put him in charge of CID, the Sheriff had summoned McCready into his office. Watson sprawled back in his chair, waited for McCready to sit down, then said two words: “Donna Parker.”

The new CID head was taken aback. “What about her?” he finally asked.

“What’s your opinion of her?”

McCready had frowned. “I don’t know her that well. She seems like a nice kid, good deputy.”

“Herrera’s given her a negative evaluation.”

McCready did not reply.

Watson laughed. “You don’t like Herrera, do you?”

McCready slowly shook his head.

Watson chuckled. “I don’t like the son of a bitch either, but he’s dug in like a tick. Listen, word is the girl sleeps around. That bother you?”

“No,” McCready said firmly.

“I think,” the Sheriff continued, “Herrera’s problem is that she won’t give him a shot.”

McCready nodded slowly.

Watson stared into his eyes. “Paul, would you hit that?”

McCready throttled his laugh when he noticed that the Sheriff’s expression was dead serious. McCready nodded, then said, “Sure. Hell yes I would.”

Watson boomed out a laugh and slammed the desk. “Hell, boy, I would, too. Tell me this. Do you think you could get in her pants?”

“Sheriff, where’s this going?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Yeah, I think I could if I put my mind to it.”

Tommy Watson smiled. “I know you two get along. And the scuttlebutt is that you stood up for her when one of the line guys got personal on her. You want her?”

“What?”

“In your division I mean. Herrera wants to kick her off the force but I like her. She’s young, she’s cute. Smart. She’s got a college degree in something that’s not criminal justice or sociology. But I can’t keep her on as a line deputy. You want her?”

“Okay,” McCready answered without hesitation.

“You got her, then. Since you already know you can get into her pants, you don’t have to prove it. Read the fraternization and sexual harassment rules, and if you do fuck her, keep it quiet.”

Two weeks later, Donna Parker was promoted to Sergeant. Eight weeks later she was certified in criminal investigations and made a detective.

Luis Herrera had made it clear to Donna that her success had come because Paul McCready had the hots for her and that McCready was Tommy Watson’s pet. She pretty much

believed that herself, and so, if McCready liked her a little too much, she liked him a little too much, too.

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McCready sat in a lawn chair and watched as Donna punched until her arms wore out. By the time she stopped and removed the gloves, her shirt was soaked. She gave a little wiggle of her hips and laughed. The girl was well endowed and she didn't mind showing it. McCready excused himself to carry his stuff inside. He returned with two beers and a blanket. He tossed the blanket to her, handed her a beer, and they both sat down.

"I'd invite you in," McCready said, "but I've got the floor torn up. It's a construction zone."

"Still working on that?"

"Still wishing I had time to work on it. That's why I didn't go in. I get depressed as soon as I walk in the door and see that shit piled up."

Donna smiled sadly. "Maybe you don't want people coming in."

McCready shrugged.

"How long has it been, Paul?"

McCready tensed. "Since what?"

"Since you and Marsha split up."

"More than a year."

"Do you miss her?"

McCready hesitated. "I don't think so. As long as my Guard unit was getting deployed and redeployed, she was fine with being the long suffering hero wife. But she couldn't handle being married to a cripple. When the chips were down I couldn't count on her. Hell with her."

Donna tried to change the subject. "How's the knee?"

By now, McCready was irritated. "It's fine. It's the perfect injury. It got me out of Iraq." He grimaced. "And after only one fun year of therapy I can work again."

Donna gazed at him with concern. "Paul, not every woman is like Marsha. You're an attractive man and there are a lot of good women out there."

McCready softened. "Including right here beside me. Unfortunately, I'm her immediate supervisor and it's cold and she has to go before we get into trouble."

Donna's smiled wistfully as she stood to leave.

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Michael Dalton sat in an old kitchen chair across a cluttered coffee table from the man that he'd challenged on that park bench by the Bay. The room was not what Dalton had expected: worn and tattered carpet of ambiguous color; print wallpaper that was yellowed, dry, and peeling; dust covered cardboard boxes stacked and slowly buckling from bearing weight for

years. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, a pull chain dangling from its fixture. The bulb made a pitiful contribution to the ambient light that came in through the two filth encrusted sash weighted windows.

The man he had come to see sat on a torn greenish sofa. He still wore the gloves and coat and hat. “You came armed, I take it,” the man proffered.

Dalton nodded. He unconsciously fondled the grip of the Taurus 9mm pistol stuck in his belt under his jacket.

The man smiled. “It won’t do you any good, you know. I can kill you before you can get it out. And if you did shoot me, I would survive and kill you. Or, with just a second’s warning, I can fix it so you can’t move at all. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you,” Dalton answered, hoping that there was no quaver in his voice.

“You can call me Jeremy. That is my name among the Community. As we go through life, we take many names, but we always keep our one true name. You said you have been following me. What did you see?”

Dalton told his story. He had come out of a pizza joint on Franklin Street just in time to see this man grab a young woman and drag her, unresisting, between two buildings. Other people had seen him and a crowd gathered. But the man had simply walked through the crowd and nobody tried to stop him. More remarkably, he had made his escape by scurrying straight up the brick wall of a nearby building and crawling into a third floor window. Intrigued, Dalton had gotten his car and staked out the front door of said building. “I trailed you, got your tag number, and dropped back to follow you home. I staked out your house on Bayshore. That’s how I know about you and the seagulls.”

The man shook his head. “I never saw you. I’m getting careless in my old age. What else?”

Dalton told of how he had dropped out of school six months ago in order to stalk this man – this monster. He told of the other killings he had seen. And then he made his pitch:

Dalton’s parents had been killed in a car crash, their lives unfinished. He himself was almost thirty and still chipping away at a Masters in Fine Arts at USF. Young as he was, he was already running out of life. It was a tough economy. People who finished school didn’t have jobs. People who used to have jobs no longer had them. People he knew, intelligent people, were taking unpaid internships and extra courses, attending conferences at their own expense just to polish up the old resume. They were like aging women competing for the available men; exercising at the gym, painting themselves with makeup, letting themselves be cut by plastic surgeons just to make themselves a little more attractive, give themselves that little edge.

“You start out in a time like now, you wait year after year and never get that break. It’s not like museums have help wanted signs out for MFAs. You waste your time. You squander all your money and your education rusts away and you get nothing but a shitload of debt.

“Meanwhile, who gets ahead? The guys who just say ‘fuck it!’ The corrupt politician. The crooked businessman. The fucking governor of Florida, who’s rolling in cash he stole from Medicare. Evil people. I’m an asshole. We’re all pitiful assholes, every one of us who goes to

school and does what we're supposed to do...every deluded environmentalist or antipoverty activist. Clueless do-gooder assholes, just waiting for some pointless early death, just waiting for some evil piece of shit to steal everything we've worked for.

"Evil rules. You can piss away your life trying to do the right thing and getting constantly kicked in the face, or you can embrace the evil."

Jeremy's smile was ironic. "Evil? Now that is indeed a compliment. So tell me about the girl. Why did you kill her?"

Dalton told his story of picking up the girl, Linda, and the Rohypnol and the dirt road in the forest. He concluded by retelling a story that dated back to the time of the Vietnam War, a story he had not credited at first. But after his stalking of Jeremy, he had come to realize its probable truth. It was the tale of a young soldier who'd been tempted by a woman who promised him life without end. The soldier had found the price too high. "He told me that, to join your kind, you first have to kill somebody. If I hadn't done that, if I'd approached you and told you who I was and that I wanted to be like you, would you have taken me seriously?"

Jeremy slowly shook his head. "No. Killing a human being is not a prerequisite but it does show a certain seriousness of purpose."

"Right," Dalton continued. "I needed something to grab your attention, to get you to take me seriously. I knew that, once you knew about her, you'd listen to me. You'd either make me one of you or kill me."

"That is, indeed, the choice before us. So you killed this young woman just to get an interview?" Jeremy's raised eyebrows showed his skepticism.

"Yes."

Jeremy smiled. "It's good that the police aren't as single minded as you. Otherwise, the Community would not be so invisible. So you want to be one of us?"

"I do," Dalton said firmly.

"You are fortunate," Jeremy said. "If you had a wife, I would kill you. If your parents were alive, I would kill you. If I thought that you were not smart enough, I would kill you. If I hadn't already decided to move on, I would have killed you already. You were stupid to come here." He paused and Dalton felt a tingle of fear.

"But I will grant your request," Jeremy continued. Dalton let out his breath.

"Our community is very loosely knit," Jeremy went on. "But we have our controversies. Some of our kind believe that we should limit our numbers. I have always disagreed. It isn't as if the world will run out of humans. No matter what reductions are imposed by war and plague and famine, there are always more and more humans. If anything, humanity needs more predation.

"And the Tampa area is an excellent territory. It contains hundreds of thousands of rootless persons without relatives or nearby friends. Who will care about one more or one less of these unconnected people? They are easy prey. Each becomes one more unsolved murder in the thick book of unsolved murders maintained by the police bureaucracy."

Dalton was almost afraid to speak but forced himself to ask: “So why are you leaving Tampa?”

Jeremy smiled. “I have lived here a very long time. I have taken many victims here. But the things that made the place attractive have all gone away. There are no more cigar factories, no more people drinking espresso and playing dominoes on the sidewalk tables. The old Cuban-Italian mafia had its attractions to one such as myself, but no longer. Even crime today is slick and corporate. I’m moving south. I think that I can flourish in Guatemala City.

“You are well endowed for this life, Michael Dalton. You have the necessary quality of boldness, which you demonstrate by approaching me, and ruthlessness, which you demonstrate by slaughtering that unfortunate stripper. Finally, you have luck, which is demonstrated by the fact that you caught me in just the right mood such that I would rather recruit you than kill you.”

Jeremy paused, gauging Dalton’s reaction. Finally, Jeremy said, “But first, be certain that you really want this. I will tell you some things.

“We can’t fly. We can climb and jump better than the humans but we can’t fly. We can’t turn into vapor and ooze under doors like Dracula. It is true that we do not age and that we can live for centuries, but we are not indestructible and not immortal. Few of us are older than two hundred years. Over the millennia, most have us have perished from accident or despair.

“Nor are we the Undead. We are not borne from corpses, but from living persons who are converted to us. The myth of the Undead has served us well. Priests and officials of afflicted towns wasted time and effort digging up and mutilating the dead while we walked openly among them. It is a fact that we can be injured, apparently fatally, and yet recover. But we don’t have to sleep in coffins. We are living beings.

“We cannot be brought down by crucifixes or by garlic. We do not burst into flames in the sunlight. As you have seen, we get around fine during the day, although we are very sensitive to the sun, as are many of the humans.

“Finally, we are not human. The longer you live, the more victims you claim, the less human you become. You can use the humans for sex. You can steal money from them. You can hide among them. But keep them separate. Don’t feast upon the humans with whom you associate. And you must not imagine yourself to be one of them. You will become a predator, a monster from Hell. Always, you will be alone. Do you still want this?”

“That’s why I came here,” Dalton said.

“If you walk away, if you swear to forget all about this, I will let you go. If you decide, after you have done this thing, that you don’t want it, do nothing. Resist the cravings and they will go away in a few weeks. Nobody will bother you. Now, do you really want this?” Jeremy watched him intently.

“I want it,” Dalton snapped.

“The Gothic stories are lurid and stupid, but they serve a purpose. Many who come to us believe that they have to be drained of blood nearly to death before they can make the change. We are only too happy to bleed them. But our secret is that blood is haunted. The spirit, life

itself, dwells in the blood of the creature. Our blood is the strongest of all. Drink of our blood and the spirit takes you over and changes you. Then, you need only drink of human blood to stay fed. Are you ready?"

"I am."

From under his coat, Jeremy produced a short knife. He worked his left arm out of the sleeve, stood, and presented his wrist in front of Dalton's face. A single slash along the vein and blood began trickling from the wound.

Dalton clamped his mouth on the bleeding arm and began to drink, and so started the process that would make him a vampire.

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