

# *Acts of Love*

One of the immutable laws of the universe seems to be that the losers all congregate in certain places, no matter where you go. The junkies, the hookers, the pimps, the thieves, the street dealers, the down and out alcoholics, the drag queens, the failed bankers and jilted housewives, the defrocked priests and debarred attorneys - all the downtrodden masses, miscreants, losers and misfits gravitate towards the same sorts of places, even in different locales.

Now whether this is truly a natural law or rather some unwritten agreement among the participants is still unknown. But either way, the results are much the same in nearly every instance.

Not surprisingly, Tacoma in Washington State is no exception to this law.

A bustling metropolis of nearly 300,000 people thirty miles to the south of Seattle, the "City of Destiny," as the town fathers are proud to boast, is the fifth largest container shipping port in North America.

And like Every City USA, the class segregation exists and is promulgated in Tacoma at an instinctual level - the junkies intuitively know to gather down near the Rescue Mission, the homeless feel secure sleeping in the doorways of the businesses surrounding the Greyhound depot, the hookers stealthily ply their trade on the streets over near the train station, and the other misfits, miscreants and losers that defy all efforts at categorization drive taxi for BlackTop Cab.

I.

Up near the top of McKinley hill, in a seedy, working class district not far south of the Tacoma Dome, is a dilapidated gray stucco building set near the corner of Harrison and McKinley streets. The long, rather narrow building is about a hundred feet off from the road, back across the width of a sloping asphalt parking lot, the lot rimmed by tall, stately maples. This structure started its life in the nineteen forties as the Solomon Brothers Grocery.

Up the hill at the top of the lot is a concrete retaining wall covered with ivy, and beyond, a row of tiny houses hastily thrown up around the close of World War II. Originally the abode of shipyard workers, these houses currently serve as homes for what seems like mostly low-end blue-collar workers and welfare mothers unable to afford something better.

Across the street from the lot is what in the forties had been a service station, now deserted, the rusting hulks of several cars and other junk dotting the landscape. Catty corner is a dive called Phil's Saloon, a hangout for the local alcoholics and other down-and-outers. Across the street the other way is a small doctor's office.

In the mid-sixties, closely following the advent of a new Safeway just down the street, the Solomon Brothers Grocery unceremoniously folded. Over the next few years, the building was home to a swift succession of businesses that one after the other, went down the tubes. There was a floral shop, a carpet store, a pet mortuary, and an insurance office just to name a few.

In its last incarnation, the building had been an auto repair shop. These owners installed three large garage doors in the side of the building and had dug out and leveled part of the

parking lot to make driveways into the new service bays. The portion out front, facing Harrison Street was turned into the business office.

Shortly after the untimely demise of the auto repair business, BlackTop Cab purchased the building and two adjoining lots down the hill. The empty lots were used as a junkyard to store wrecked cabs for parts, and the building was partially remodeled to suit its new purpose.

At the back end of the building up towards the top of the parking lot, BlackTop turned what had previously been a loft into its dispatch office, along with a small driver's lounge and a bathroom. Outside, a short flight of stairs led up from the parking lot onto a small wooden deck, which sat in front of the windows of the dispatch office. To the right of the windows was a door which led inside.

### **I. BlackTop Cab Company**

“So anyway, there I was,” said Mack Campner. “The driver's side mirror fell off my cab one night. Just fell off. Presto chango, the sonofabitch disappears.” He held up his hands, gesturing, a look of amazement on his face, and continued, “So anyway, there I am the next day. I go to the shop and ask ‘em to put a new one on. Not such a big deal. Just a mirror, right?”

Mack paused to light a cigarette. He was sitting with Marty Medina on the deck in front of the dispatch office at BlackTop Cab Company, where they were taking in a little of the late afternoon sun while waiting for the start of their shifts.

Exhaling a long plume of smoke, Mack went on, “Any idiot could put a new mirror on in five minutes. Right? So, when I come back the next day, what do I find? What’d these stupid dildoes done?” He shook his head as if in wonder, and then continued, “Oh, shit! These dudes'd

put a whole new *door* on the cab. But the kicker? Ah, yeah. The kicker was they were gonna charge me a hundred and fifty bucks for doing it!” He threw up his hands.

Warming up to Mack’s story, Marty Medina leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the rail of the deck. “A whole new door?” he asked, a knowing grin on his face. He straightened the crease on his gray uniform pants. “Like, why?”

Wide eyed, Mack held up his index finger. “My question exactly. So, I go and I find Evil Justin and I ask him why it was they put an entire door on when all the damned cab needed was the mirror. He just tells me, ‘It was easier to put on a new door.’ Then like usual, he starts getting ugly with me, so I split.” Wide eyed again, Mack tapped the side of his head with a finger. “Easier,” he said, making a face. “Can you believe this shit?”

Smiling, Medina laughed and said, “Only at BlackTop Cab, man.”

Mack nodded, running his fingers through his gray-blond beard. “Ain’t it the truth? So anyway, next I go and I find Elmo and bitch about the charge for the new door. What a laugh. Elmo, he just tells me I gotta pay the cost, even though it wasn’t my fault the mirror fell off. If I don’t pay, he says, then I’m parked. Period.” Mack shook his head, and took a long drag off his cigarette. Blowing out a thin plume of smoke, he went on, “God I was pissed. But I had to drive. I mean, I ain’t independently wealthy. I wasn’t born with no silver spoon in my mouth. So, in the end, I bite the bullet and cough up the hundred and fifty bucks.”

“That’s too bad, man,” Medina said, shaking his head. “Like extortion, when it comes down to it. Another BlackTop moment.”

Mack nodded, looking serious. “No shit. So whada I do? They’re screwing me. Am I gonna get out the Crisco and bend over? Not fuckin’ likely.” He gave an evil grin and went on

in a low voice, “I tell ya what I did. Late the next night, I park my cab up here at the office, then I go out down in the boneyard. I got this five-pound sledge.”

Smiling, Medina shook his head. “A sledge hammer? What the hell?”

Mack nodded. “Uh huh, a sledge hammer. I’ll tell you what. I took that sledge, and I went and I bashed-in the side of every driver’s door of every taxicab in the boneyard. Every goddamn one of ‘em had a nice big dent in the driver’s side door. Every one. Then I take my sledge, and I get in my cab and I leave.”

Medina cracked up, laughing, shaking his head.

“So anyway, there I am the next night, I’m back here at the office and the dispatcher, it was Carnahan, he casually asks if I’d heard anything the night before.”

“I ask him what he’s talking about. He tells me, ‘Ya know, it was the damnedest thing, Mack. Somebody broke-in down in the boneyard last night and bashed in the side of every driver’s door on every taxicab there.’ Carnahan looks over at me then goes on, ‘Now, I understand you just had the driver’s door replaced on your cab. And I saw you here last night. You wouldn’t know anything about it, would ya?’ he asks, and he’s got this big shit-eatin’ grin on his face.”

“For real, man?” Medina asked, eyes narrowed.

“Yup. I just shook my head and told him, ‘Who, me?’ then walked away smiling. And that’s the last I ever heard about it.”

Medina laughed, shaking his head. “Man, Carnahan’s like really cool.”

Mack nodded his head in agreement. “Damn straight. He knew it was me, I’m sure, but he never said nothing.”

“Yeah, like he hates BlackTop more than any of us.” Medina paused for a moment, thinking, and then said, “You know man, we really oughta do something nice for Carnahan. He’s always covering someone’s ass. He takes all this crap and no one never does nothing for him.”

Mack looked thoughtful, staring off into space. “Ain’t it the truth?”

## **II. Damned seagulls**

The driver's lounge at BlackTop Cab was a small narrow room in back of the dispatch office. To the right inside the door, was a pinball machine. In back of that was a Coke machine and a candy machine, and then the long narrow hallway with the drop-boxes for the leasers on the left, and at the end, the bathroom door. On the left side of the room was an old metal desk and a couple folding chairs, as well as the door into the dispatch office.

One of the leasers, Dan Dinwiddie, was seated behind the desk in the driver’s lounge, wrapping up an interview with a new driver.

In his early sixties, Dan was dressed in black sweats and was wearing a baseball cap with the legend, “*Damn Seagulls!*” on it, with what appeared to be a large splotch of bird droppings on the bill. About five foot eight, he weighed maybe three hundred pounds, and had a round, cheerful face with merry blue eyes, as well as a long, snowy white beard and mustache – all of which made him look a little like Santa Claus.

Dan looked up as Medina walked through the door.

“Hey Dan.” Medina waved a greeting, and then put his money in the Coke machine and pressed the button for Diet Coke. The can clunked noisily down.

Dan waved back at Medina. “Hey Marty? You s’pose you could take a trainee tonight? He had a quiet voice and his normal tone was almost a whisper.

Close on Medina’s heels, Mack entered from outside and bellied up to the pinball machine. He dropped two quarters in the slot and the bells dinged.

Medina shrugged, as he swallowed a drink of the Coke. “Yeah, I s’pose.”

Dan turned to the man he’d been interviewing, and then hooked his thumb at Medina. “This is Marty Medina. He’s one of my best drivers. You can ride with him tonight. He’ll show you what to do.”

Medina laughed. “Hey, you tell people I’m one of your best drivers, Dan, I’m gonna like get a swelled head.”

Dan looked back at the man. Eyebrows raised conspiratorially, he put his hand by his mouth and said *sotto voce*, “He’s really one of my worst drivers, but I was trying to be kind.”

Mack, trying for some English jolted the pinball machine, and broke in, “Yeah, you’re one hopeless fucking wetback, Medina, admit it.”

Smiling, Medina took another drink of Coke and answered, “Screw you, Mack. I keep tellin’ ya I’m a wop not a wetback.”

Dan giggled, a high-pitched laugh, then turned to the man, and said, “We’ll let you ride with Marty, anyway.” He turned back to Medina and indicating the new man, went on, “This is David Wick. You be sure and don’t scare him off.”

Medina looked over at Wick. He was in his mid thirties, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. He had the lean, hard look of someone who really needed a job. “Pleased to meet ya,” said Medina. “Like welcome to BlackTop Cab, such as it is.”

Concentrating on his pinball game, Mack said under his breath, “Fresh meat...”

Smiling, Medina glanced sidelong at Mack. “For Jesus Christ’s sake, Mack, chill huh?”

Mack looked up, waiting as a new ball was loaded. “Hey, God as my witness, I feel so good tonight, I think maybe I’m not gonna scoop anyone. The whole night!”

Trying not to laugh, Medina shook his head. “Yeah, right. Like not scoop anyone for the whole night? You sure you’re not sick or something, man?”

Dan smiled and then looking back at Mack, said quietly, “Yeah... oh by the way, Carnahan told me about what you did last Wednesday night.”

Utter innocence on his face, Mack concentrated on his game and asked, “Did what?” The pinball machine shook as he jolted it, trying for some English.

Wide-eyed, with a puzzled look on his face, Dan turned to Medina and said, “You know, it’s the weirdest thing. Grandma Shirley had this really bad night, Wednesday. *Really* bad – she booked zero. No money at all. She just couldn’t figure it out. Every call she was sent to was no-good. Every single one, she’d get there and the person was already gone. It was simply amazing!” Still wide-eyed and sucking his lips, he nodded his head in wonder.

Medina turned to Mack. “You were like scooping Grandma Shirley, again, huh?”

Innocence incarnate, Mack smiled, totally focused on his pinball game. “Who, me?”

Over seventy, Shirley actually was a grandmother. She was also perhaps the one person most unsuited to drive cab in the entire company – she was completely inept and as an example,



was actually unable to find the Greyhound Bus Depot one time even when she was sitting right outside it. Her inability to navigate to even the simplest destinations was legend at BlackTop.

A good example of Shirley's problems was a trip she had gotten one night from the Shipwreck Tavern on the Tideflats.

Late as always, Shirley finally found the Shipwreck and picked up the fare – a chemical salesman who wanted to go to the Amtrak station. This was a trip that would normally take maybe ten minutes.

*One hour later*, Shirley dropped the salesman off at the Eleventh Street Bridge, downtown. Apparently, after having seen nearly every sight in the Tideflats – except his actual destination – the fare was desperate to get out of the cab and abruptly demanded to be dropped off as they came to the bridge, before as he said, the trip “bankrupted” him.

Now smiling benevolently, Dan held up his finger. “Guess what?” he asked Mack.

Mack shrugged. “What?”

Dan grinned widely, and then said slowly, “Weeeelll.... It's like this... Apparently Shirley complained to Elmo. Said she finally figured out what the heck happened: there was this ‘*ghost cab*’ following her. She was screaming mad, crying all about how she was gonna file a sex discrimination suit on whoever was screwing her. She demanded Elmo do something or she was gonna sue him too.”

Mack scowled, trying to look unconcerned. He loaded another ball.

Dan went on, “Now you and I both know Elmo really doesn't give a shit about what goes on here, but you also know how sometimes he goes off on his crusades. Well, it looks like this may just be one of them. Plus, I guess he wanted to get Shirley off his back, so what he did was he told Shirley he'd investigate it and park whoever did it. P-A-R-K them. He went and talked

to Carnahan ‘cause it happened on his shift. He told Carnahan he wanted to make an *example* out of whoever did it.”

His game over, Mack looked vaguely uneasy as he stood next to the pinball machine. “He did, huh?” he asked, polishing his nails on his chest.

Dan nodded. “He did. But...but...” Dan enjoyed watching Mack squirm. After pausing theatrically, he finally went on, “But, you lucked out, because Carnahan covered for you. He told Elmo it was probably an Army-Navy Cab or something. Told Elmo he’d been having problems with Army-Navy drivers all week. You sir, owe Carnahan big, ya know?”

Frowning, Mack shrugged. “Hey, I gave that goddamn broad every chance to get those calls. Every chance in the world. Every one I waited long enough for any *normal* driver to get there before I picked the people up. I can’t help it if she’s got fucking Alzheimer’s and can’t find her ass with both hands. What am I supposed to do, let the company get in trouble because she can’t find the customers?”

Dan looked sympathetic, nodding. “Right. But did you have to take *every one* of her calls? Every one for the whole night?”

Mack shrugged again. “Oh, I dunno. I guess it got to be a game after the first five or ten.” Eyes narrowed, he went on, “You know, some of them were real challenges actually, because she’d be right on top of the damn calls. I put a lot of fucking work into it, really.”

“I understand. I’m just thinking you might lay-off her for a while. And you oughta thank Carnahan for covering your ass. Elmo really was pissed. You know how he gets.” Satisfied he’d made his point, Dan lay back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the desk.

Medina shook his head slowly. “You know, like we really do gotta figure out something nice to do for Carnahan.” He started off into space for a moment, and then remembering the

trainee, he turned back to Wick. “I guess you’re getting the picture of what it’s like to work here. But anyway, like I said, I’m pleased to meet you.”

Wick smiled at him. “Pleased to meet you.” He turned back to Dan. “Uh, you never told me what the pay is.”

“The pay? We split your bookings fifty-fifty, and we each pay half the cost of the gas.”

“Okay. And what nights would I be working?”

Dan shrugged. “It’s up to you. I lease ten cars, so there’s a fair bit of flexibility. If it were me, I’d work Tuesday through Saturday. Those are the best nights for someone starting out. You work twelve hours on, twelve off.”

Wick looked thoughtful, then said, “Okay, I’ll go for that. Is there anything else I need to know?”

Dan shook his head. “Nope. Marty’ll show you the ropes. Come see me after you’ve done the ride-along for three nights and gotten your hack license, and then we’ll see about getting you on the insurance.”

Wick nodded. “Okay.” He turned to Medina. “So what do we do?”

Medina smiled. “Well, like first we gotta find out about my car. C’mon.” He nodded in the direction of the door.

### **III. Babysitting morons is fun**

“Sir, I suggest you look very carefully and see if you can locate Puyallup Avenue,” said Ed Carnahan, sounding annoyed. “It’s a big, wide street, just at the south end of downtown, off Pacific Avenue. The train station is at the intersection of Puyallup Avenue and East J Street.”

He sighed and then took a long drag from his cigarette. After taking his foot off the microphone pedal, he glanced at Dave Murphy, sitting next to him, and muttered, “Dipshit fuckin’ idiot...” as he exhaled the smoke. Frowning, he went on, “Babysitting. I don’t have time for babysitting. Where on earth do they find these guys?” The radio crackled and sputtered. Impatient, Carnahan moved the headset mic, adjusting it to fit more comfortably on his head, while waiting for the driver to respond.

Smiling, Dave Murphy nodded as he spoke quickly on the phone to a customer. All the phone lines were lit up, and blinking. To Murphy’s right, the other phone people talked into their phones in hushed voices, busily answering the calls and writing up the trips as fast as they could get the information.

It was bar-closing time on Friday night, and BlackTop was *very* busy.

The BlackTop dispatch office was a rectangular-shaped room about fifteen feet long by about ten feet wide. To the left of the dispatcher was the window that looked out onto the deck. Arranged neatly under the window on the counter was a vertical file full of various company forms that the drivers sometimes needed, as well as a small reference library with the *Thomas Guide*, the *City Directory* and other reverse directories and maps and so on. To the right, the length of the other wall was taken up by the dispatch boards – two of them, side by side arranged with a Plexiglas partition in-between, so that in times when it was extremely busy, two dispatchers could work using different radio frequencies. Facing the Plexiglas partition on both sides were narrow counters where the phone people worked – two positions next to each dispatcher, each position with its own phone and time-stamp machine. At the back of the room was another Plexiglas partition with two more phone positions, and the phone supervisor’s position. Beside that and to the left was the door that opened into the driver’s lounge. To the

right was a small alcove with the coffee maker and a tiny refrigerator, as well as a fax machine and copier. Covering the walls and ceiling were egg-crate style foam insulation, to deaden the noise.

There hadn't been enough business to justify using two dispatchers in years. Normally, on a busy night, they used one dispatcher and three or four phone people. Tonight, there was just Dave Murphy and two others answering phones.

After several more seconds, the errant driver finally responded on the radio, "Uh, like where is Puyallup Avenue? In Puyallup?"

Carnahan exhaled another long stream of smoke, and then shaking his head, stepped on the microphone pedal. "Sir, do you have your map book?" He turned to the counter on his left and opened a *Thomas Brothers* map book, flipping through the pages quickly. He continued, "It's on page fifty-seven."

There was silence on the radio for several seconds, then the driver responded, "Uh, I like can't find my map book...uh, I ...uh, think maybe I lost it or something..." His voice trailed off.

Carnahan rolled his eyes, and then frowning, said in a strident tone, "Sir, I am going to give you ten minutes and if I don't hear you call going with the gentleman from Amtrak, I'm going to dispatch someone else. Do you understand, car thirty-five? And if I *do* have to dispatch someone else, I'll see you here at my window and we're going to have a little talk before you get any more calls. *Do you understand me, sir?*" Carnahan's anger welled up towards the end, and you could hear it in his voice.

The radio crackled and the driver responded quickly, "Thirty-five copy."

Staring at the dispatch board, Carnahan nodded. "Good. Pick the guy up in the next ten minutes or you're at my window before you get another bell." He took a quick breath, then went

on, “Okay, we’re holding twenty bells in the Town, sixteen in the Lakewood, eighteen bells in the Tideflats, nine in the Puyallup, cars calling...”

The radio squealed and sputtered with all the cars trying to call in.

#### **IV. Life is a bowl of tomatoes**

Edward Flanders Robb Carnahan was forty-nine. He’d been involved in the cab business in Tacoma in one way or another for over twenty-five of those years. He’d driven cab, he’d leased cabs, he’d dispatched and even owned a few cabs once as an independent operator. As he said, the taxi business was in his blood.

Almost six foot, Carnahan was overweight, a middle-age bulge developing as a result of his sedentary lifestyle. He had a mobile, expressive face with laugh lines that crinkled around his eyes when he smiled, which was frequently, and a hawkish nose. His graying brown hair was long now, usually trailing in a confused mass over his shoulders – he was in one of his “hippie phases,” as he called it. He wore wire-frame aviator-style glasses to help in reading. His usual mode of dress was faded blue jeans with a plaid shirt, along with an occasional cardigan sweater when the weather was chilly. He smoked incessantly. He had a fondness for greasy cheeseburgers and drank coffee by the gallon. He was a voracious reader, and always had a book or paper or magazine available to read in the off moments when it wasn’t busy at BlackTop.

Way back when, all the folks in his hometown said he had a great potential.

Just out of high school, Carnahan had done his stint in Vietnam like many youths at that time. Back from the war without a scratch, he'd spent his last few months in the Army at Ft Lewis, and then when he got out, he decided to stay in Tacoma.

Using his GI Bill, he'd almost finished his business degree at Pacific Lutheran University when *love* intervened, and he'd ended up getting married. The realities of providing for a family got in the way of education, and after his wife became pregnant late in his third year, he dropped out of school. He'd been driving cab part-time for extra money for a couple years, so now he decided to drive full-time – but he was sure it'd just be for a few months till he could find something better.

Twenty-five years later, and still, nothing better had come along.

At various points in all those years, he had made stabs at finding a different line of work, but he'd always come back. The truth of the matter was that he *liked* the cab business. He figured it was his one true home.

He'd been divorced about ten years now. His daughter was grown and was living on the East Coast, attending college. They maintained a close relationship in spite of the miles between them, and Carnahan went back to visit her at least once a year. It was he mused, his only one hundred percent truly successful relationship with a woman, ever.

Women had always been Carnahan's downfall. Since his divorce, he'd had a long series of different girlfriends. His current flame was twenty years his junior, a cab driver named Lucy – a flamboyant young black woman given to dressing in leather pants and wearing hats with feathers. They'd been together now for a little over six months, and from the rumors, it wasn't going to last much longer.

Carnahan was mostly philosophical about his women problems. He just said some people were born to be married, but he was obviously born to be divorced.

Still, if he was a failure in his own eyes with women, he made up for it in other ways – like for instance by the fact that he really was a *great* dispatcher.

Carnahan had spent most of the last fifteen years at BlackTop, and was currently in his longest single continuous stretch as graveyard dispatcher – three years and six months in a row.

The normal pattern was either that he'd get fed up and quit, or he'd do something crazy and get fired. When he was fired, like the other *professionals*, he'd usually go work for Army-Navy Cab – the equivalent of being exiled to Siberia – for a year or two. The length of the stay was determined by either the nature of what he had done to get fired, or by how pissed-off he was.

The last time he'd been fired was almost four years ago. He'd only been gone for about six months that time.

In that instance, his departure had been as a direct result of some dealings with one of Elmo's nephews, a young man with the unlikely name of Jojo Mortimer.

Jojo was a major disappointment to his mother, Henrietta. Right from the start of his miserable life, they'd all known he was a little "off." Jojo got terrible grades and didn't socialize with the other kids in school. He was an outcast. He had a putrid body odor and bad breath and was flatulent beyond all belief.

All the family was so very pleased when he finally got the job at the sawmill after repeating the twelfth grade twice and flunking out of high school at age nineteen. With his mother's active encouragement, Jojo bravely moved away from home, got an apartment, and it



looked like he was set in life. There were rumors that he's started bathing, and actually gotten a girlfriend.

But then as luck would have it, the mill closed – and after only a few short years, Jojo Mortimer was suddenly thrust into the cold, harsh world of the unemployed. It was *awful*.

Henrietta certainly didn't want him moving back in – that was *strictly* out of the question. She had recently acquired a new boyfriend on the side, and having Jojo move back home would have disturbed her potential for secret trysts. So after examining an exhaustive number of different alternatives – and striking out with every single one – Henrietta finally turned to her older brother, Elmo.

Elmo couldn't stand the sight of Jojo – just being around Jojo made him queasy, and the thought of giving him a job was about the last thing he wanted to do.

Unfortunately, Henrietta knew where all the bodies were buried – or so she hinted in their hour-long, exceptionally heated argument. She even made lightly veiled threats about going to the county prosecutor and telling tales.

To say the least, Elmo was very impressed with her determination. As such, it was with great trepidation that he reluctantly hired Jojo to drive one of the BlackTop bandits.

The bandits were company cars – cars operated directly by BlackTop, where the drivers were paid an hourly wage to pick up the *crème de la crème* of the calls – the airport trips, the runs to Seattle or Portland and so on. All the big money stuff.

Sadly though, success again proved to be elusive for Jojo Mortimer.

True to form, he was a disaster as a cab driver right from the start. Customers complained that he stank. He couldn't find half the destinations he was given. He was rude and

arrogant to customers and fellow drivers, alike. He was consistently late for every call. And if anyone complained, he'd just tell them to fuck off or he'd tell his uncle.

For his part, Elmo showed a degree of tolerance and understanding that everyone had previously thought impossible. He overlooked every minor and many major problems Jojo caused – things that would have sent any normal driver packing down the road to Army-Navy Cab in a heartbeat.

And all this *really* grated on Carnahan. He put up with it for about three weeks before he finally snapped.

It was just after bar-closing on a Friday night. Jojo had been sent to the Sheraton Hotel to pick up an elderly Japanese businessman who wanted to go to Seattle – a *very* good trip. An hour after Carnahan had given Jojo the bell, the Sheraton called, angrily demanding to know where the businessman's cab was.

Carnahan immediately called Jojo on the radio. What he found out was that Jojo had gotten a flag from the Olympus Hotel – a seedy, fleabag dive downtown – and was in the process of delivering the man to a destination in Lakewood. He told Carnahan to not worry; that he'd pick up the businessman at the Sheraton *after* he finished, if he still felt like it.

Of course in the cab business that sort of thing is a strict no-no, and even dumb as he was, Jojo Mortimer knew it. He was just an arrogant young shit and figured his uncle would fix any problem he got into.

Carnahan was enraged. He sent another car to pick up the businessman, and he flatly refused to dispatch any more calls to Jojo, or to even speak to him, in person or on the radio.

Predictably, Jojo complained to his uncle, and when Carnahan came back to work on Monday night, he received a strongly worded note urging him to dispatch to Jojo, “or else.”

Carnahan ignored that note and several others that followed for the next few days. He continued to refuse to dispatch to Jojo on his shift. Several more days followed. Then just when it looked like Carnahan might succeed in banning Jojo from driving, another note appeared, telling him he would dispatch to him or be fired. To make sure Carnahan knew he was serious, Elmo had the swing-shift dispatcher, Rosie Glenn, deliver the note in person. Supposedly, if he refused, Rosie would tell him he was fired and then cover the shift.

Now, all of this was *very* awkward. Carnahan and Rosie were friends. He had trained her, way, way back when. And Rosie didn't even want to work a double that night, much less tell one of her best friends and mentor that he was fired. She pleaded with him to come to his senses and just dispatch to the little twerp.

So, when Carnahan agreed to bite the bullet, she was much relieved.

Sadly, the truce only lasted maybe five minutes, until Jojo called in on the radio.

Jojo sarcastically asked if Carnahan was done fucking around, because he'd like his big money trip now and please do hurry because his time was *very* important to him.

It was at that single moment when Carnahan snapped. He completely lost it.

Not only did Jojo not get his trip – *no one did* – because for the next twenty-five incredible minutes, Carnahan did a *monologue* over the radio. He went on a non-stop diatribe, raving about Jojo's shortcomings as a taxi driver, and a human being, as well as making some very salient comments and observations about Elmo and *his* shortcomings, as well as BlackTop's problems generally. On and on and on...

When he eventually wore down and stopped, Rosie and the phone people – as well as the mob of nosy cab drivers that had come to the office to watch – all gave him a standing ovation.

A crooked smile on his face, Carnahan bowed, then un-hooked the headset mic and walked out the door.

Jojo only lasted a couple weeks beyond that before Elmo took action. After begging and pleading with his sister and finally getting her agreement, he cheerfully fired Jojo – who later went to work at the Elephant Car Wash and found fame polishing hub caps.

But it was six months before Carnahan simmered down enough to come back, even after Elmo made him offers of more money.

He was BlackTop's best dispatcher, bar none. He could put out more calls per hour than anyone else. His knowledge of the county was unsurpassed. And the drivers loved him.

Someone was always saying, "You know, we really gotta do something nice for Carnahan..."

## **V. Calling all cars**

Smoke drifted from Carnahan's nostrils as he looked at the dispatch board, surveying the damage, trying to figure out the best way to dispatch the calls.

There were hooks over the number of each car on the dispatch board, and on each hook hung the tickets giving the address of every call dispatched to that car, with time-stamps on the ticket showing when the call was received, and when it was given out.

Below on the desk was a long, narrow metal board divided into sections that showed the different zones for the city, along with three slots for each zone – hired, vacant, and enroute. There were magnetic buttons for each car. When a car was given a call, the car's button was moved into the "hired" slot for the zone. When the driver called to say he had picked up the fare and was going, the button was moved to the "enroute" slot for the destination zone. The button was moved to the "vacant" slot when the driver called-in vacant after the trip was completed.

Carnahan intuitively knew how long it would take the different drivers to complete the different calls. Thus, by looking at the board, he could tell in a few brief moments what he could expect – how many cars he'd have available in any given area in the immediate future.

He was holding almost a hundred calls at the moment, and he had several good runs he needed to give out immediately. He studied the board and the calls.

He saw Marty Medina was going to Lakewood and would probably vacate sometime in the next few minutes.

Carnahan pushed down the mic pedal. “Car Two-two?” he said tersely.

Medina answered immediately, “Double deuce.” His voice sounded tinny over the speaker.

“How long?”

“I'll be vacant in about two minutes.”

Carnahan studied the ticket, and then quickly said, “Okay. Two-two, get one-one-five-one-six Holden Road Southwest.”

“Two-two copy.”

Carnahan pressed the pedal down as he time-stamped the ticket and hung it on Medina's hook. “Vacant cars calling?” he said in a strident tone. He moved Medina's button into the hired position for King County. The fare Medina was picking up was, unbeknownst to him, going to Seattle – which from Lakewood, was probably a seventy or eighty-dollar trip. Medina was a good driver, and Carnahan took care of the good drivers.

There were squeals of static and buzzing from the speaker as everyone tried to call-in at once. Carnahan heard what he thought was part of a number. “Car with a five...”

More squealing and buzzing noises, then, “...Forty-five.”

“Go ahead forty-five.

Dave Murphy dumped a large handful of tickets in front of him on the board.

“Car forty-five vacant fifty-six and S-T-dub.”

Carnahan looked at his calls. Forty-five was a newer driver, but he seemed to be working out well. He selected a run and then said, “Forty-five, get Barbie’s Brews and Cues for Richard.” The fare was going to Parkland – not a bad run.

“Four-five copy.”

“Next car,” he said quickly. He hung the time stamped ticket on forty-five’s hook, then moved the car’s button.

Out of the buzzing and squealing, Carnahan thought he heard Mack’s voice, and said, “Go ahead car sixty.”

“Sick-o’s vacant at Greyhound.”

Carnahan looked at the tickets. Mack was another good driver, so he’d give away his other Seattle call. “Car sick-o, get the tall one for the Sherman party.” The “tall one” was shorthand the drivers used, referring to the Sheraton Hotel – the tallest hotel in downtown Tacoma.

“Sick-o copy.”

Carnahan hung the ticket on the hook for car sixty, then said tersely, “Next car.” He moved the car’s button to the King County slot, along with Medina’s.

There was a blare of noise from the speaker, and he thought he heard the number ten.

“Car ten”

“Car ten’s going to SeaTac Airport.”

Carnahan moved ten's button to King County. Everyone's going north it seemed.

"Going... Next *vacant* car."

There was a blast of noise from the speaker, then "...twinkie eight."

"Twenty-eight."

"Two-eight's vacant Six and Pearl."

Eyes narrowed, Carnahan studied the tickets and his board. Twenty-eight was supposed to have been going to Lakewood – the exact opposite direction. He pressed the pedal, "Two-eight, you were going south – what happened?"

There was a blast of static, then "...changed his mind. I called but you couldn't hear me."

Carnahan shrugged, and then after glancing at the tickets, he selected one and said,

"Whatever. Call me approaching Nineteenth and Mildred."

"Two-eight copy."

Carnahan hung the ticket and moved the button. "Who's next?" he asked briskly.

There were squeals and buzzing from the speaker, then part of a number came through,

"...Three"

"Car with a three."

"Thirty-three."

"Go ahead thirty-three."

"Well, I got kinda a problem here..." The speaker went dead.

Carnahan waited for a few moments, and then asked impatiently, "Three-three, it's really busy here right now. Can this wait, sir?"

Thirty-three came back, "...just puked all over the back seat. He owes me fifteen bucks for the trip already, and now says he doesn't have any money. Can't pay for the trip or for cleaning up the mess. What shall I do?"

Laughing as he sat at the phone next to Carnahan, Murphy said, "Dump the fucker out and use 'em for a speed bump."

Nodding agreement, Carnahan chuckled, then serious, he pressed the mic pedal and said, "Three-three would you like me to call the police?"

"Can you?"

Smiling at Murphy, Carnahan spoke sternly into the headset mic, "Three-three, if the man won't pay you, the police *will* take him to jail. Just ask him if he'd like to go to jail, or find some money. And even if he goes to jail, he'll still have to pay you. That's the law. Pay you the fare plus twenty-five dollars for cleaning the cab. That's company policy. Either way you'll get paid."

There was a pause, and then thirty-three said, "He thinks maybe he can find the money."

"They always find the bucks when you call the cops," said Murphy, writing up a trip.

Carnahan nodded. "No shit they do." He pressed the mic pedal, and then said, "Okay thirty-three, you let me know what happens. If you need it, we can have the police there in about two minutes. Dave Murphy just talked to TPD and they're standing by to find out what happens. They have a car just down the street from you."

"Three-three copy. I'll let you know."

Shaking his head, Carnahan smiled and said, "Alright. Now, who's calling?"



## **VI. When vampires walked the earth**

Ralph Mack was white. Really and truly. He was the whitest, palest person ever seen. He almost looked like an albino – or perhaps a vampire, as people would sometimes wonder.

In his mid fifties, Ralph had been driving cab for the better part of the last thirty years. Ralph always drove at night, and it was a rare occasion that you'd ever see him somewhere in the daylight – all of which contributed to the vampire speculation.

He was about five foot six, skinny, and had gray hair, usually cut short, with a graying mustache. His lined, expressive face and baby blue eyes had a perpetual look of innocence. He was a quiet, mild mannered, likeable person, soft-spoken and never outwardly aggressive.

Like many of the other “professional” drivers, the customary pattern for Ralph was that he'd work at BlackTop until he did something nuts and got fired. Then after he got fired, he'd go drive for Army-Navy Cab until things quieted down. Usually he was gone for less than a year at a time. His longest single absence was a two-year stretch when he'd lost his driver's license in a child support dispute.

Ralph saw cab driving more as a lifestyle than a job. His usual and customary hangout was in the Tideflats, working the seedy bars along Puyallup Avenue and the merchant ships calling at the Port of Tacoma.

The Tideflats was the most cut-throat area in existence for Tacoma cab drivers. It was common knowledge that if you couldn't get to your fare within just a couple minutes after being dispatched, then you shouldn't even bother trying because someone else had already scooped you.

Ralph was one of the self-acknowledged kings of the Tideflats. He knew when each ship was due in, and if one of the mates needed to go to Seattle, Ralph would likely be there waiting

at the proper moment when the man walked down the gangway. In his off moments when he had nothing else going on, Ralph worked the bars and the hookers and the druggies and the drunks and whatever else came his way. He also scooped the other drivers mercilessly – but was always ready with a smile.

One night a group of drivers had gathered down at *Marilyn's*, a dive restaurant on Puyallup Avenue across from the train station, which coincidentally, was also known in the trade as the Eastside Driver's Lounge.

Ralph was feeling his liquor that night and uncharacteristically boasted to the other drivers, “Well nobody can ever scoop me, because I know all the short-cuts and all of the ways around. No one'll *never* scoop me.”

Dan Dinwiddie, also present, saw this as a challenge.

Dan and Ralph were good friends but Ralph's boasting rather grated on him, because he figured anyone – including Ralph – could be scooped if you tried hard enough. Dan thought it would be interesting to try out his theory, and at the same time, put Ralph back in his place – in a friendly sort of way.

The very next day, Dan got his chance. He'd been sitting at the train station for about an hour when the dispatcher came on the radio to tell Ralph he had a personal at the SeaLand Terminal.

Like lightning, Dan was off. As fast as he could, Dan drove to SeaLand. Ralph's fare, a crewman off one of the Alaska ships, the *SeaLand Anchorage*, was waiting at the gate of the terminal. Dan stopped his car by the guard shack and the crewman got in the back seat.

“Hey, you're not Ralph Mack,” said the man as he closed the door. “Where's Ralph Mack?”

“I have no idea, sir,” said Dan, politely. “I think they sent me because he was on another call. Do you want this cab or not?”

Looking thoughtful, the man shrugged and then said, “Well yeah, I s’pose, if he’s not around. I really don’t have time to wait.” He settled back in the seat, and then went on, “Okay, I need to go to the union hall up in Seattle, then return here. Do you know where that is?”

Dan did indeed know where the union hall was in Seattle. And a round trip up there would run well over one hundred dollars.

Dan also knew Ralph was coming to pick the man up so he stalled around for as long as he could, talking with the man as he slowly drove up East Eleventh towards Portland Avenue and the freeway. He wanted Ralph to know who had scooped him.

Just as he was getting ready to turn left onto Portland Avenue, Ralph pulled up at the corner coming the other way. Dan turned the corner and cruised by very slowly making sure Ralph could see who he had in his car.

Ralph freaked.

Dan had a scanner, and a few moments later he heard as Ralph called the dispatcher, complaining, “Hey, Dan just picked up my personal. Ya gotta do something!”

The dispatcher responded mildly, “Oh, c’mon, I don’t think Dan’d do that.”

Ralph came back in a whining tone, “But I *know* it was my fare. I saw him. They just drove right by me.”

Interested now, the dispatcher called Dan, and asked, “Dan, did you pick up Ralph’s personal?”

Holding the microphone, Dan told the dispatcher, “You gotta be kidding! See how rumors get started! Nobody could *ever* scoop Ralph! He’s way too fast! And if you don’t believe me, you ask him!”

There was a fit of laughter from the dispatcher over the radio, then silence. The matter was dropped.

Dan let Ralph twist in the wind for several days, then gave him the money from the fare – *almost \$120*. It was quite a while before Ralph boasted about being un-scoopable again.

## **VII. Mack the knife**

The man was standing in front of the tavern near the street corner, leaning unsteadily, draped against a mailbox when Mack pulled up. The lights in the bar were off and the blinds were pulled, which figured because it was now well after closing time.

Mack surveyed the scene with disgust. He hated drunks with a cold passion.

A veteran driver, Mackenzie Campner was nearly fifty years old. He was about medium height and skinny, with short gray-blond hair and a bushy beard and piercing blue eyes, that occasionally seemed to twinkle when he smiled. In his former life, pre-BlackTop, he’d been a truck driver. He had, he said, gotten bored with truck driving and started driving cab just to hold him over for a few months. That was six years ago.

Like nearly all the drivers, Mack complained incessantly about the conditions at BlackTop and was always on the verge of “getting into something else.” Still, like most everyone else, he never quite managed to follow through and find a different job. One thing different from most of the others though, was the reason Mack stayed: underneath it all, he really and truly loved being a cabbie. He figured it was his true calling in life.

Sadly, his former wife hadn't shared this love – she was deathly afraid of him being away at night, and deathly afraid of him being a cab driver, in general. She nagged and complained and nagged and complained about this over and over and over until eventually, they split up. After the split, she moved in with a Polish weightlifter that worked as a ladies shoes salesman, days at the Mall. She started clipping coupons and was happy at last.

Mack had been living by himself now for almost two years. He'd felt much better after she left, too – finally he could concentrate on his work without her gawdawful, incessant nagging. Unfettered at last, he strived hard to maintain the proper stereotype persona – or at least what he figured should be a proper persona for a cabbie.

In Mack's mind, the fares were nothing more than birds ripe for the plucking, and placed there solely to insure his own economic solvency. He figured transporting people from point A to point B was merely an incidental, *minor* part of his real job – which was of course, separating the marks from their money.

Quite broad-minded, Mack also included other cab drivers as part of his economic domain. He gleefully welcomed any contributions – albeit mostly involuntary and quite often unknowing – which the other drivers might make.

And while he wasn't above rolling an occasional drunk – which as a class he detested and despised – he usually drew the line only at preying on people who didn't offer a sporting chance. To Mack, the game was everything and if a person was too stupid to play, Mack generally retired from the game and treated them deferentially, as befitted their status as non-combatants.

For their part, the other drivers mostly looked up to Mack as their leader – even though he frequently exploited them. Mack cherished this role and undertook the job with great relish.

Mack looked at the man, who was still leaning propped over the mailbox, swaying drunkenly.

Reluctantly, Mack pushed aside his disgust and revulsion of drunks, and called out to the man, “Hey you!”

After a couple moments, the man turned his face towards Mack.

Frowning, Mack called out loudly, “Yeah, you. Who the hell you think I was talking to, ya fucking dipshit? You call a cab?”

The man hesitated, looking uncertain, then recognition finally dawning, he answered drunkenly, “Yesh...it was I.” He continued to stand draped over the mailbox, staring vaguely in the direction of Mack’s cab.

Mack shook his head. He really and truly hated drunks with a passion, and this guy was *very* drunk – it looked like the man was just barely functional.

He waited a few more moments while thinking seriously about calling the trip in as a no-good, but then yelled at the drunk angrily, “Well if you called the fucking cab, then maybe you better get in right now or I’m leaving. You got about ten seconds, Einstein.”

Finally aware of what he was supposed to do, the drunk reluctantly let go of the mailbox and bobbing and weaving, walked unsteadily around the side of the car. Eventually, he navigated his way into the passenger seat.

Mack could smell him as he got in – stale beer and cigarettes.

The drunk fumbled with the door and finally got it closed.

The drunk was a big man, maybe six foot three and well over two hundred pounds. He was dressed like a laborer, in jeans and a blue denim work shirt, stained with grease around the front. He had to be in his mid-forties, thought Mack, as he sized him up. He had rough-looking

hands – large hands, with grease under the fingernails. Maybe a mechanic at a truck stop or something. And totally and completely plastered, just on the verge of passing out. The drunk lay back in the seat and closed his eyes.

For a second, Mack thought the guy might have passed out, and shouted, “Hey! Hey you! Where the fuck you want me to take you? Hey! Wake up, goddammit!” Mack grabbed his arm and shook him roughly.

Having a drunk pass out in your car was a real pain. Sometimes they could be pretty difficult to get rid of. And if this guy passed out, Mack thought, he was way too big to drag out by himself. He shook him again.

The drunk’s eyes fluttered, and then he mumbled something.

Mack shouted in his face, “Hey! Where do you want me to take you?”

More alert now, the drunk narrowed his eyes for a moment, then smiling, slurred, “How ‘bout home?” He smiled broadly, pleased with his display of wit.

Eyes narrowed, Mack screamed at him, “*You fucking moron!* I don’t know where you live. What’s your goddamn fucking address?”

The drunk lowered his eyes for a moment, and then said slowly, “Uh, ...it’s twenty-four forty-three North Baltimore.”

Mack thought for a moment. From where they were at the tavern, it’d probably be twelve dollars or so to that address. But then another thought passed his mind, and he grinned wickedly, and said, “Okay, look. I want twenty-five dollars up-front to take you there. Pay up or we’re not gonna move.”

The drunk looked indignant. “Hey, whas this? You don’ trus’ me ta pay? I got lots a money!” His eyes were almost closed again.

Sneering, Mack said, “Look, asshole. I’m gonna push your smelly fucking ass back onto the sidewalk and you can sleep there tonight unless I get some bucks. You wanna ride home in a cab, it’s gonna take twenty-five bucks up-front to get moving. Now you gonna pay-up or what?”

Moving slowly, the drunk pulled a large wad of money out of his hip pocket and then shoved two bills at Mack.

Mack grabbed the bills – twenties he saw – and quickly stuffed them in his shirt pocket. “Now that’s more like it,” he said, turning the meter on. He put the car in gear, moving off. A broad grin lit his entire face.

The drunk rolled his eyes and finally passed out, fortunately for Mack, while leaning against the door.

An hour and a half later, Mack had finished breakfast and when he got back to the car, he saw the drunk was still sleeping. The meter was up to one hundred and thirteen dollars.

He’d driven around aimlessly for the first half hour or so, and he’d then done a blood run from Tacoma General to St Clare hospital in Lakewood before deciding to go get a bite to eat – at his favorite restaurant in Kent.

From Kent, he decided to check and see if his brother who lived in Everett was home from work – he worked a night shift at Boeing. As it turned out, his brother wasn’t home yet so he left a note saying he’d be over later to collect the money he was owed. The drunk continued to snore.

It was nearly time to start getting light when Mack finally pulled into the drunk’s own driveway.



Mack put the car in park, and then after hesitating for a moment, with great distaste, he reached over and shook the man violently. “Hey, asshole! *Asshole!* You’re home! Wakee wakee!” he screamed maliciously in the man’s ear, and then shook him some more.

The man mumbled something and tried to hide his head.

Mack shook him again and screamed, “C’mon goddammit! You’re home, motherfucker! H-O-M-E Now pay me my fucking money and get your stinkin’ ass outa my cab!”

The man mumbled again and struggled to sit up, blinking his eyes and rubbing his face with his hands.

“You gotta pay me my money!” Mack said a little softer, now that the man was awake.

The drunk shook his head as if trying to clear the cobwebs, then said thickly, “Huh... I... Uh...oh my God.” His whole body shook, as if in a convulsion, and then he opened his eyes again, and after clearing his throat, asked thickly, “...uh, whada I owe ya?”

Lips pursed, Mack tapped his finger on the meter. It read \$314.70.

After staring for a few moments, the drunk finally focused on the meter, and then obviously in shock, exclaimed, “*Three hundred and fourteen dollars?* What the fuck?”

Eyes narrowed, Mack shouted angrily, “Hey, what the fuck is this? You hired me, asshole! I went where you told me, now you’re gonna pay the fare or you’ll be doing time, goddammit!”

The drunk stammered, “But...but...how did I...?”

Mack cut him off. “I don’t give a flying fuck what. You’re gonna pay the goddamn fare or we’re calling the cops!” He picked up the microphone from its bracket on the dash and held it close to his lips.

The drunk looked worried. “No cops, please ”

“Then pay me!”

The drunk hesitated for a moment, then dug in his pocket and pulled out a large wad of bills. After several moments, his hands shaking badly, he counted out three hundred and fifteen dollars and passed it to Mack.

Mack counted out the bills quickly, and then glaring, eyes narrowed, he shouted, “*What? No tip! You chiseling cocksucker! What about my goddamn tip?*”

Looking shocked, the drunk pulled a twenty from his wad and trembling, handed it across to Mack.

Still glaring at him, Mack took the bill and looked at it. “A twenty? *You cheap sonofabitch!* Oh, great! Now I can send my kids to college.” He hesitated for a moment, and then continued, “Aw, go on. Get the fuck outa here. Your stink is making me feel like I wanna puke.”

Relieved, the drunk fumbled with the door handle and managed to get out, and went wobbling across the wet grass towards his house.

Whistling to himself, Mack smiled as he reached across the car and slammed the passenger door, and then put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway.

### **VIII. Service is our goal**

Marty Medina was an ex-athlete gone to seed, the paunch of middle age starting to replace the flat stomach. In his late thirties, the remnants of healthy muscles were now turning to flab, and hung loosely on Medina's large frame. Nearly six feet tall, Medina had an olive complexion, and although he was out of shape, he still moved lightly on his feet, with an athlete's grace.

His clean-shaven face was round, with large, expressive brown eyes, framed by shoulder-length straight, black hair, cut in a shag style, longer in back than on the sides. He had a prominent nose, slightly crooked, as if it had been broken and not properly reset.

Medina was very careful with his hands, and he got a manicure at least once a week. Above all, he considered himself a guitarist – he still had ambitions of making it *big* someday – and at the annual company picnic thrown by Dan Dinwiddie, he would always be found off in a corner playing his guitar, usually with several ladies making moon-eyes at him.

Ladies were indeed his weakness and as a result, he often ended up wasting a lot of time and money to pursue some romantic interest or other. Even so, it didn't really bother him. The time he wasted and the money he failed to make were his own. If he wanted to spend several hours giving out Hershey Kisses to all the hookers on Christmas Eve, or doing their errands or whatever, that was his business.

Every now and then, his business would intersect that of the ladies. He had his favorites among the girls that worked downtown, and when the occasion arose, he'd steer some business their way. That was as he reasoned, what cab drivers did. Ethics or legalities didn't enter into it. He saw himself more as a mother hen figure than as a pimp.

He'd been at BlackTop now for about three years.

For a period of years after he got out of high school, Medina had played in a bunch of bands around the San Francisco Bay area, and at one point, actually did come pretty close to making it big. After a falling out with his last band – where he'd actually ended up as their manager – disgusted with music and musicians, Medina turned his back on music. Since then, after a brief interval in college, he'd been in sales, mostly. His talents ran the gamut from selling

rodeo tickets for crippled children over the phone, to flogging decrepit wrecks that could barely run for *Honest Al's Used Cars*. The car lot had been his home for over five years.

Al's motto, hanging on a big sign over the entrance of the lot had read, *Quality Service is Our Goal*. Marty and the other salesmen used to joke privately that the only service it referred to was what Al forced on unwary female customers – Al was particularly well endowed and he liked to share this good fortune with any female who was willing – and many who were not.

Marty hadn't really approved of Al's methods, and that as well as a good looking blonde and some other factors contributed heavily towards Marty's move to BlackTop. Al had been romancing the blonde in the back of a VW Vanagon that needed CV joints and new rings. Marty had unwittingly rescued her from Al's attentions.

He'd been about to take a picture of the van for the *Photo Auto Trader* magazine when he noticed it rocking and heard noises. Camera in hand, he'd opened the sliding door expecting to find a couple of teenagers going at it. Instead, he found Al and the blonde in a state of undress, the lady with her panties down around her ankles, and her broad backside upturned as she bent forward over the folding table. Al was poised in back of her, in *flagrant delicto*, trying to do his worst.

As they stared out at Marty, shocked expressions on their faces, Marty's bad luck continued and the flash on the camera somehow fired. The blonde started screaming as Marty slammed the door shut and ran off towards the sales office.

Although he hadn't actually taken a picture, he was never able to convince Al, who figured Marty was trying to blackmail him.

For a month or so, Al had nightmares about blackmail, deathly afraid that Marty would send the non-existent picture to his wife. And while Marty vehemently denied any interest in blackmail, he didn't turn down the '89 Caddy when Al offered it to him.

After he accepted the Caddy, things really went downhill at the car lot. Al became morose, withdrawn and paranoid, afraid of what he imagined Marty would want next. The final straw was when Al started carrying a gun – just in case someone tried to stick them up, he said. And so, they soon ended up parting ways.

If Medina sold someone a beater Pontiac that would throw a rod before it went ten miles; if he sold someone tickets for a non-existent rodeo to benefit non-existent crippled kids; if he took someone twenty miles out of the way to boost their cab fare, it was all the same to Medina. When people did business with him, they were buying Marty Medina and that was just the price of doing business with him. He was the *best* – just ask him, he'd tell you – and you always pay more for the best.

Now all this said, Medina was also subject to random fits of nobility and honesty, often at the strangest, most inopportune times. In addition, he had a well-developed if somewhat underutilized sense of fairness that plagued him occasionally. Topping off this mass of contradictions was a compassionate, caring soul that longed to fight injustice, and to protect the weak and infirm.

As Mack frequently observed, Medina was one sick puppy.

## **IX. Chivalry abounds**

Marty Medina was driving slowly up Pacific Avenue, at “trolling speed” as he called it, when his trainee, Wick exclaimed, “Hey, look! Over there by the Jack in the Box. Someone's flagging us down. A broad. Nice looking, too.”

Medina moved the Dodge Diplomat over to the curb lane and signaled a turn, and then pulled into the parking lot at the Jack in the Box. The lady moved towards them at a jog. As she got closer, Medina saw it was Dora, one of the regular girls who worked the area.

Dora was in her mid thirties and still looked good. She hadn't ruined herself yet – like many of the other, older whores. She was about five-five and slim, with great legs. She was wearing a black miniskirt with low heels, and a tight, Nile green-colored satin blouse which was cut low, showing off her sumptuous breasts. Her round face was framed by flaming red hair cut short, almost severely short.

“Marty! Jesus lord, am I glad to see you. You gotta get me outa here.” She slowed down as she neared the car, and looked in back of her, and went on, “This freak was following me. I think he was vice. He had this badge.” She stopped by the door, and for the first time noticed Wick. She frowned, and asked, “You got a fare?”

Medina shook his head. “Naw, like this is a trainee, David Wick.” Turning to Wick, he said, “Dave, may I present Dora? One of our proud working girls.” Looking back at Dora, he went on, “Go ahead dear, get in back.”

Bent over, standing with her head in Medina's window, Dora smiled at Wick. “Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,” she said very formally. Then she turned and opened the back door, and climbed in the back seat.

As soon as she slammed the door, Medina turned the car around and turned left onto Pacific. Glancing back at her, he asked, “Shall I like take you down by the Valley Motel or something?”

She nodded. “That'd be great.” She dug in her small purse and found a cigarette, which she lit. Blowing out a long plume of smoke, she asked, “Say, have you seen Ashley tonight?”

Turning right onto Puyallup Avenue, Medina shook his head. “Uh uh. Haven't seen him all week. Why?”

She draped herself over the back of the seat in-between Medina and Wick, and said, “I'm kinda worried about him. There's a whole lot a vice around tonight. Got these two guys in a little blue truck with a camper on the back. According to Alfred, they been picking up girls all night – and none a those girls a come here back on the street, at least yet. Eva, Doris, Phyllis Mae and a bunch of others. I think it's a sting like they did a few months ago.”

Medina looked at her in the mirror. “Eva?”

She nodded, reaching over to the window to knock the ash off her cigarette. “Yeah, that's what Alfred said.”

“Like I thought she went back to East St Louis to like visit her family?”

“Yeah. But she got back here a couple weeks ago.”

“Huh. Didn't even know she was back.” Medina paused for a moment, then asked, “Hey! You see Hazel around, man?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Not tonight. Why?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. It just that it's been a few days since I seen her. Kinda worried. You heard that Lockjaw was still after her?”

She nodded, blowing a plume of smoke against the windshield. “That porch monkey goes near that white girl he's gonna get his wiener chopped off. And Hazel's just crazy enough to do it, too.”

She looked over at Wick who was silently following their conversation and said, “Lockjaw got it into his head that he's in love with Hazel. He's a pimp junior, a wannabe. Hazel can't stand him.” Turning to Medina, she added, “And no wonder ‘cause it's for sure he ain't exactly what you'd call a winner. Me, I wouldn't let him catch my crap in his mouth.” Back to Wick, she went on, “One day about two weeks ago, they're all high on rock and he starts beating on Hazel. Gonna finish her off, 'cause if he can't have her, then no one can, he reckons. He gets this car and has China drive, while he puts Hazel on the floor of the back seat. Tells her he'll kill her if she moves. Got some rope and a shovel in the trunk. Gonna take Hazel out in the woods, off her, then bury her body.” Dora took another hit from her cigarette, and then went on, “They get all the way down by Twenty-Fourth and Pacific and the car runs out of gas. You believe that? Hazel just freaked. She starts fighting with him, and he stabs her in the leg with this little pocketknife, but she managed to get out of the car and run inside the Texaco station. Lord Almighty God, she was lucky!”

Eyes narrowed, Wick asked, “The guy was really gonna kill her?”

Dora nodded. “Oh, yeah. Lockjaw's one crazy nigger.”

Medina spoke. “But like you didn't tell him the best part.”

“Huh?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Like what Hazel's carrying, now.” Medina pulled into the lot in back of the Valley Tavern and stopped, putting the car in park.



Dora smiled broadly. “Oh yeah.” She turned to Wick. “Well you see, after all this comes down, Hazel decides she needs some protection. She spends two three days going around trying to find someone that'd sell her a gun. Problem was every time she'd find someone with a gun, it'd be right after she scored some rock or something – she never was able to find a person who had a gun and have enough money to buy one at the same time. A couple days of this, and she was going nuts.” Reaching back to the window, she tapped the ash off her cigarette and then took another hit. Blowing out the smoke, she continued, “I mean she was right – she does need some protection. If Lockjaw ever does find her again, she's a goner unless she can get him first. But anyway, like I was saying, she got all browned off 'cause she couldn't get a gun.”

Wick eyed Dora's cleavage. “So what'd she do?”

Dora grinned. “Well, like I told ya honey, she was getting pretty desperate. She's been going through all this stuff for a couple days. So finally, she says ‘screw it,’ walks into this department store at the mall and shoplifts the biggest, nastiest electric carving knife they had!” Dora cracked up.

Medina broke out laughing as well, and said, “And so like here she is on the street, and she's got this big purse, right? Like she'll be standing there, and all of a sudden, she pulls this humongous knife out, and starts waving it around, yelling about what she's gonna do to Lockjaw when she sees him. Like this foot-long electric carving knife. And man, she's waving it in the air, and it's going, 'whirr, whirr, whirr.' Oh, Jesus.”

Wick didn't seem to think it was quite as funny as Dora and Medina did. Maybe you had to be there, Medina thought.

Still laughing, Dora sighed and said, “She's one stoned crazy 'ho.”

Carnahan's voice came over the radio. “Car twenty-two.”

Medina picked up the mic and responded, “Double deuce.”

“Double deuce, get the Twenty-Fourth Street Tavern for Gary.”

Medina keyed the mic. “Like is that a male Gary, a female Gary, or an indeterminate Gary?”

Carnahan’s braying laugh came over the speaker, and then he finally answered, “Yeah, right. You let me know when you find out, huh?”

“Two-two copy.” He hung the mic up.

Medina looked back at Dora. “Well, lady, it's been real.”

She smiled and leaning forward, kissed his cheek. “Thanks for the ride, Marty. Have a good night, huh?”

“You too, lady. Be safe.”

She smiled. “I will.” Opening the door, she turned to Wick and smiled. “Nice meeting you, honey. See you around?”

Wick nodded. “You bet.”

“Bye bye.” She slammed the door and undulated off towards the tavern.

Medina turned to Wick. “She's something else, huh?”

Wick nodded, looking thoughtful. “I wouldn't mind that.”

Medina smiled. “Maybe so. But for damn sure, I'd want a full-body prophylactic.”

They laughed, and then he said, “C'mon, let's go over to the Twenty-Fourth Street.”

“It's a fag bar?”

He nodded. “Finest kind.”

## **X. A Gathering Of The Forces**

Phil's Saloon was catty corner across the street from BlackTop Cab.

Built just before the turn of the century, Phil's was one of the oldest buildings in the area. Originally called *La Casa Felice dell' Ubriaco*, which translated loosely as "The House of the Good Drunk," it was built to cash in on the growing Italian community on McKinley Hill.

Through the years, ownership of the bar had been passed down the Rossini family, till when in the fifties, no Rossini heir could be found that wanted to continue the tavern. Thus, it was sold to an erstwhile shipyard worker come restaurateur named Phil Syzmanski.

The Rossini family had really let the place go in the last few years. What started out as a cheery place where Italian laborers could knock back a few glasses of vino in an atmosphere reminiscent of their hometowns of Napoli or Ravenna had, by the time Phil got a hold of it, degenerated into a dingy hangout for bums and winos.

Phil fixed the place up. He scrubbed off years of grime and crud, opened up previously boarded-shut windows, and applied some new paint. The useable remnants of the Italian motif decorations were dusted off and left in place, the rest tossed out. And thus the transition was made to Phil's Saloon – a bright cheery place where the shipyard workers could come for a drink.

After tending bar for the better part of twenty years, Phil retired in his late seventies and turned the bar over to his nephew, one Harold Lemoyne – a mostly absentee landlord with a predilection for fast women and cocaine. In the short space of about five years, the place once again descended into a haven for bums and winos.

The BlackTop drivers fit right in.

Many drivers came over to have a few drinks after the end of their shifts, because the place was so conveniently located. And then for that matter, some also came over for a few

drinks *before* their shifts. The place opened up at 6:00 AM and closed at 2:00 AM. It was *perfect*.

Just inside the door on the right were four booths, old high-backed wooden booths with dark-stained wood. Across from the booths to the left was the bar, which took up the center of the room. The bar looked like it might have been shipped over from Italy – it had an ornate hand-carved hardwood top with a brass foot-rail, and with big heavy oak barstools with leather-padded tops. The bar was U-shaped, with beer taps on both main sides. The coolers were built into the wall at the end.

On the far side of the bar in the back of the room were tables and then along the rear wall, another row of four booths, along with doors to the restrooms. The place was dimly lit, and reeked of stale beer and cigarettes – and frequently of urine or puke, the smells of which wafted out from the restrooms. The tables were almost always sticky – but you could never really be sure with what.

Mack and Medina had commandeered a group of tables in the back and were getting pretty wasted. They'd both come in right when the bar opened, and Mack was buying rounds, feeling expansive after having what he figured was a *very* good night.

As the morning progressed, a number of other night drivers as well as some other BlackTop employees filtered in.

Johnny Avalon and Bobby O'Dea came in. So did Darnell Jones, Hughie Wilson and Whitey Jorgen and Robert Ransoon and Dewey Mitchell. They were regulars at the '*Morning Tea*' as they all called it, and almost always stopped over for a few cool ones after turning in their cars.

Bobby Wood made it and he hardly ever came over in the morning. So did Dave Murphy and another of the phone people, a young lady named Martina Gustafson who had a second job as a telephone psychic with the *Psychic Friends Network*.

Everyone, it seemed, had had a really great night and wanted to celebrate and had picked Phil's as the place to go.

By 7:00 AM, Mack and Medina really were getting pretty blasted. The others weren't far behind.

As usual, once they'd downed a few drinks, the conversation had quickly degenerated into a recital of the problems at BlackTop, along with a heated discussion of what they'd all like to do to make things right. Chief on the list of problems were the shitty, broken-down cars and the *asshole mechanics* that kept them that way.

The standard bitch was that if you took a car in for a broken windshield wiper, the mechanics would thoroughly screw it up and they'd end up having to deadline the car for a blown main-bearing or something.

To make the morning more interesting, Evil Justin, BlackTop's lead mechanic, was also in the bar downing a few beers before the start of his shift.

His presence had been bugging Mack to no end, and the more that Mack drank, the more aggressive he became, and the louder he spoke about how *fucked-up* the mechanics all were.

Evil Justin was a sour, angry, bitter and petty person. He loved to scream and berate and bully the drivers for no reason at all. He made a real sport of it, actually.

He had come by his name honestly. Early in his career, there had been a time where there were two mechanics at BlackTop named Justin, and so given his disposition, it was only

natural that he be called Evil Justin and the other was called Good Justin. The names fit extraordinarily well.

Evil Justin was in his early thirties. He was lean and thin, and had a haggard look with mean and spiteful little eyes, set narrow on his face. He had long, straight brown hair, usually tied back in a ponytail, along with a full beard and mustache – the effect of which made him look a little like a biker. All which would have been great except he was way too short to be a biker – maybe five foot six or so.

He'd mostly worked at wrecking yards before coming to BlackTop. He'd started out at BlackTop a number of years ago at the bottom doing oil changes and replacing windshield wipers. The garage paid only minimum wage so there was heavy attrition, and thusly, Evil Justin quickly rose through the ranks to become the head mechanic.

Evil Justin lived solely to take out his pain, frustration and anger on others – mainly the drivers.

When he wanted to be, he was a reasonably competent mechanic, so Elmo protected him. Plus, their management styles were quite similar – they were both arrogant bullies that lived to intimidate and belittle everyone they came in contact with. The only real difference was where Elmo was sneakier and underhanded, Evil Justin was more direct and to the point. And he really and truly loved to scream.

Evil Justin was the one responsible for the scrawled legend painted on the door of the shop, "*No Drivers Allowed!*" then along with smaller letters painted below, it said, "*This means you, asshole!*"

Any driver disregarding the words would bear the full force of his wrath.

At BlackTop, Evil Justin found an ideal home. The place was made for him.

“Fucking junkyard dog,” said Mack, blowing out a long plume of blue smoke. He took another healthy swig of *Old Tennessee* bourbon – which by consensus was the crowd’s favorite libation. Gasping a little after he swallowed the fiery liquid, Mack looked over at Evil Justin, and went on, “That’s all the fucker’s good for. Ain’t no kinda mechanic.”

The more Mack drank, the more he wanted to have it out with Evil Justin. In the past few minutes, his comments had been getting very loud, and it would have been impossible for Evil Justin to have not heard.

Dewey Mitchell, sitting to his right, agreed. “Sonofabitch ain’t good enough to be a goddamn junkyard dog.” He pulled a comb from his pocket and ran it through his close-cropped black hair, all the while, wondering who it was the guys were talking about.

“Did I ever tell you what we did to this guy at Oliver Taxi, once?” asked Bobby Wood. A long ash tipped off his cigarette into his drink while he looked at Mack expectantly, smiling his toothless grin, staring out of his Coke bottle glasses.

Mack smiled drunkenly, and then asked, “Naw, what’d you guys do?”

Another ash fell off into his drink, and then Bobby said, “Well, this guy was the shittiest mechanic I ever seen. I mean you ain’t *never* seen nobody this bad. Why you’d take the car in for an oil change, then three days later, you’d get it back and it wouldn’t run – every time. So finally, we get fed up with ‘em fuckin’ up our cars and we decided to get even. You know what we did?”

Whitey Jorgen broke in, “I was there, too, you old fool.” He turned to Mack and went on, “We chained the back of his truck to a goddamn phone pole. The asshole took off, burning rubber, like usual, and he pulled the whole back axel off!”

Bobby Wood slapped the table, laughing, and then said, “You shoulda seen the look on the asshole’s face! Oh, we fixed that fucker so good!”

Everyone stole looks at Evil Justin, who was now downing the last of his beer.

“The cocksucker’s leaving,” said Bobby O’Dea. “Here he comes.”

Eyes straight forward, Evil Justin walked towards the door, trying to ignore the group.

Mack called out to him, “Hey Justin! Down enough beer so your hands won’t shake when you pick up a wrench?”

Evil Justin stopped and glared at Mack.

Mack continued, “Hold on, silly me, I forgot. Why the hell would you ever pick up a wrench? It’s much easier to scratch your asshole with your fingers, isn’t it?”

Medina giggled drunkenly. The rest of the group at the table held their collective breaths, waiting for the explosion.

Evil Justin gave Mack a withering gaze. Then with a thin smile, he said slowly, “You drive car sixty, right? I know you do. I remember now. I just seen a write-up on it. Had a noise in the engine I think. I’ll have to call it in for service, today. This is gonna take quite a while to fix. Maybe two-three weeks.”

In a matter of only several seconds, Mack’s face went through several distinct changes, first registering shock, then incredulity and finally, it twisted with rage. “You fucker!” He said thickly. “There’s nothing wrong with that car and you know it. You leave it the fuck alone!”

Evil Justin smirked. “Nope. I’m certain of it. Sixty’s off the road. I’ll write it out of service as soon as I get to the shop. Don’t worry Mack, I’ll see you get a loaner. I got a special one just for you. Car *thirty-one*.” Evil Justin smiled malevolently.



Now all of the loaner cars were pretty scary. Without regularly assigned drivers, the loaners were never well maintained – they were all pretty much thoroughly thrashed. But among the loaners, car thirty-one was something of a legend at BlackTop.

The oldest car in the fleet, it had well over a million miles on it. The main bearings had been going out for quite a long time – all while making a tremendous racket that never failed to frighten the customers. But somehow, the car wouldn't die. The interior was completely thrashed, icky black grunge that was impossible to remove covering what was left of the upholstery. The car smelled of stale urine and puke. Sometimes the trunk wouldn't close completely. Several of the body panels were loose, held on with baling wire. It was a wreck with wheels.

Wide eyed, Mack shook his head. “You can't do that to me!”

Evil Justin sneered. “Whadayamean, you moron? I just did!”

Mack stood up quickly and faced Evil Justin. “*You sonofabitch!*” He screamed. “I want you outside, *now!*”

“Kiss my ass!” Sneered Evil Justin, standing his ground, looking Mack dead in the eye.

Medina moved quickly and managed to grab Mack just as he swung at Evil Justin.

Dewey Mitchell and Robert Ransoon followed suit, grabbing his arms. Mack struggled to get away.

Medina was pretty big, but Ransoon was bigger. And Dewey was even bigger yet – an ex-boxer who was six-foot five, and weighed over three hundred pounds. With the three of them holding him, Mack didn't have a chance. He stood struggling, trying in vain to break loose.

“*Lemme go you assholes!* Goddammit, I'm gonna kill this sonofabitch!” he screamed, twisting back and forth, trying to get free. The three held on tighter.

Evil Justin narrowed his eyes and smirked. “May be a couple months before I can get to car sixty. I’m sure you’ll be real comfy in thirty-one.”

Shaking with rage, Mack struggled to get free, and when he couldn’t, he finally hawked a big gob of spit at Evil Justin, hitting him in the face.

Still staring at Mack, Evil Justin calmly wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt, and then without saying anything more, he left.

The drivers released Mack as soon as Evil Justin passed through the door.

Breathing heavily, Mack shook his head, and then sat back down, grabbing his drink, and took a big chug of *Old Tennessee*.

Ransoon picked up his Indiana Jones hat from where it had fallen on the floor, and then sat heavily down, reaching for his drink.

Bobby Wood and Whitey Jorgen sat shaking their heads, sipping their drinks. Dave Murphy went back to talking with Martina Gustafson about her work as a psychic. He had a growing suspicion that if he could keep the conversation running long enough, he might have company in his bed this morning. Dewey Mitchell sat down and combed his short hair again, and then drained the rest of his coke, all while wondering why everyone was so excited. Pleased the interruption was over, Jonesy and Hughie and Bobby O’Dea resumed their argument about last night’s Mariner’s game.

Trying not to laugh as he sat down, Medina said, “Man, like I guess you showed him, Mack.”

“That fucker!” said Mack, still fuming. “I’ll talk to Dan. He can’t do this shit to me.”

“Right as rain, Mack,” said Medina, trying to suppress a giggle as he swallowed the last of his drink, nearly choking in the process.

Ransoon adjusted the brim of his hat, and said, “We’ll do it just like Bobby Woods said. We’ll chain the back end of his car to a pole. We’ll show the sonofabitch he can’t fuck with us!”

Mack nodded, his eyes narrowed, focusing on his drink. “Serve the fucker right.” He looked up, and noticing that most everyone’s glasses were getting low, he called out to the bartender, “Hey Joey! Can we get another round here? We’re dying of thirst!”

Martina left abruptly for the ladies room, and since she was gone, Murphy focused back on the group for almost the first time in the whole morning. He decided to drop his own bombshell.

Looking over at Mack, he said, “Hey, did you hear Lucy and Carnahan split up?”

Glad for the diversion, Mack seized on the thought and said, “Huh. That’s too bad. I been hearing rumors for the past couple weeks. But that’s what he gets for shacking-up with a lady twenty years younger than him. Can’t expect a lady like Lucy to stay too long.”

Medina butted in. “Bullshit. Age don’t mean diddley! Nothing at all a matter with younger ladies. Man, like you shoulda seen this hooker I had in my cab the other night. I bet ya she was ten-twenty years younger than me if she was a day, and probably the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. I’d a sold my soul for that. We coulda made sweet music for like years and years!”

Ignoring the interruption, Murphy went on, “He’s pretty broken up by it. Nothing obvious, but you could tell.”

Mack frowned. “That’s shitty as hell.”

Hughie asked, “You sure it’s over between them?”

Murphy nodded. “One hundred percent sure. Yeah, he really loved her. It’s gonna take him a while to get over it.”

Jonesy added, “Women! Thank fuckin’ Christ I’m divorced...”

Dewey, who had been following the conversation intently, now frowned and said, “Jeeze, that’s too bad. I wish there was sumpin we could do for ‘im – kinda like help him over it.” Still frowning, he stared off into space. He idolized Carnahan and the thought that Carnahan was in trouble really scared him.

After draining his electric iced tea, Ransoon asked Medina, “If this hooker was so beautiful and you wanted her so bad, whyn’t you just date her?”

Medina shook his head. “Naw, she was class, man. Like way outa my league. You know what she wanted for a head job? I asked. Two hundred bucks! You believe that shit? Man, two hundred goddamn bucks for a blow job.”

“You got money,” said Johnny Avalon. “Why the hell didn’t ya pay her if you’re that much in love with her? I woulda did it.”

Staring dreamily off into space, Medina said, “I should have, ya know. I fucking A should have. God she was so sweet. Looked twenty-one if a day. Long black hair, parted in the middle. Great figure with big tits, long legs, and a face that wouldn’t quit. Exotic as all hell. Kinda Chinese with a little Mexican thrown in, nice brown skin, but with these great big slanty, green, eyes! God she was beautiful!”

The drinks arrived and after paying the bartender, Mack sat studying his drink while the others continued to talk about Medina’s hooker. After a few minutes, Mack looked up and broke in.

“Hey, now just hang on a minute here,” he said. The others looked at him expectantly.

Mack took a large gulp of his drink, and then looking down the table, said, “I think Dewey there hit the nail on the head a couple minutes ago.”

Looking pleased with himself, Dewey sat up straighter in his chair and saluted Mack with his glass of coke, as he wondered what he had done.

Mack went on, “Now you all heard what Dave said about Carnahan. He really did love that stupid broad Lucy and breaking up with her is gonna be hard as hell on him. Now every damn one of us owes that sonofabitch something and we all been wanting to do something nice for him. Right? Admit it!”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

“Well, I think we just got our chance, here,” said Mack.

Medina stared drunkenly at him and asked, “What in the holy flying fuck are you talking about, Mack?” Medina didn’t normally swear but when he got drunk, his vocabulary became quite colorful.

Mack’s eyes narrowed. “I’m talking about doing a great favor for our friend. I’m talking about helping him forget Lucy. I’m talking about starting to pay him back for everything nice he ever done for us.”

“You got a plan?” Asked Bobby Wood, eyebrows raised, staring intently at Mack over the rims of his thick glasses.

Mack smiled benevolently. “Have I got a plan? Shit!” He paused for a few seconds, the others hanging on his words, and then went on, “It’s like this: he’s got problems getting over Lucy, right? Well, what’s the best way to get over a woman? With *another* woman, that’s what!”

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

Mack looked over at Medina, and continued, “Now you been talking about this call girl you had the other night. *Really* beautiful, you said?”

Medina nodded. “Like the best looking hooker I ever seen. Ever! Man, she was damn near the most beautiful *woman* I ever seen.”

Mack threw up his hands. “Well, that’s it then. You wanna help Carnahan get over Lucy, what we need to do is buy him this hooker!”

The others looked thoughtful, taking sips of their drinks. Medina, with a broad smile on his face, stared off into space.

“Now what we need to do,” said Mack, “Is to do this right. We buy the girl for him for the whole night. If she’s charging two hundred bucks for a blowjob, a night’ll probably cost six seven hundred or so. Maybe more. Either way, we shouldn’t have a problem coming up with that much dough. We can hit-up everyone. I’ll start it off right now with a hundred bucks!” He dug in his pocket and pulled out a large wad of money, and then quickly peeled off five twenty dollar bills which he placed on the table.

Medina frowned, and said, “Like I dunno if I can afford that much myself, right now, man. I mean like I got a car payment coming up next week.”

Mack shrugged. “Look, everyone just puts in what they can afford. You can do fifty, can’t you?”

Still frowning, Medina shrugged and said, “Well, I s’pose.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills.

Mack turned to the others. “Robert, I know you got it. I heard about your round-trip fare to Portland two nights ago. Whitey, you put in fifty and I won’t tell anyone what I heard about you and those soldiers you stiffed, last weekend. Bobby, gimme at least twenty. Same with you, Dave, Dewey. Johnny, you’re good for a hundred, aren’t you? Hughie? Jonesy?”

The others reluctantly started laying money in the pile in front of Mack.

Medina, not wanting to look cheap, said, “Like if Johnny and Ransoon can ante up a hundred, so can I.” He placed more bills in the pile.

Smiling broadly, Mack said, “Now that’s the spirit!”

Mack picked up the pile and shuffled through the bills, counting. “Six hundred and ten bucks, just like that.” He shoved the wad in his pocket. “I’ll hang-on to this.” He looked thoughtful, then continued, “Ya know if we can come up with this much this easy, we oughta set our sights higher. We could *really* do a good number for Carnahan.”

“Whadayamean?” asked Johnny Avalon.

Still looking thoughtful as he sipped his bourbon, Mack replied, “What I mean is we could *really* make this a night he’s gonna remember.” He lit a cigarette, and then blowing out the smoke, went on, “If we hit-up everyone, did a really good job of it and make everyone cough up with some dough, I bet ya we could probably get a thousand bucks or so. Maybe more. Can you imagine what kinda night we could buy him for a thousand bucks?”

Medina’s dreamy expression seemed to spread to the rest of the group. Even Martina who had returned from the restroom and had settled back next to Murphy seemed caught up in the fantasy.

“A thousand bucks...” Mack blew smoke rings at the ceiling.

Medina nodded. “Wow, like we could make it the greatest night of his life. Dinner, drinks, then a fancy hotel with the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen. Something he’d remember forever and ever! *Man!*”

Mack nodded. “It’s settled then. We’ll hit-up everyone over the next few days. *On the Q-T!* We don’t want Carnahan knowing what we’re doing. It’ll be a lot better if it’s a surprise.

Then somehow, we get him to come here next Saturday night on his night off, and we present the hooker to him. God, he's gonna love this!"

"Lucky sonofabitch," said Whitey, wishing the hooker was for him, not Carnahan.

"Damn straight!" said Dewey Mitchell, feeling truly blissful now that Carnahan's troubles were finally over.

Mack looked over at Medina. "You do think you can find this lady again?"

Medina shrugged. "Like I think so. She was working the Sheraton. I think she was like staying at the Ramada, or maybe one of those motels in Fife, like the Executive. If she's still in town, we'll find her, man. There's gotta be able to be someone who can tell us where she is."

Mack smiled, and said, "Good. Folks, this is gonna be one *bull-bitch* of a party he ain't *never* gonna forget!"

## **XI. A job well done**

Evil Justin was feeling under the weather.

As he frequently did, he'd stopped over at Phil's before work to down a few beers and had gotten a good buzz going, but by ten o'clock, the buzz had died a unnatural death and been replaced by a slowly throbbing headache that wouldn't go away, even after a couple shots from the bottle of vodka he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk.

He'd spent the morning harassing one of the new mechanics he'd hired the week before and that made him feel a little better. The new mechanic, whose name was John, had spent the



last three days putting rebuilt transmissions into car thirty-eight. So far, they'd installed four different transmissions, and each one had been defective. It was making Justin angry.

Elmo had signed a contract with one of his friends to rebuild the transmissions for one hundred dollars each. They'd been dealing with the friend now for about three months, and it seemed like the guy screwed up about half of the transmissions he rebuilt. This was getting old.

Evil Justin would have liked to cancel the contract, but he couldn't because of the fact that the guy was Elmo's friend. The one time he had broached the subject a few weeks ago, Elmo just blew him off saying that the friend was a great mechanic and everyone was allowed a few mistakes from time to time.

All of which made Justin suspect that the guy had something on Elmo. Or that Elmo had finally gone nuts.

The throbbing increased again, so Justin retreated into his office to have another slug of vodka.

The room was at the back of the shop, under the dispatch office, and partitioned off from the rest of the shop by a heavy wire cage. It also had a door that could be locked, and along with serving as Evil Justin's office, it was where they stored any high-priced or easily disposable parts – the radios, carburetors, windshield wiper blades, and other electronics stuff like the meters – anything that might look attractive to a thief and could be readily changed into cash. The room was about eight feet wide, and maybe twenty feet long.

Just inside the door on the left was a back seat taken out of a van, heaped high on one end with radios sitting in two piles – a broken pile and a repaired pile. In back of that was a blue colored cabinet full of small drawers each filled with sorts of different nuts and bolts and washers. To the right of the door and backed up against the wire cage, was an old black, four-

drawer metal filing cabinet with all the car's maintenance records. Beside that was Justin's desk – a beat up old wooden desk that had originally come from an elementary school, which he had rescued from a pile of trash on the roadside a few years ago.

On the desk was a large, grease-stained monthly calendar/blotter with penciled notes written here and there all over it, and then an old phone, the original yellow color almost wholly obscured by grease. In the desk's left corner was a messy pile of bills and invoices, with a badly scored brake rotor sitting on top. Behind the desk taped to the wire cage was an old calendar supplied by a tool company. The calendar showed a nearly naked young lady with hopelessly improbable silicone breasts, smiling broadly while she fondled a wrench. Beside that was a faded centerfold of *Penthouse's Pet of the Year*, from 1994. Hanging from the ceiling suspended above the desk was an electric cord with a bare light bulb.

Beyond the desk on either side of the small room were the rows of rough shelves made out of junk wood where parts were stored – the storage that generally overflowed onto the floor. The whole room was dark and gloomy, and like the rest of the shop, stank of grease and other, less easily identifiable things.

Justin sat heavily on the old secretarial chair in front of his desk, and pulled the bottle of vodka from the bottom drawer. After checking to see no one was looking, he took a long pull off the bottle, and then replaced it in the bottom drawer. The fiery liquid burned as it coursed down his throat.

He had closed his eyes while waiting for the buzz, and was leaning back in the chair when he was interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Said a voice.

Justin opened his eyes.

Standing in the open doorway to the office was a driver. Evil Justin figured he must have been new, because he didn't recognize him. The man looked like he was in his early thirties, lean and thin, about medium height with the stubble of a crew cut. He looked meekly at Justin.

“What the fuck do you want?” snapped Justin, annoyed at being disturbed.

The man frowned, and then avoiding Justin's angry glare, he said timidly, “Er, I ...uh, just wondered about my car – car twenty-seven. It was called in for maintenance yesterday. I was wondering when it was going to be done. I talked to one of the mechanics about two hours ago and they told me all it needed was an oil change and it'd be good to go.”

Evil Justin was enraged. No one *ever* asked when their car would be done. *Ever*. He could hardly believe the guy had had the nerve to come in and ask. He must be real new, he thought. Or real stupid.

“So you want your car, you stupid asshole? Just who the fuck do you think you are, anyway? Can't you fucking read?” he asked in a low voice.

The driver backed up in the doorway a little, and said, “Uh, the dispatcher told me to ask 'cause there aren't any loaners available and they're real busy right now.” He studied the floor, anxiously.

Evil Justin stood up and faced the driver. “I asked you if you could read, cocksucker,” he said a little louder.

“Yes. But I just wanted...”

Evil Justin quickly stepped closer and cutting him off, he screamed in the man's face, “You stupid cocksucker! Just shut the fuck up! The sign says *no driver's allowed*, dipshit! You may *never* get your car if you try this kinda stupid shit again! Now you get the fuck out of here

and don't bother me. And you damn well better stay away from my goddamn mechanics! Out!"

Justin stabbed his finger at the door.

The man backed up a little again, and said, "But I... I..."

Seething with anger, Justin screamed, "You fucking moron! You wanna get parked for good? Get the fuck out, right now!"

The man turned tail and fled, heading for the nearest exit. Justin watched as he retreated, the glow of vodka and the satisfaction of a job well done finally beginning to overcome his headache.

He sat heavily at his desk again, and fished out the vodka, taking a long pull off the bottle. He had just replaced the bottle in the drawer when one of the mechanics entered with a box of parts that had been delivered.

"We got the rotor for fifty-five and the computer for twenty," said the mechanic, placing the box on the van seat by the pile of radios. He was wearing greasy blue coveralls, and had a lit cigarette dangling from between his lips. He stared uneasily at Evil Justin.

Justin looked up at him. "You working on twenty-seven?" he asked.

The mechanic nodded.

"What's left to do?"

"The brakes are done and I fixed the leak in the radiator. All it needs is oil and a lube."

"Leave it for now. I want you to help John with the transmission in thirty-eight. Make sure he gets it right. You can finish twenty-seven tomorrow or the next day."

"You sure you don't want me to finish twenty-seven? It'd take only fifteen-twenty minutes."

Justin glared at the mechanic. “You trying to be a smart-ass? Maybe you want my job – is that it? Is it?”

The mechanic shrugged and said, “Naw, I just thought you’d want me to finish it first.”

The vodka was starting to come on good now, and Justin was beginning to feel more mellow than he had all morning, so he allowed the mechanic to escape without reaming him too badly. He said, “When I want your opinion, fuckface, I’ll ask for it.” The man frowned and Justin went on, “You don’t like it? Well don’t let the door hit you on the ass on your way out. Now get the fuck out and do what I told you or start looking for another job.”

The mechanic shrugged. “Whatever you say,” he said, looking unhappy. He shuffled off across the shop.

## **XII. Hit me with your best shot**

The junkie took one look in through the window on the passenger side of the cab, saw Dewey Mitchell’s hulking form, and quickly decided to get in the back seat. Dewey had that effect on people. He looked a little scary, at least until you got to know him.

As the door closed, Dewey looked back at him, and asked in a gravelly voice, “So where ya going, Bud?”

The junkie looked nervous, like maybe he needed a fix. He answered, “I’m going to the Mission, man.”

Dewey nodded, taking in the information slowly, then after a couple moments, he said, “Uh, okay, then why don’t ya gimme a five.” He might not be the smartest person, but he’d been ripped off enough times by junkies and other low-life’s to know that you always got your money in advance. And plus, Mack had drilled it into his head over and over in the past few years, and so he rarely forgot, anymore.

Intimidated by Dewey’s bulk, the junkie forked over the money without hesitation.

With over three hundred pounds on his six foot five frame, Dewey Mitchell was a hulking giant of a man, often called *Lurch* by his fellow drivers. He’d had been driving cab at BlackTop for almost fifteen years.

In his high school years, Dewey had pursued the dream of becoming a boxer. Sadly, with a glass jaw and poor coordination, his career never even got off the ground.

He’d drifted out of high school at age sixteen, and had been working at the Hygrade meat packing plant on the Tideflats for several years when he ran into Donny Thompson one night.

Donny was booking fights once a month at the National Guard Armory and needed someone to fill out the bill for a heavyweight fight coming up. He’d caught one of Dewey’s high school fights – the only one where he’d lasted more than the third round – and he was impressed with Dewey’s size and strength.

Dewey had never really lost his dream of becoming a boxer, and throwing around frozen slabs of meat wasn’t exactly a picnic, so obviously, he was interested. But honest to the core, he told Donny about his glass jaw.

As it turned out, Donny didn’t care. It was just supposed to be a one-night stand. The way he told it, everything would be *pre-arranged*. They’d dance around in the ring for a few

rounds, the other guy would pretend to knock him out and then Dewey would take a dive – all for which, Donny would give him the huge sum of one hundred dollars, cash.

Now the thought of doing something dishonest – *like taking a dive* – truly offended Dewey. But the more he thought about it, the more he really wanted to get back in the ring in the worst way. Plus, he really did need the money. So, eventually he agreed.

The fight started as planned, with Dewey dancing around the ring throwing punches, his opponent, Robert *The Marauder* Muldoon, apparently cowed by Dewey's bulk. The crowd cheered and cheered, and Dewey was in seventh heaven. And that's where the whole thing went horribly wrong. It went to Dewey's head – and, he started *fighting*.

In one lucky blow, Muldoon was surprised and nearly went down.

“What the *fuck* you doing, kid” said Muldoon in a stage whisper, fingering his sore jaw.

Dewey took that opportunity to land another blow and Muldoon promptly lost his cool and began actually fighting, too.

The ensuing battle lasted only one more round and was quite an exciting contest, but ended when Muldoon delivered a *punishing* series of blows to Dewey's head, knocking him out.

Dewey laid in a coma for the next several days – with a severe concussion, according to the doctors. When he finally awoke, he wasn't quite all there.

He'd never been what you call a mental giant, but now his reasoning powers had been knocked back to the level of a twelve year old and his short-term memory had suffered as well. The doctors diagnosed this as a traumatic brain stem injury that was a result of the knock-out. They told him the brain damage was probably permanent, but that with a little rehabilitation, he was still high-functioning enough to be a productive member of society.

Dewey didn't have a clue what they were talking about or really care. He just wanted another sponge bath from the pretty, blonde nurse.

Back out on the street after rehabilitation, Dewey struggled through a series of different jobs before finally landing at BlackTop. Cab driving actually suited him well. Of all his faculties, his spatial senses still worked well and he was able to navigate around the town without too much difficulty. He really did fit in well as a cabbie.

While he was a very imposing figure and could look quite terrifying when he chose to, he was a gentle giant. Always happy, it was almost impossible to get him angry, even when his feelings were hurt. He was quick with a kind word, and was completely and blissfully unaware of anything beyond his immediate world.

Some of the dispatchers would lose their patience and occasionally be unkind to Dewey because he was so dense. But Carnahan *always* went out of his way to make sure Dewey was taken care of, feeding him some very good runs every now and then. Because of this, Dewey idolized him.

Dewey had hung out with Mack and Medina now for several years. Initially Mack had avoided him, figuring he was a '*retard*.' But then he found out Dewey's story, and after that, treated him deferentially. As Mack told everyone, he admired and respected him for having had the balls to go in the ring and refuse to throw a fight – even if he was a little slow. And in any event, as Mack privately thought, having a six foot five giant for a friend might have its benefits.

Dewey picked up the mic, and finding a break in the heavy radio traffic, he spoke up, "Car five-nine."

Carnahan responded, "Five-nine."



Dewey thought for a second, trying to think of where he was going and then remembered. “Fifty-nine’s going Fifteenth and Commerce,” he said, and then released the key of the mic.

There was a pause for a moment, and then Carnahan responded, “Dew, Dave Murphy wants me to tell you to GTM.” This was the driver’s shorthand for *Get The Money* up front before you go. If the phone person who wrote up the trip thought there was anything suspicious about the call, they’d usually tell the dispatcher who would pass along the tip to GTM.

Dewey, eyebrows furrowed, thought furiously for a second, and then said, “Oh, I did. It’s okay.” He un-keyed the mic.

“Good for you, Dewey. Five-nine’s going, then. Next car,” said Carnahan.

The radio crackled and sputtered with all the cars trying to call in. Dewey turned down the volume and hung up the mic.

He stared blankly off into space for a few moments, while planning out all the details of where he was supposed to go – what turns to make, what street names he should look for, and so on. He liked to make sure he had everything down, because sometimes when he didn’t, *unexpected* things happened – like for example, the time when he had ended up east of the mountains in Cle Elum when he was supposed to have been going across town to the Seven-Eleven at Thirty-Eighth and J.

Finished planning his route, Dewey flicked the meter on with his index finger. He dropped the car in gear and moved off into traffic.

They were at the Mission in just a few minutes.

Parked at the curb, Dewey looked back at the junkie and then said, “Well, here we are, Bud. You want your change?” He always liked to ask because as he found, sometimes they would say no.

The junkie shook his head. “Just wait for me a minute, then we’ll leave. I wanna go to Lakewood.”

This wasn’t one of the responses he’d expected and the interruption in the routine threw him off for a moment. Dewey stared at him blankly, and then finally asked, “You don’t want your change?”

The junkie’s eyes narrowed. “I said I wanted you to wait, and then we’d go to Lakewood. Didn’t you hear me?”

Dewey focused on what the man was saying, and then recognition dawned. He remembered there had been other times when this had happened. “Oh, you mean like you want me to wait and then take you to Lakewood, huh?”

The junkie nodded. “You got it, man.”

Dewey thought about that for a second. Slowly, he looked over at the meter. It was only a little over three dollars. His brain aching with the effort, he did the math and after figuring out he had almost another two dollars left, he looked back at the man. “I’ll wait here until the five bucks is gone. If you ain’t back by then, I’m leavin’.”

He settled back to wait as the junkie closed the door.

### **XIII. Hooker? I don’t got to show you no stinkin’ hooker**

It was early evening, finally starting to cool off a little from a high of almost ninety. The smells of hot grease and gasoline wafted out from the open door of the shop. Johnny Avalon was washing his car on the wash rack in front of the deck. And Medina still had not been able to find the hooker.

Mack was getting worried.

They'd collected several hundred more dollars, and it seemed likely they would easily be able to reach the one thousand dollar mark. But without the hooker, all their preparations would be in vain.

Mack, Dewey and Medina were sitting on the deck in front of the dispatch office, waiting for their day-drivers to bring in the cars

“I think if we're gonna find her, we've just gotta go do it,” said Mack, frowning.

Medina shrugged. “Like, it's only Wednesday, we've got three more days. What's the rush, man?”

Mack frowned. “The rush is we're gonna look like jackasses if we don't get the girl. We go and collect all this money, promising we're gonna deliver the goods. If we don't deliver, our ass is grass. Three days ain't shit!”

Mack hadn't even been in his car yet and his uniform was already sticking to his skin. He moved in his chair trying to get comfortable. A vague thought chased across his mind that he's ask Johnny Avalon to spray him with the hose – it was still that hot. He moved again, trying to get comfortable.

“Hey Mack! Marty! You guys seen Ralphie?” It was Robert Ransoon, walking up the stairs to the deck.

Mack's frown deepened and he turned away, not wanting to change the subject.

Medina answered, “Like I don't think he's here yet. Why?”

A broad smile on his face, Ransoon fingered his Indiana Jones hat, adjusting it to the perfect rakish tilt, and then he said, “I just wanted to thank him for the favor.”

This was unusual enough to divert Mack, who turned and asked, “Ralph Mack did you a favor?”

Wide eyed with a goofy grin on his clean-shaven face, Ransoon nodded. “Sure as shit. You’re gonna love this. I was in the Tideflats, two in the zone behind Ralph. Ralph had just scooped someone in the Town at Greyhound and was running silent – he was going somewhere down towards Lakewood, I guess. I saw him just as he was turning onto the freeway, southbound. He waves at me as they go by. One minute later – *one minute* – Carnahan comes on the radio. He calls him three times, but Ralph never answers ‘cause he’s running silent, so Carnahan finally calls him out of service and gives me the bell. You know what it was?”

“What?” asked Darnell Jones. He and Hughie Wilson and Bobby O’Dea had wandered over and had been listening in.

Shaking his head, Ransoon went on, “Jonesy, you ain’t never seen one this good. The bell was to SeaLand. It was a sailor.”

“Imagine that. A sailor at SeaLand,” said Mack in a caustic tone, impatient to get back to the subject of the hooker.

Ransoon was unfazed. “A sailor at SeaLand. Right. But you know where this dude wanted to go? Do you know?” He paused for a second, and then went on before anyone could speak. “*Ferndale*, up north of Bellingham! He had to catch a ship at that oil refinery. It was over *two hundred bucks!*”

The driver’s eyes opened a bit wider, and heads nodded appreciatively.

Grudgingly, Mack acknowledged Ransoon’s good fortune. “That is a helluva good trip. I always figured Ralph was nuts running silent all the time. Looks like it finally bit him in the

ass. I mean so what if the fare hears the guy you scooped call in? It don't matter. You don't *never* wanna turn your radio off."

Dan Dinwiddie appeared, walking slowly and cumbrously up the stairs.

Ransoon called out at him, "Hey Dan! You'll never guess what I did to Ralphie!"

Dan waved and continued walking into the driver's lounge.

Ransoon and the most of the others followed, leaving Mack and Medina and Dewey.

Thankful the interruption was over, Mack turned to Medina and said, "Okay. So anyways, we were talking about the hooker. Right?" Mack sat glaring at Medina.

Mack was impossible to deal with when he got in one of these moods, so Medina resigned himself to the inevitable.

"Okay, okay. So like whadaya wanna do?"

Mack took another long drag from his cigarette, then staring off over towards the street, he said, "I think we gotta go look for her tonight and fuck everything else until we find her."

"Like you're saying we should take the night off?" asked Medina, scratching his head.

Excited, Dewey interrupted, "We're gonna take the night off!" Bouncing up and down, he strained forward and for a second, it looked like his plastic chair would break.

Mack put his hand on Dewey's shoulder. "Hold on, Dew. Just me and Marty."

Dewey looked crestfallen. "I don't get to take the night off?"

Eyes narrowed, Mack said, "Look, somebody's gotta hold down the fort. It's an important job, and I know you're up to it. Right? You're not gonna let me down, are ya?"

"I wouldn't do that to ya, Mack. You know that." He shook his head, a solemn expression on his face.

"Thanks Dewey. I knew I could count on you."

Sighing, Medina brushed back his hair with his hand, and then said, “Okay. Like I guess I don’t have a real problem with taking some time out. But like if we’re gonna go cruising for hookers man, I for damn sure don’t wanna do it in my own car. That’s a bust, bigtime.”

Mack nodded, running his fingers through his bushy gray-blond beard. “Yeah, this is true.” He paused for a second, and then went on, “Okay... look, let’s take your cab. We’ll tell Rosie we’re on a mission. She’ll be okay with that. We find the lady and make the deal, then you can drop me back here and we’ll go back to work.”

Medina tilted his chair back on its hind legs. “Okay. That’ll be cool.”

Dave Murphy climbed the steps to the deck and sat down heavily next to Dewey.

Murphy was in his mid forties. Tall and skinny, he had long, straight brown hair with a receding hairline, and a bushy, drooping mustache – a Fu Manchu sort of style – that went all the way to below his jaw-line and which he would sometimes twirl with his fingers. His face was narrow and angular, with a strong, prominent jaw. His brown eyes were inquisitive and questioning. He was wearing faded jeans and a black t-shirt, with black square-toed boots.

Years ago, he and Medina had played in a couple of bands together. At the time, Medina had played lead guitar and Murphy played bass.

Murphy had been a cab driver for most of the last ten years, until around six months ago.

Following a break-up with his wife for about the eighth time in a year, Murphy went and hung out at the Spot Tavern and cried in his beer for several hours. After working all the angst out of his system – and getting pretty buzzed in the process – he started shooting pool with a couple of bulldaggers named Joe and Melanie who had drifted over from next door at the Loop. Murphy did really well at nine ball and by eleven o’clock, he was up nearly fifty dollars.

The bulldaggers had to get up and go to work the next day – Joe was a receptionist downtown for the Department of Labor and Industries; Melanie worked as a hairdresser – so they left at about eleven thirty.

Murphy was pretty drunk. He was feeling good having won the money playing pool, and the sorrow about breaking up with his wife had changed to anger – everything being her fault, as it was. So, he decided to go somewhere else where there was more action.

Big mistake.

The whirling red lights in his rear view mirror caught him by complete surprise as he turned onto South Tacoma Way. Later, at the hospital, he blew a one point eight on the Breathalyzer.

About a week later, Elmo found out and Murphy was parked – BlackTop’s insurance wouldn’t cover a driver with a DUI on their record.

One of the phone people had quit a couple days before, so since Murphy had been around for such a long time, Elmo allowed him to take the job.

Medina nodded to Murphy. “What the hell you doing here so early?” he asked.

Murphy shrugged. “Fire suppression training. I just got out, thank fuckin’ Christ. What a gawdawful boring sonofabitch that was.” He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, then blowing out a long plume of smoke, asked, “So you guys find the lady for Carnahan, yet?” He looked over at Mack.

Mack shook his head. “Nope. We’re gonna go look for her tonight.”

“I’m not, I’m gonna work” said Dewey, hunched forward, drumming his fingers on the railing of the deck, staring wide-eyed at a bug crawling on his pants leg.

“We’re like just waiting for Phyllis to bring my car in, then we’re gonna take off,” said Medina absently, ignoring Dewey, shifting in his seat, angling to get a better view of the gorgeous blonde undulating down the sidewalk a hundred feet away across the parking lot.

“Where you figure to look?” asked Murphy, following Medina’s gaze and noticing the blonde for the first time. She truly was memorable.

The blonde passed around the corner out of view.

Alert now that the distraction had vanished, Medina quickly answered, “I dunno. Like I don’t figure her to even be on the street – she’s way too classy for that. I think we gotta check out the big hotels, and maybe some of the high-roller bars. When I picked her up at the Sheraton, she was like going to the Ramada or somewhere. I’m pretty sure that’s what it was. Looked to me like was she was working the convention trade – out of towners. I been looking at the Ramada, the Sheraton and all the bigger hotels.”

Mack blew out a long plume of smoke. “And *that’s* why you haven’t been finding her.” He shook his head and then went on, “Look – you wanna find a whore, you talk to the other whores. They all know each other. They know who’s doing who and who’s working where. It’s a small town, really. You’ll see. I say we go talk to the ladies first and see what we can come up with.”

Medina shrugged, unwilling to get into a fight over the matter. It just wasn’t that important. “Have it your way, Mack. I don’t care.”

Murphy asked, “You guys want some company? I got a bunch of time to kill before the start of my shift.”

Medina shrugged again. “What the hell, man? The more the merrier.”

“I gotta work,” said Dewey, happily, but no one heard.



#### **XIV. The great hooker hunt**

After squabbling over search techniques for the better part of an hour while waiting for Medina's car to come in, the three finally decided to go out to eat first. The idea was that it was just too early to find any hookers out and about – it was common knowledge that you usually never saw a working girl on the streets until after eight or nine o'clock in the evening.

Mack had changed into civilian clothes for the occasion, while Medina kept his uniform on. The reasoning there was that it'd look weird to have two drivers in uniform with one fare – and they certainly didn't want to attract any attention. Thus Medina would be the driver and ostensibly, Mack and Dave Murphy would be the fares. They figured they'd be able to blend into the background, wherever they were.

For dinner, they ended up going to Marilyn's. Mack, to ease his digestion, had several good slugs of *Old Tennessee*. Deciding Mack had the right idea, Murphy joined in and downed several drinks of his own.

Medina was crushed at being left out, but resigned himself to this fate because he *had* to drive – Mack was still assigned to car thirty-one, and it was for sure they weren't going anywhere in *that* car.

By the time they finally teetered out of Marilyn's at about eight-thirty PM, Mack and Murphy were feeling *very* mellow, and so a stop by the liquor store on Thirty-Eighth Street was ordered. When that mission had finally been accomplished and the provisioning had been taken care of, they were at once on their way to find the hooker. Murphy and Mack sat in the back seat, sipping *Old Tennessee* while Medina played chauffeur.

“Onward, Jeeves,” said Mack drunkenly.

Fuming, Medina hunched down in his seat and drove.

Following Mack’s directions, they cruised all the common spots hookers hung out. There were a number of ladies working, they observed, but none that even remotely looked like Medina’s girl. Finally, after almost an hour of driving, Mack spotted a hooker he knew.

“There! See that one, the blonde? Stop by her. She’ll know.” He pointed at a tall, willowy blonde standing by the entrance to the Twenty-Fourth Street Tavern.

Medina pulled the car over to the curb.

Rolling his window down, Mack beckoned to the hooker.

As the woman approached the car, Medina recognized her – it was Ashley – a transvestite hooker that often worked the area. He/she was a little over six feet tall, skinny as a reed, with long, straight strawberry blonde hair, parted in the middle. From a distance, she looked awfully pretty. It wasn’t till you got close and saw the five o’clock shadow that you’d realize she was a he.

When she recognized Mack, Ashley stopped short of the car and placing her hands over her breasts, and started gushing, “Oh, honey! Don’t tell me tonight is finally gonna be my lucky night! I knew you’d come around eventually, Mack! Oh, I’m gonna make you the happiest man alive!”

Medina and Murphy cracked up. Mack looked embarrassed.

Mack answered, “You wanna pipe down with that shit, Ash? People might get the wrong idea, here.”

Giggling, Murphy asked, “Does your ex-wife know, yet?”

In falsetto, Medina chimed in, “Oh, Mack! I thought you were mine! You Cad!”

Coming closer, Ashley bent down so her head was at window level. She recognized Medina and blew him a kiss, then smiling broadly, turned back to Mack, and asked, “I won’t tell anyone if you won’t, darlin’.”

Looking very uneasy, Mack drew back a little from the window, and then said, “Look, we got a serious problem here and we need your help.”

Visibly disappointed, Ashley frowned and said, “So what can I do for you, honey?”

“You can help us find a girl. We’re looking for this one special girl. It’s for a friend.”

Her brows furrowed, she said, “Yeah, right. What’s the girl’s name?”

Mack nodded his head. “My question exactly. Unfortunately, that’s part of the problem – we don’t know her name. Marty?” He looked over at Medina in the front seat.

Medina spoke up, “Like I had this girl as a fare last week. Long black hair, parted in the middle. Great figure with big tits, long legs, and like a face that wouldn’t quit.” He stared off into space for a moment, savoring the memory, and then continued, “Man, she was exotic-looking like you can’t believe. Kinda Chinese-y with a little Mexican thrown in, nice brown skin, but with these great big green eyes. Young as hell. Maybe twenty-one or so. I picked her up at the Sheraton and then like took her to the Ramada or maybe somewhere in Fife. Like I think she was working out-of-towners – the convention trade or whatever. I don’t think she’s a local.”

Ashley shook her head and then quickly said, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s gotta be Suzy. She just got in from LA last week.”

“Wow, you know her? Like how’d you meet her?” Medina asked.

“I ran into her up in Seattle,” answered Ashley, inspecting her long, blue nails. “We’ve been hanging out together, partying since then.”

“You sure it’s the same girl, Ashley?” asked Medina.

Ashley nodded. “It is. Gotta be. She really is beautiful. But look out – she’s a real *flying bitch* most of the time. Picky? Oh, you wouldn’t believe! And she’s got *religion*, too! You believe that? And that’s not all – you know what she wants to charge? Hah! Maybe they can get away with bucks like that in LA, but not here. I’ve been helping her for the last week, but I tell you, I’m just about ready to give up!” She threw up her hands and then paused, batting her eyes seductively. After a few moments, she went on, “But anyway, what could she do for you that I couldn’t?” She stared at Mack, looking ever hopeful.

Mack smiled. “Ash, soon as I decide to turn queer, you’ll be the first to know. I promise.”

She batted her eyes again, smiling. “You sure, darlin’?”

“Absolutely, positively.”

Closing her eyes, she shook her head, saying, “Oh, what *is* a girl to do?”

“Where can I find Suzy, Ash?” asked Mack.

Ashley opened her eyes and sighed, and then her voice deepened and for once she sounded almost like a man. “She’s got a room at the Valley, unless she’s got a trick right now. Room twelve. You can tell her I sent you. Later tonight, I think she was gonna go up to the Ramada.” She paused for a second, and then went on, “They got a machine tool expo at the dome tomorrow. And machinists got *big* bucks!” She was smiling again and her voice had returned to normal.

Mack smiled. “Thank you, Ash. I owe you.”

She batted her eyes again. “And I’ve got just the perfect way you can pay me back, darlin’!”

Several hours later, they still hadn't found the girl. Every place they went, it seemed like she'd just left.

They'd gone by the Valley Motel and gotten there mere seconds after she'd departed. They'd arrived at the Ramada just after she left there. They'd followed her trail to Fife and back, down to Lakewood and even over to Puyallup, once.

By this time, Mack was completely drunk on his ass, and Murphy wasn't far behind, and they were both really getting on Medina's nerves. They'd had Medina stop at the liquor store yet again for another bottle of *Old Tennessee*, then not long after that, they'd both gotten the munchies and as a result, Medina's back seat was now littered with the detritus of their meal: vagrant potato chips, wheat thins and peanuts were now strewn about the seat, as well as a long streamer of Cheese Whiz that Murphy somehow missed getting on a cracker.

Medina *never* let anyone eat in his car, for that exact, precise reason. He liked to keep his car clean and tidy. So now, he was getting pissed.

Then to top it off, it was a busy night and they were missing out on some very good runs.

Medina was about ready to pack it in.

For the past fifteen minutes, Murphy and Mack had been in a heated discussion on the heady subject of Indian salmon fishing, and it was boring Medina shitless. After striking out at the last three bars they'd gone to, Medina decided to try the Valley Motel again for one last time before packing it in. He figured if the girl wasn't at the motel, he'd return to the office and dump Mack and Murphy off – somehow – so he could get in at least a little business for the night.

Medina pulled the car up to the door of the motel room and stopped.

Mack and Murphy continued arguing as he got out and went to the door and knocked.

The door opened.

Suzy was just as Medina remembered. Long, shiny black hair parted in the middle, big, slanted, almond-shaped green eyes and a stunningly beautiful face. She stared at Medina for a second, then recognized him and smiling, said, “Oh, I’m sorry honey, I didn’t call a cab. Maybe it’s next door.”

Mesmerized, Medina stared for a moment, and then answered, “Naw, like it’s not that. Hey, can me and my buddies like talk to you for a minute?” He jerked his head over at the cab where Mack and Murphy were finally getting out.

Looking disinterested, she shrugged, and then said, “Whatever. It’s your nickel.” She turned and walked back inside.

Medina followed. Booze in hands, Mack and Murphy trailed behind.

The door closed, Suzy sat down in a chair next to a small table. Mack, Murphy and Medina sat down on edge of the bed. They stared at her, in awe.

She really and truly was *beautiful*.

Looking a little apprehensive, she broke the spell, saying, “If you guys want a date, it’s gonna cost. And I don’t do no kinky stuff, like with chickens or grapefruits or getting tied down. We’ll get that straight *right now*.” Her voice was nasal and hoarse, and that along with her bad grammar were at odds with her appearance.

Mack took a quick sip from the bottle of *Old Tennessee* and then sat it down next to him on the nightstand. He held up his hands unsteadily, and then said, “Hang on. Look, we got this little proposition for you.” He paused for a moment, staring at her trying to judge her reaction, and then went on, “I and the boys got this problem. We got this friend. This guy we work with. He just broke up with his woman, and it’s really tearing him up.”

Suzy's face was unreadable. She shrugged again, and then asked, "Yeah? So?"

"Well, we wanna get him a present – something to help get him over losing his old lady."

"You wanna get him laid?" she asked.

Mack nodded, admiring her directness. "Yup. That's it in a nutshell. We wanna buy you for the whole night."

Her eyes widened. Then after a moment, eyebrows raised slightly, Suzy smiled, looking more interested. "A whole night'll cost you plenty."

Mack shrugged. "We got plenty of dough. What do you charge for a whole night?"

Her green eyes narrowed. "You guys cops?"

Murphy laughed. "You really think we look like cops?" He wobbled unsteadily sitting on the bed.

Mack nodded. "Lady, we're not cops. Not even close. We're cabbies. The guy we're buying you for is our dispatcher, Ed Carnahan."

She sat motionless for a moment staring at Mack, and then leaned back in her chair and lit a cigarette. Blowing out a long plume of smoke, she cleared her throat, and then asked, "Okay, so what exactly do you have in mind?" She looked from one to the other of the drivers.

Mack continued to stare at her for a few moments, almost hypnotized by her beauty, swaying slightly as he sat on the bed.

Concerned that Mack was too drunk to talk, Medina elbowed him in the side.

Mack glared at him momentarily, and then he snapped out of it and remembered why they were there.

Looking back at Suzy, he said, "Okay, it's like this. We want you to go out for drinks and dinner with Eddie, maybe dance a bit, then go to some nice hotel and fuck his brains out all

night long. We'll pay for the food and the booze and the hotel. We want it to be *really* nice – the very best night in his life.”

She stared at the wall for a few moments and took a big drag from her cigarette. After blowing a long plume of smoke up towards the ceiling, she looked back at Mack and with a straight face, said, “Okay. Fifteen hundred bucks.”

Mack frowned, looking worried. “That’s more than we got.”

She shrugged. “Hey! You want the best, you gotta pay for it, guy. And I *am* the best.” She drew herself up in the chair, sitting a little straighter, and then went on, “You want your friend to think he’s died and gone to heaven, and then I’m the angel you want. I’m the angel you *need!* And the best is *always* expensive. You reckon you don’t have what it takes? Then maybe you oughta you go look up on the Hilltop and buy him a ten-dollar blowjob. Don’t waste my time.” Looking bored, she studied her nails.

Gazing in awe at Suzy, Medina turned to Mack and nodded agreement. “Like she’s right, man.”

Still frowning, Mack said, “Look, there’s gotta be some way we can do this. It’s just we don’t have quite that much cash.”

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged, then said, “So exactly how much have you got?”

“Well, we gotta think about dinner – I figure you go to a nice place, maybe Johnny’s Dock or something, drinks and dinner’s gonna be at least a hundred and fifty bucks. Then the hotel, say the Sheraton, will cost another hundred. Maybe another hundred for extra expenses. Take off all that, I figure we could still come up with close to a thousand for you.”

You could see the wheels turning inside Suzy’s brain.



Her almond-shaped green eyes narrowed, and then she said, “Make it eleven hundred and I’ll cover any extras, if they come up.”

Mack nodded. “Okay. Done. But it’s gotta be the very best night of his life.”

Suzy drew herself up again, and at once looked even more beautiful. She smiled, looking gracious, and said, “I can guarantee it.” She paused for a moment, and then asked, “So how do I get paid?”

The drivers had put quite a lot of thought into this. They wanted to make sure they didn’t get ripped-off, so they had devised a plan.

Stifling a whiskey-flavored burp, Mack smiled. “Okay, it’ll be like this. We’ll pay you three hundred bucks now, as a down payment. Saturday night – that’s the night we want the date to come down on, we’re gonna present you to Ed as a surprise over at Phil’s Saloon – it’s up on McKinley Hill. You know the place?”

She nodded. “I heard of it.”

Mack went on, “One of us can come pick you up and bring you over there. We’ll give you another three hundred, then. You come to Phil’s, have a few drinks, then we spring the surprise on our friend, and you’re off. Either Marty or me’ll give you rides for the whole night – take you to dinner, then dancing, and then to the hotel. We’ll be your own personal chauffeurs.”

Eyebrows raised, she said, “Yeah. That’s okay. So when do I get the rest of the bucks?”

“At the end of the night – whenever that is – you call us to pick you guys up, we’ll give you the final installment of five hundred bucks – and then take you wherever you want to go. You can keep our friend there with you until we show up and pay you.”

A slight frown on her beautiful face, she stared off into space for a moment, and then said, “You’re asking for a whole lot of trust, here. Five hundred bucks!”

Mack shrugged. “Same for us. Look at it this way – we’re paying you six hundred bucks in advance without you having done jack. We’re just gonna have to trust each other.”

She hesitated for a couple moments, and then shrugged. “What the heck. I guess you’re right.” A big smile lit her face, and she asked, “Hey what’s your guys names, anyways?”

### **XV. And may I present...**

Ed Carnahan hated parties.

He’d been hearing whispers all week that Mack and the boys were going to throw him a surprise party and it bothered him no end.

A group of drivers would be talking and then fall silent when he approached. Someone would ask him what he was doing Saturday night, and then there’d be muted snickers from the rest. This had happened at least a half-dozen times just in the last day or so.

And, he could swear people were watching him.

It drove Carnahan nuts to the point where on Thursday night, he finally cornered Dave Murphy and asked him point-blank what was happening.

But Murphy just clammed up, and simply told him to “Relax and don’t worry...”

All of which made Carnahan even more nuts.

Breaking up with Lucy had been pretty rough, and the only thing he wanted now was just to be alone. The idea of a surprise party didn’t turn him on at all.

Then to top it off, he’d heard one rumor that they were trying to set him up with some girl!

He figured a woman was about the absolute *last* thing he needed.

Mack had finally come to him late Friday with an obviously phony story about how he wanted him to come to Phil's Saloon on Saturday night and just knock back a few with the boys. He'd known right away the story was phony and Mack even knew he knew.

They were just playing out their roles.

But still, he agreed.

The way he figured it, he had no other choice – he was trapped. Because whatever it was they had planned, Mack and the boys had gone to an awful lot of trouble. From the looks, the whispers and the probing questions, it seemed like almost everyone at the company *expected* him to show up. So, there really wasn't any way out. He resigned himself to the inevitable.

With a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, Ed Carnahan walked through the doors of Phil's Saloon. An old Tony Bennett song, *Fly Me To the Moon*, blared from the jukebox as he entered. He waited for a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, and then was able to make out the faces of Mack and Medina through the hazy, smoke-filled room. Searching farther, he recognized a number of other familiar faces – in fact, the more he looked, the more it seemed as though most all of the drivers not on duty were there.

The sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach intensified, and he was strongly thinking of bolting for the door when someone called out his name and he knew there was no escape.

Mack and Medina saw him and in an instant, they were there at his side, guiding him towards the group of tables they had commandeered in the back.

“Glad you could come, Eddie,” said Mack, steering him by the elbow.

“Hey, Ed. We got a place for you,” said Medina, standing in front of him, beckoning to an empty chair placed between Bobby Woods and Dave Murphy.

“Saved it special for you,” said Medina. He held the back of the chair as Carnahan sat down, and then continuing, asked, “So like what can I get you to drink?”

Carnahan thought this over for a moment as he scanned the crowd of familiar faces, then said, “How about a shot of *Old Tennessee* on the rocks?”

*Everyone* was there. Sitting across the table was Rosie Glen, who waved hello, and to her left was Whitey Jorgen and down from him, Jonesy and Hughie and *all* of the night drivers and a lot of the day drivers as well. Dewey Mitchell, Wayne Sands, Robert Ransoon, Woody Wooten, Don Murdock, Jim Camandona, Billy Paul, Bobby O’Dea, Henry Lowry, Dale Church, Steve LeMay, Walter Cavalier, Lyman Clark, Ed Timmons, Dave McDonald, Bob Cox, Bill Richards senior *and* junior, Johnny Avalon, Don Rudy, Joe Cadero, Mike Severson, Phyllis Johnson, Hans Sdorra, Billy Seamans, Ernie Harris, Ed Miller, Ralph Mack, and even some of the leasers – he spotted Dan Dinwiddie sitting talking to Lee Houston. Don Morgan was there, leaning drunkenly against the door of the men’s bathroom. *Everyone*.

And now almost all of them were staring at him, expectantly.

Nearly overcome by a feeling of dread and despair, Carnahan loosened the collar of his shirt and someone shoved a drink into his hand.

Standing at his side, Mack rapped a spoon on a glass loudly, and then shouted, “Alright now! Let’s cut the shit! Can we get some peace and quiet here?” He continued to rap the spoon on the glass.

When the noise had died off and the room was finally silent, Mack announced, “Okay, I wanna thank all of you for coming tonight.” Then looking down at Carnahan, he went on in a lower voice, “I’m gonna cut the horseshit and come straight to the point. Ed, we all know you’ve been pretty down since you and Lucy split up, so we wanted to try and cheer you up.

How we gonna do that? Well it's this way: you got a hangover, how do you cure it? By having a couple shots, that's how! You got a bad breakup with a lady? You cure it by getting another lady! And that's what we got for you..."

Medina, sitting at a table nearby did a drum roll with his hands on the table. The eyes of the crowd turned expectantly towards the storeroom door.

And out walked Suzy.

Radiant, graceful, glowing. In a word, *stunning*.

Five solid feet of one of the most gorgeous women on the face of the earth. Shining black hair parted in the middle, her almond-shaped, slanted green eyes were focused on Carnahan, who was sitting helpless like a possum caught in a cars' headlights, staring at her, holding his drink.

She looked elegant and sophisticated, standing in high heels, wearing a dark-red dress with a low-cut top, which showed off her sumptuous breasts. The dress was slit on one side, exposing her long, slim legs. She carried a small black purse under her arm. She walked gracefully towards him.

Standing face to face with Carnahan, she held out her hand expectantly.

Transfixed, he stood up and took her hand, and then as if in a dream, he bowed and kissed it lightly.

At their side, Mack cleared his throat and then said, "Ed, may I present to you, Suzy." Then looking at Suzy, he said, "And this is Ed."

Carnahan and Suzy stared into each other's eyes, oblivious of the crowd around them.

Mack cleared his throat again, then said loudly, "It's like this, Ed: Suzy and you are gonna go out for dinner at Johnny's Dock – we got you some reservations there – and then after

you eat, then maybe you can do a little dancing.” Pausing for a second, Mack quickly went on, “And no, you don’t need your checkbook – everything’s paid in advance, on us.”

There were murmurs from the crowd and one or two people clapped. Mack paused for a moment.

Carnahan and Suzy were still staring at each other and a sloppy, crooked smile lit Carnahan’s face. Mack coughed, and then continued, “After you done danced your heart out, well, what you do after that is up to you.”

Someone from the crowd screamed out, “*Get it on!*” And everyone else laughed.

Mack continued, “But we do got you booked into a nice room at the Sheraton.”

There were catcalls and shouts from the crowd. Carnahan’s cheeks reddened.

## **XVI. The first strike...**

The restaurant was packed, and they had to weave in and out between people as the hostess led them through the noisy crowd. Carnahan was feeling nervous as the hostess finally seated them at the window table Mack and the boys had reserved.

Suzy wasn’t at all what he’d expected.

They’d talked as they rode in Medina’s cab to the restaurant. She had asked some polite questions about his work, and after warming up a bit, he told her a couple funny stories from when he used to drive cab. She was very polite and treated him deferentially.

She really was beautiful and charming – which was quite unexpected. He found her drawing him out of his shell, almost making him forget the pain of breaking up with Lucy.

He'd been absolutely miserable since the last ugly fight with Lucy, which ended with her packing up and leaving. It wasn't like it was really that big a surprise to either of them – they'd both known it was coming. But just the same, it was still a shock when it finally happened, a shock he felt it would take a long, long time to recover from.

He blamed himself for the break-up, naturally. He saw it as the final proof that he was completely incapable of sustaining a meaningful relationship with a woman. Every time, he'd go into a relationship with a new woman full of boyish enthusiasm, and open himself up wide – a true romantic to the core, sure that this relationship was the *one*. And just as surely, every time, it'd all go south in short order, and he'd end up back by himself again, an emotional wreck.

The break-up with Lucy had been one of the worst – he'd had such high hopes – and it hurt him a lot more than he'd let on to anyone. So since then, he'd basically decided to swear off women for good. He figured it was safer if he never opened himself up again. He was *never* going to be hurt like that again.

But now Suzy... *God, she's beautiful*, he thought.

The hostess placed menus in front of them, and then smiling broadly, asked, "Would you like the champagne now, or with your dinner?"

"Champagne?" asked Carnahan, eyebrows raised, as he looked over at Suzy.

She shrugged, and said, "Sure. That'd be great."

Looking back at the hostess, he said, "Okay, I guess we'd like it now."

The hostess nodded and left.

Carnahan focused back on Suzy.

She was staring out across the shimmering waterway, at a small cabin cruiser heading out towards Commencement Bay. A man was standing on the bow of the boat, coiling a rope, while

a young boy watched intently. A woman was at the helm, and a young girl stood beside her, leaning out the window of the cabin shouting something at the man and boy.

Suzy looked back at Carnahan and flashed a nervous smile.

“The water’s really pretty, isn’t it?” he asked.

“It is.” She was silent for a few moments, still staring at the boat, and then said, “You ever wonder what it’d be like to live like that?” She nodded at the boat. The man and boy walked aft to talk to the woman.

“Being able to afford a boat?” He asked.

She nodded again. “Yeah, more or less. I guess I mean mom and dad and the kids, out for an evening cruise. That kinda thing.”

A busboy appeared and began filling their water glasses.

When the busboy had left, Carnahan picked up the linen napkin, and after placing it in his



lap, he asked, “So you’re from California?”

Suzy nodded, then after stealing another glance at the disappearing cabin cruiser, she answered, “Born and raised.”

“How do you like it up here?”

She shrugged. “It’s okay, I guess.” She took a sip of her water, and then went on, “All you hear down there is how it rains and all up in Washington, but I don’t think it’s rained even once since I got here.”

The wine steward arrived, and after placing an ice-filled bucket on a stand next to Carnahan, he presented the bottle for Carnahan to inspect. “This meets your approval, sir?” he asked. It was a bottle of *Dom Perignon*. Mack and the boys certainly hadn’t skimped.

Trying not to register shock, Carnahan nodded. “Quite so, thanks.”

The wine steward made a show out of extracting the cork, which came out with a loud “pop,” and then offered it to them to smell. With a flourish, he poured each a glass and after wrapping the bottle in a towel, he placed it in the bucket of ice. With a bow, he disappeared.

Carnahan had never actually had *Dom Perignon* before. The closest he’d come was one time when a rich drunk had left an empty bottle in his cab. He picked up his glass now, and took a sip. It really was quite good, he thought. Tiny bubbles...

He looked back at Suzy, “So how long have you been up here?”

“About a week,” she said. She took another swallow. Then looking back out at the water, she asked, “You ever wonder how it would be if things had been different?”

“What do you mean, different?”

“Like if you hadn’t done something.”

Carnahan nodded. “Sure. Everybody wonders about stuff like that.”

She nodded, and was silent for a few moments, as she stared out at the water. Then she looked back at Carnahan and said, “Mack said you just broke up with your old lady.”

He stared at her for a moment, and then said, “Yeah, last week.”

She lowered her eyes. “That’s too bad. You were together for a long time?” She looked back up at him.

“About six months.”

“Huh, that’s pretty good. I don’t seem to be able to last longer than a month or two with mine.”

“How come?” Carnahan asked, interested.

She shook her head. “I dunno. I guess you go into it expecting one thing, but then it turns out to be something else. Maybe it’s ‘cause a what you did, or maybe it’s something else, entirely outa your control.”

Carnahan leaned forward, looking into her beautiful green eyes. “That’s what you were talking about, if things had gone differently?”

She took a sip of the champagne, and then nodded. “Yeah. I was just kinda flashing on it.”

“What happened?”

She shrugged, and avoiding his gaze, looked out the window at the water. “It wasn’t nothing.”

The waiter appeared beside the table, and he said, “Hello, I’m John. I’ll be your waiter tonight. I hope you folks are settled in. How is the wine?” He stood attentively, with his pencil poised over the order pad.

“Just great,” said Carnahan, smiling.

“So have you had a chance to make a selection?”

“Not yet. Could we have a few more minutes?”

The waiter nodded. “Certainly. I’ll be back in a bit.” He walked off.

Carnahan picked up his menu. After a moment, he looked up and said, “Hey, they have abalone steaks. I haven’t had that in ages.”

Suzy looked at him over the top of her own menu. “I never had abalone before. Is it good?”

“It’s *really* good. Hard to find any more, though. Not a lot of abalone left, I guess.”

She smiled. “Huh. Well if there ain’t a lot of them left, then I’ll have something else. Maybe salmon. I like that and there’s lots of them.”

Carnahan nodded. “That’d be good. They do salmon really well here.”

“Then that’s what I’ll get,” she said, smiling. She set the menu down and took another sip of the champagne.

Carnahan decided he liked her. He took a sip as well, and then asked, “So what were you flashing on? What was the decision you made, where you wished things had turned out differently?”

She stared at him for a second, and then said, “It wasn’t that. It’s just like you think maybe you’re going one direction, then it turns out it’s something else.”

His eyes narrowed, he asked, “Because of something you did?”

She shook her head. “Not that I did. Not really. Stuff that other people did.”

Carnahan took the bottle of champagne from the bucket and refilled their glasses, and said, “If it was beyond your control, there’s not a lot you can do.”

Suzy took a long drink, and then shaking her head, said, “That’s not true. Everything you do affects what happens to you. That’s what they taught us.”

“Who taught you?”

“You know, in church, and Sunday School. They said if you sin, God’ll punish you.”

“So you figure you sinned and God is punishing you? What happened?”

Suzy stared at him, a blank expression on her face. Finally after several long moments, she shook her head. “Look, I really don’t wanna talk about it.”

Carnahan stared back, silent.

After another few moments, she frowned and then looked away and said, “All I’m gonna say is I guess I kinda walked into this thing, wanting to believe one thing, but at the end, I found out it was something entirely different.”

“You’re not the Lone Ranger. People do that all the time.”

She laughed sourly. “Yeah right. But it seems like I make a habit of it.”

“We all do. It’s human nature.”

Eyes still downcast, she frowned, and then continued, “Not like me. Before that, I went all these years with my mom, believing if I just hung on, it’d work out, and it didn’t. And then afterwards, I still hung in there figuring if I worked hard, there’d be a reward somewhere down the line. It’s all a bunch of crap.”

“What’s a bunch of crap?”

She looked up at Carnahan. “God, Christianity. The whole lot.”

“Why?” He looked at her intently, now thoroughly enjoying himself. Carnahan loved discussions like this. Plus, in any event, he really wanted to find out what had happened to her.

When she didn't respond, he repeated himself. "Why?" he asked again. "C'mon, you can tell me."

Suzy frowned, staring at him intently. Finally, she answered, "Because they were lying. What they said doesn't work. God doesn't reward you for not sinning." Cheeks flushed bright red, she looked away out at the water, and then took another sip of champagne.

Staring at her for a moment, Carnahan let out a deep breath, and then said, "Well, I'm not really a heavy Christian, but I'll take a stab at this, anyway." He took a drink of his champagne, and then went on, "The basic idea is that if you keep on the straight and narrow, God'll reward you. You screw up, you'll be punished. Right?"

Still frowning, she nodded, looking gloomily into her wine glass.

The waiter appeared back before them, then asked, "So, have you folks decided what you want yet?" He looked at Carnahan.

Carnahan nodded. "The lady will have the King Salmon Filet, I'll have the abalone steak."

The waiter wrote the orders on his pad. Then looking at Suzy, he asked, "What dressing would you like with your salad?"

"You have a house Italian?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." The waiter nodded, still writing. Then he looked at Carnahan. "And you, sir?"

"Same."

The waiter finished writing. "Anything else?"

Carnahan shook his head.

"Alright. I'll be back with your salads in a few minutes." He left.

Suzu was still staring gloomily at her wine glass – which Carnahan noticed was almost empty.

“Would you like some more champagne?” he asked.

She nodded her head. “Sure.”

As he was pouring the wine he studied her. Her long, straight black hair was shining in the late evening sun. Perfect complexion with a nice tan. Lovely, elegant body. Gorgeous legs, he recalled from when they were walking in. She was probably the most beautiful woman he’d ever met. Maybe not the best educated, from the way she talked, but what the hell? She was nice – he was certain of that. He didn’t get any bad vibes at all. But her almond-shaped green eyes looked sad. He felt a compulsion to help her.

He put the bottle of champagne back in the bucket, and then took a sip. Putting the glass down on the table, he said in a tentative tone, “Look, I have no idea where you’ve been or what you’ve done, but I’ve got the feeling that you’re a good person. I can sense that.”

She looked up at him over the rim of the wine glass. “Thanks,” she said.

Carnahan went on, “What you’ve got to remember is that often stuff happens that there’s just no reason for – things that don’t appear to jibe with what we’re taught in Sunday School. A baby’s killed in some horrible death. Children starve. Things like that happen every day of the week. But were they sinners and was God punishing them? No way.” Carnahan took another sip of the champagne, and then continued, “I don’t know what’s happened to you, but I’m guessing it’s along the same lines. You’re not a bad person.” Pausing a second to glance out at the water, he turned back to her and said, “I drove cab for a lot of years, and one thing you learn as a cabbie is how to size people up in a hurry – either you learn or you don’t make any bucks. Now I don’t get anything negative off you at all.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t?”

He shook his head. “I don’t. So if you’ve had bad luck, then it’s just one of those, ‘shit happens’ kind of things. Not because you are a bad person. I’m certain of it.”

Eyes downcast, she frowned. “I wish you was right.”

He smiled at her. “I am. You want an answer beyond that, then maybe you should just figure God’s testing you. That’s a big concept in Christianity, right?”

Looking thoughtful, she nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Then that’s it. You figure the harder the tests, the bigger your prize at the end, if you pass.”

Almond-shaped eyes narrowed, she asked, “You really think so?”

He shrugged. “It’s either that or the ‘shit happens’ type stuff.” He continued, “I’m not really very religious, but I do like that explanation – I’d like to think that there is some reason for things happening. Not a Christian thing really. More of a ying yang sorta thing, you know, like the concept of karma – do good and good will come to you, do bad and bad will come to you. Very simplistic, but *that* I have seen in action.”

She stared at him, a somber expression on her lovely face. “So you think I’m being tested?” she asked.

He nodded, taking another drink of champagne. “I’m sure of it.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment thinking about what he’d said. She looked up at him, and then asked, “So I make the right decisions, I’ll pass the test and be rewarded? I make the wrong one, then I’ll be punished?”

“More or less.”

She looked at him intently. “So how do I know which is the right decision?”

Carnahan sighed, then after hesitating for another moment, he said, “That’s the tough one. Figuring out which path is correct.” He shook his head, and then went on, “The only thing that’s ever worked for me is you gotta pick the hardest one. The one that’s least attractive. You look at the other options, you’ll see some short-term gains, things you want – they all look attractive. They’re the expedient ones and they always look so, so good. But they are almost always the wrong ones. The right path is the one that’s so hard you’re sure it’s gonna break your back; the one you know there’s no way you can do, because it’s embarrassing, or hard financially, or there’s something else that makes it impossible.” He looked over at Suzy.

She was immobile, staring out at the water, a frown frozen on her lovely face.

She closed her eyes, and Carnahan thought it looked like she shivered.

“You okay?” he asked.

She shivered again – he was sure of it this time – and then she looked up at him. “Thank you,” she said, wiping what looked like a tear from the corner of her eye.

“Huh?” He asked, eyes narrowed.

She sat up straight in her chair and took a deep breath. Letting it out, she said, “Look, I gotta go.”

Puzzled, Carnahan, stared at her for a moment, then said, “Oh, the rest rooms are back by the entrance.”

Frowning, she shook her head and then said quickly, “No! I mean I gotta leave. I just can’t go through with this shit.” She picked up her small black purse, and after rummaging around in it, pulled out a large wad of bills. “Here, it’s almost all there, except for like a couple hundred dollars. Tell Mack I’ll get it to him. Soon as I can. I ain’t no rip-off.” She held it out to him.



Uncomprehending, Carnahan stared at her, wide-eyed, in a state of shock. He looked at her face, and then at the money, and then back at her face.

After a few moments, she dropped the money on the table, next to his wine glass.

“I gotta go. Sorry.”

Finally, he was able to speak. “Did I offend you?” he asked stiffly.

She rolled her eyes, and then stood up and grabbed her purse. She fled quickly through the crowded restaurant, nearly colliding with a busboy who was cleaning up a nearby table.

When she was gone, Carnahan stared at the wad of bills sitting next to his wine glass.

A few minutes later, he was thinking dark, ugly, painful thoughts as he drained the last drop of champagne from the glass.

He stood up, and then turned the empty bottle upside-down in the bucket. He picked up the wad of cash from the table and put it in his pocket, and then after thinking about it, he pulled out a twenty and left it on the table.

A grim frown on his face, he made his way out of the crowded restaurant.

## **XVII. One rich sonofabitch**

Elmo Murkowski always had a nice haircut. He prided himself on it, actually.

He had his graying brown hair styled at least once a week, and that along with the regular manicures and facials and expensive colognes, all conspired to make him seem a little like a politician. Or at least a rich person. Which indeed he was.

In addition to BlackTop Cab, Elmo owned a number of apartment buildings on the Hilltop, which he rented out to anyone with a warm body and the first month’s rent. Plus, he had

an interest in a bar down in Spanaway, which catered to the redneck cowboy crowd. And then there was the landscaping company he owned that employed illegal aliens – mostly Mexicans. Plus it was rumored he had some money in topless dancers in Alaska. Elmo was quite diversified, actually.

He was on the long side of fifty and holding. Well over six feet tall, he had played quarterback on his college team. Sadly, in the past few years, he'd put on a fair bit of weight, to the point where his favorite attire – Dockers with a polo shirt – looked a little ridiculous with the heavy gut riding out over his belt.

Elmo never avoided a chance to make money, no matter who got screwed in the process. The rules for leasers and drivers at BlackTop were always in a state of flux and kept changing – almost on a daily basis – to suit Elmo's current needs. And always, if you didn't like it, there was the omnipresent threat that you could be parked if you spoke out.

Elmo was always very careful to make it clear that the drivers and leasers were *not employees* of BlackTop – and that was one of his most significant bonuses. By his decree, the drivers and leasers were “independent contractors” which allowed Elmo to escape paying payroll taxes or workers compensation or even minimum wage or overtime. The beauty of it was that it still allowed him the same degree of control as if they were employees, because all he had to do was to refuse to lease a car to someone and they were finished. Not fired – *parked*.

It was perfect.

The leases were always verbal – nothing was in writing, so if he felt like changing different terms, he could do so on a whim.

He'd had an inspiration some time ago and instituted what he called a *crash fund*, which was supposed to pay the deductible if a driver was involved in an accident. Initially, leasers

were supposed to come up with five hundred dollars that Elmo would hold for them. Then if one of their cars was involved in a crash and the driver was at fault, the crash fund would cover the deductible and the leaser would have to pay in another five hundred dollars. Just a few months ago, he'd decided to up the amount to one thousand dollars per leaser. At present, there were ten different people leasing cars and he required the deposit from each of them.

Elmo used the ten thousand dollars to invest in offshore oil drilling and made a killing.

Bobby Woods had made a contribution to the crash fund.

He'd been driving car thirty-three one night. He'd just left the office and was turning left onto Puyallup Avenue when the steering locked up, and he crashed broadside into a new Cadillac driven by the wife of the Pastor of the Life Church, a big congregation over off South Puget Sound Street.

It was a low-speed crash, but Bobby was pretty shaken up.

When the cops arrived, Bobby told them what happened, and they inspected the cab's steering and confirmed that there had been a mechanical failure – and that Bobby was totally faultless.

As such, Bobby was quite surprised when he was summoned to the office with one of those, "Elmo requires your presence, immediately," commands from the dispatcher on the following day.

At the office, Elmo put a paper in front of him and told him to sign it. It was a statement where he claimed complete responsibility for causing the accident.

According to Elmo, either Bobby could sign the paper and pay him the thousand dollars for the crash fund, or he could go drive for Army-Navy.

Scared, angry and hurt, Bobby eventually signed the paper. He'd been at BlackTop too long; he couldn't see leaving.

### **XVIII. Dirty, icky, nasty**

Elmo really hated to go down in the shop – it was so dirty and icky and greasy and smelled so bad. But he wanted to talk to Evil Justin and dredge some information out of him – and he thought it would be better to do it on Justin's turf. He wanted Justin to feel at ease.

One of the mechanics told him Justin was in the office doing paperwork. Elmo found him seated at his desk with a stack of invoices in front of him.

Elmo stood in the doorway of the office, staring down at Evil Justin, a bland smile on his face. "Hey, how's it going, sport?" he asked. He sniffed, and thought he could make out the faint traces of alcohol on Justin's breath – even over the smell of his own cologne – which today, was *Antaeus*, by *Chanel*.

Evil Justin was at once on guard.

He knew something was up by the fact that Elmo had come into the shop. He also figured that gave him an advantage. He decided to use it.

Looking up at Elmo, Justin shrugged his shoulders, and then said, "They're just putting the fifth rebuilt transmission into thirty-eight. The fifth transmission in two weeks. All of the last four have been fucked-up and we had to pull them out almost as soon as they were installed."

Elmo looked thoughtful. "How many transmissions have you done in the last month?"

Justin shook his head. "I dunno. Maybe ten-fifteen."

“How many were bad?”

“About half,” said Evil Justin, watching him closely.

Elmo frowned and then shook his head. “That’s way too high. I’ll talk to Greg about it.”

Evil Justin nodded. “Good. Because my guys are getting sick and tired of working on the same damned cars over and over. The shop’s getting backed-up because of it.”

“I’ll see to it. Greg’ll just have to do better.”

There was an awkward pause for a few moments, and then Elmo asked casually, “Hey, so what do you know about this party they gave for Ed Carnahan last Saturday night?”

Justin shook his head. “I dunno. I heard a lot a people talking about it. Shit, that’s all everyone’s talking about, really. Something fucked up bigtime, but nobody seems to know exactly what happened. Only thing that’s for sure is that Carnahan’s really upset, and everybody seems to figure it’s Mack and Medina’s fault, somehow.”

“Have you seen Carnahan?”

“Nope. He’s been gone by the time I got here this week.”

The stench coming out of the mechanic’s bathroom was more intense than usual this morning, so Elmo decided to leave without further questions. “If you hear anything, I wanna know, ASAP.”

He turned and fled.

### **XIX. Darkness descends**

*Everyone* figured it was Mack and Medina’s fault. Everyone.

Even so, no one actually seemed to know what had happened, or why.

That night after they learned that Carnahan and Suzy had left the restaurant, Mack and Medina scrambled frantically to locate Carnahan and find out what had transpired – but all to no avail. It wasn't until Monday night when Carnahan showed up for work that they had finally been able to talk to him. And that wasn't very helpful.

All that Carnahan would tell them was that he and Suzy had gotten into a fight and she had left. He gave them the money he'd gotten from Suzy and then in a very chilly tone, asked them to please leave him the fuck alone.

He was very obviously quite depressed. And *angry* as well, although it was hard to tell at whom, because he really and truly wouldn't talk about it.

From that point on, it seemed Carnahan was just going through the motions at work. He was morose, gloomy and withdrawn. He snapped and shouted at people for no particular reason at odd moments. For the first time ever in his career, he was hard to work with.

Mack and Medina had kept fairly close track of who had donated what money, so at least they were able to return the proper amounts to the proper people. All told, they were nearly four hundred dollars short – which to their credit, they absorbed themselves.

But even though they got their money back, the people still blamed Mack and boys for the change in Carnahan. No one really knew what had happened – just that something very bad had come down and that Carnahan was *extremely* unhappy. The idea for the hooker was Mack and the boy's, so it *must* be their fault. *QED*.

In this manner, the drivers became outcasts and pariahs overnight, and a period of darkness descended onto BlackTop.

For a while, it seemed like the bad luck was *universal*.

Whitey Jorgen broke his left ankle chasing a runner that he should have caught. Steve LeMay had his guitar stolen out of the back seat of his cab while he was in Marilyn's eating breakfast. Dan Dinwiddie had three cars down in the shop for over a week when there were no loaners available, and Elmo refused to reduce his lease. Robert Ransoon lost his Indiana Jones hat while he was on charter with a couple of obnoxious, drunken Russian sailors. Three of Medina's favorite hookers including Hazel were busted in a sting down near the train station. Bobby Wood's cable TV went out just at the start of his favorite race, the *Indianapolis Five Hundred*. Dewey Mitchell received a notice from the IRS saying they were going to audit him – which he promptly lost and forgot about. Darnell Jones got in a wreck with a school bus and had to fork over a thousand dollars to the crash fund. Elmo's ex-wife blew into town for a visit and hit him up for three year's back alimony. Ed Miller got a two hundred dollar speeding ticket on a really great run to Port Angeles.

*Everyone* had a bad time.

## **XX. Suzy is as Suzy does**

“Thank-you, Mr. Blair,” said Suzy politely. “And will there be anything else?”

“Can I get extra starch?” He asked, staring at her chest.

She checked a box on the tag, and then asked, “Okay, is that it?”

Still staring at her chest, the man nodded his head. “Yup, that's all.”

“Okay, we'll have this for you on Wednesday then,” said Suzy, smiling.

She put the tag she'd filled out on the pile of shirts, and then handed the receipt to the man.

He smiled at her again, then turned and walked out the door.

She pushed a vagrant strand of shiny black hair out of her green eyes, and then went back to sorting the piles of clothes behind the counter.

After leaving Carnahan sitting at the restaurant on Saturday night, Suzy found herself walking aimlessly downtown, pondering her fate. She was by Sauro's Cleanerama on Pacific, wondering for about the ninety-ninth time what in the *holy hell* she was going to do, when she noticed a help-wanted sign in the window. Suzy believed in fate. She took the help-wanted sign as an omen and went inside just as they were closing, and got an application.

Monday morning, she was back at the door at the door of Sauro's at eight AM, application in hand. The owner, an elderly Italian man with a toupee that looked like a drowned rat, hired her on the spot.

That night, she paid her motel bill with the last of her cash, and then with her small suitcase in hand, she walked all the way back downtown and then up the steep hills and moved into the YWCA women's shelter.

The place was dirty and there were bugs, but it felt right. And to her, that's what was most important.

She had taken Carnahan's advice literally, and was starting her life over. This time, she figured, she was going to do it right. She might not be able to fix everything that had happened in her life, she thought, but she'd do as good job as she could. From this point on, everything was going to be on the up and up.

It hadn't always been that way.

Raised in Visalia, California, Suzy had been sixteen when her alcoholic mother finally ran off and, this time, didn't come back. Her father had left years before, so she was on her own,



without any money, or any way to get money. She ate scraps from the refrigerator and continued to go to school, hoping her mother would return.

After the landlord evicted her from the apartment, the state became involved and from then until she was eighteen, there was a swift succession of foster homes.

The day after she turned eighteen, she walked out of her last foster home and never looked back. She moved to Los Angeles and for the next several years, supported herself mainly by working in fast food restaurants. At least until she met Henri.

Henri was an older, handsome, fast-talking, French-Canadian who styled himself as a film producer, and who lived a wild, extravagant lifestyle. Suzy was awed by his good looks, his big house and his apparent knowledge of the movie business. And plus, he really seemed concerned about her welfare, not like most men, who just wanted to get in her pants.

It was no coincidence she had chosen to move to Los Angeles – she wanted to be an actress – and she realistically figured her looks might be the key to her success. So when Henri whispered sweet nothings in her ear, and then told her he could get her in pictures, she bought the story hook, line and sinker. She gave up her job at Bob's Big Boy and moved into an apartment he rented for her. He showered her with presents and for the first time in her life, she was actually happy.

The bliss continued for several months. Henri would come over several nights a week, and they would discuss her career, how she was going to make it big. He enrolled her in an acting class that met twice a week and he even got her a speech coach to work on her grammar and pronunciation. She was going to make it *big*.

She had heard about the casting couch, so it wasn't a total surprise when Henri suggested it might further her career to sleep with a man he introduced as a studio exec. Nonetheless, she had a lot of problems with it – even just the aspect of being unfaithful to Henri.

They had a messy, protracted fight that lasted a couple weeks, but finally, she gave in. She steeled herself and did the dirty deed. Henri had convinced her it was *completely* necessary. She figured he was looking out for her best interests. Afterwards, Henri told her she'd made a great impression, and just to wait.

This whole scene repeated itself several times and might have gone on indefinitely except that she ran into another woman – who as it developed, had gotten the same assurances from Henri – as well as an apartment and all the rest – for the last year or so.

Henri had always been a little unclear about exactly how he got the money to support the big house and his wild parties. So after the two women compared notes about the men they had slept with and all the rest, even as naive as they were, it soon dawned on them both that he was *pimping* them out.

The resulting confrontation between the two women and Henri was quite ugly. It ended with Henri battered and bruised, gagged with a sponge and duct tape, and tied to a kitchen chair with the cord off the drapes. The women searched the house and found his cash, and then blowing kisses, left.

Suzy was distraught. She felt violated, betrayed and worthless. Nothing more than a dirty, no-good whore. Cursing her stupidity for believing Henri, she holed up in a motel and contemplated suicide for a few days, and then calming down, she decided to use her share of the cash to leave LA.

When she arrived at the Greyhound Station, the first bus she saw had a “Seattle” sign on it, so believing this was yet another omen, she hurried inside and bought a ticket for Seattle, and then boarded the bus.

Arriving in Seattle two days later, Suzy hooked up with Ashley – who by chance of fate was at the bus station looking for a post-operative transgendered friend supposedly coming in from Tuscaloosa.

Ashley’s friend never made it, but she and Suzy hit it off quickly.

Ashley developed a motherly interest in Suzy and took her under her wing, and began the slow process of trying to educate her all about life in the Puget Sound area.

For the next several days, the pair floated around from party to party, Suzy trying to deaden her feelings of despair in a bottle. She didn’t really protest when Ashley offered her some crack cocaine. With the advent of the cocaine, most of her money was gone within a couple more days.

When Suzy finally sobered up, she found she was getting desperate.

At Ashley’s incessant urging, she reluctantly decided that hooking was the best way she could earn some money.

The way she saw it, her life was ruined already. She’d done the dirty deed – albeit unknowingly – a number of times for Henri. She *was* a dirty no-good whore. That being the case, what exactly was the difference if she did it now, for herself?

As a friendly gesture, Ashley offered to turn Suzy on to a few tricks – for a *small* percentage of the action.

And so with Ashley’s expert guidance, Suzy set out to ply the world’s oldest profession.

Unfortunately, luck was not with Suzy. Every time Ashley set her up with a client, something happened to torpedo the deal. Either her price was too high or the guy looked like a creep and Suzy couldn't go through with it. This happened almost a half-dozen times in just a few days.

Ashley was pissed-off, no end, teetering right on the verge of a hissy fit.

When Mack and Medina had found her, Suzy was very nearly out of money and right on the bitter edge of desperation.

So the deal Mack and the boys offered looked awfully good – the way she figured it, if she could actually make eleven hundred dollars in one night, then maybe she could use the money to set herself up so she could look for a *real* job. She figured she *had* to get out of her current situation – of that she was certain. Because the further it went, the less it looked to her like she had any future at all as a hooker. Aside from Ashley – who she did actually count as a friend – the people associated with prostitution and the lifestyle itself just weren't for her. None of it.

Plus, she'd seen how her money had quickly evaporated because of the partying. The brush with cocaine had scared her badly – mainly because she'd liked it a whole lot – rather too much, she thought. Quite correctly, she figured if she didn't get out soon, she might never get out.

She saw Mack's offer as her only real chance at going straight. It compromised her morals to sleep with someone for money – even one more time – but the way she saw it, her morals, thanks to Henri, had already gone out the window. So she reasoned, such as it was, one more time wouldn't *really* matter.

And then the deal came down.

She'd been surprised when she met Carnahan. After talking with him, she found she actually liked him. She'd always been attracted to older men – like Henri – and she found Carnahan *quite* attractive. He was smart and seemed very compassionate. He seemed like someone she could really trust. If it had been different circumstances, she thought...

She'd about lost it when she found herself talking to him about her problems – that was close to the last thing she wanted to do.

But it was so weird.

At the end when Carnahan started talking about finding the right path, it was like she knew exactly what he was going to say before he even said it. Or rather, it was like he was just confirming what she already *knew* she had to do.

So pushing her over the edge was really pretty easy.

On one hand, she hated to leave Carnahan at the restaurant. He was a nice guy, and had helped her. Sleeping with him might have actually been fun, she thought. And she really and truly could have used the money. But like he said, that was the easy way. And it was *wrong*. And, she knew it.

So, she did the hard thing and left him sitting there.

She hated the fact that leaving him like that, had hurt Carnahan, but there was no way around that, as she saw it.

This time, she was going to do it right – if it killed her.

## **XXI. Life sucks**

“Next car,” said Carnahan, tonelessly.

“Car fourteen.”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen’s vacant Tenth and Pacific.”

“Top Downtown,” said Carnahan in a monotone. He moved fourteen’s button to the vacant slot for the downtown zone, and then said, “Next car.”

“Car twinkie-eight.”

“Go ahead twenty-eight.”

“Two-eight’s vacant at the Tall One.”

“Two in the Town,” said Carnahan as he moved the button, placing it below fourteen’s.  
“Next car.”

The radio hissed and sputtered, and he heard what sounded like a three.

“Car with a three,” he said, disinterested.

“Car forty-three,” came the response.

“Go ahead forty-three.”

“Four-three. Uh, hey, I’m on South Hill, but I’m not finding that Roadside Tavern place.  
Where is it?”

Carnahan exploded, “If you don’t know where the place is, look in a phone book, you idiot! Don’t waste my time with stupid stuff like that. Now, next car!” he said, angrily.

Ed Carnahan had tried to remain focused on his job, but it was a losing battle. Since Suzy walked out on him that night, he’d been a wreck. He’d been irritable and short with people, and generally very hard to get along with. He stayed to himself as much as possible, avoiding any kind of meaningful conversation.

Anyone who even tried to ask about what happened with Suzy was met with a curt, “None of your goddamned business!”

Every face he saw at BlackTop was laughing at him, he was sure.

Ed Carnahan, the man that was so bad at relationships, had been stood up by a hooker! Of all things, this was the capper, as he saw it. He couldn’t even sustain a *one-night* relationship with a goddamned hooker! Now that’s *bad!*

He wanted just to crawl in bed and never come out.

In his more rational moments, he didn’t really blame Mack and the boys – they’d been trying to be helpful. The person he really blamed was himself. Over and over and over.

Breaking up with Lucy had been difficult, as he saw it. But even so, it was something he would have dealt with over time. The final fight that ended with her leaving had been anticipated, at least in his subconscious, if nothing else. More than anything, when she finally did walk out the door, he felt relief, at least deep down inside, knowing that that chapter was finally finished and he could move on.

The grieving he had since gone through had been more of a matter of routine, as he saw it now – he had grieved for the loss mainly because it was expected of him – that was just what you did under those circumstances. In this, he mostly focused only on the good times they’d had, pushing into hazy obscurity, all the nastiness that formed the basis of the reasons why they had broken up. Then his denial would flag and the hurt and pain would be renewed. Back and forth, around and round. His moods were like a revolving door.

That was alright. He would have gotten over Lucy in time, no problem.

But adding the failure with Suzy presented a burden that he could not bear.

This failure had been totally unanticipated.

Suzy was a bright, beautiful woman, who seemed like an honest-to-God a nice person. Over the course of their encounter, he'd become very attracted to her. They had seemed to get along awfully well.

He'd known Suzy was a hooker, and what Mack and the boys had arranged, more or less – he wasn't stupid or blind. But he'd actually sensed some *chemistry* – something he hadn't even expected. So when he found himself getting to like her, it was quite a surprise.

But not half as much of a surprise as when she so abruptly left. That was about the last thing he expected – she was a hooker after all, bought and paid for.

Since she'd left, he'd replayed their conversation over and over in his mind, and couldn't even imagine anything he could have said to offend her. This being the case, the only reason he could come up with was that it was simply *him* – and this left him in a deep, dark depression.

He figured there must be some very profound fundamental flaw within him that he must be blind to, and that that was what she had reacted to.

Seriously – who gets stood up by a hooker? It just doesn't happen.

And yet, it had happened to him.

But that wasn't even half of it.

If this had been an indignity he had suffered by himself, alone, it would have been tolerable. But it was not.

*Everyone* at BlackTop knew what had happened. The whole mother-loving company, he figured. He was under the microscope. It was just so embarrassing.

And he felt like he was being flayed alive.

He longed for the comfort and the simple bliss of ignorance and denial. But it just wouldn't come.



And so the run of bad luck and ill feelings at BlackTop continued, on and on.

## **XXII. Make my day**

Microphone in hand, Bobby O’Dea flipped on the meter and pulled the heavy car out into traffic. It was just after midnight on a busy Friday night, and he was having a very bad time.

Sensing a momentary lull in the radio chatter, he took advantage and keying the mic, said, “Car double-nickel.”

In a terse voice, Carnahan instantly responded, “Go ahead fifty-five.”

“Double-nickel’s going twentieth and Sprague,” said Bobby O’Dea into the mic.

“Going. Next car.” There was a squeal of noise from the speaker as several cars tried to call in at once.

Bobby turned the volume down, and hung up the mic, and then looking in the rear view mirror, he glanced at the faces of his fares in the back seat.

They were gangbangers. His car was full of young gangbangers – who better yet, were playing with a gun.

Bobby had a really bad feeling in the pit of his stomach – although when he thought about it, it was quite familiar. It was a feeling he hadn’t experienced in years and years and years – not since he’d been in Saigon.

Now those were the days!

Bobby O’Dea was a Viet Nam veteran.

He'd known right from the start that he'd really lucked-out when the Army had sent him to truck driving school, and everything that happened to him after that in Viet Nam, while he was "in country" proved his theory.

Bobby O' had driven truck there, and he'd liked it. Really and truly. He'd pushed his deuce-and-a-half mostly back and forth between Saigon and Bien Hoa, ferrying supplies to the different bases. He hadn't really seen any action or had anything bad happen the whole time he was there. He had a mild-mannered disposition and treated everyone with respect and dignity. Most of the Vietnamese treated him the same. The few that didn't, he ignored.

The Army had issued him a rifle back when he arrived, and he took it with him on his trips religiously. Unbeknownst to his sergeant or the captain, he'd quickly lost the ammo and so for over six months in one period, he'd carried it unloaded. As far as he was concerned, it didn't matter because he wasn't really interested in shooting anyone.

His best friend in Saigon was one Patrick Aloysius Murphy, a supply sergeant with Headquarters Company, and together, they made quite a killing. Murphy had a really good connection for some local marijuana, and with Bobby's help, they supplied about half of the soldiers in the district with high-quality Vietnamese Green.

Bobby O' never sampled his own wares. He didn't really approve of drugs – at least for himself. Even so, he didn't really care what other people did, either. As such, he helped Murphy out figuring that if weed made people happy and helped make the war zone a nice place to live, then it was okay.

It turned out to be a good business. He and Murphy made quite a bit of extra money, and as a side benefit, he developed a network of friends all over central Viet Nam. Bobby O' knew in his heart that it was a good deal all the way around.

Bobby was full of regret when his thirteen months was up – altogether, Viet Nam had been quite a pleasant experience for him – but not so pleasant that he wanted to extend his tour. He was a realist. He'd had a lot of friends that weren't so fortunate as he was, and he didn't want to press his luck.

Bobby O' got out of the army in 1970, and after traveling for a few months visiting friends and relatives, he decided to settle down and live in Tacoma. He'd spent some time at Ft Lewis just after basic training, and had liked it there.

He quickly found a job driving truck, and within a few more months, he married a local girl that he'd gone out with before he left for Viet Nam. They were as happy as could be.

At least on the surface. Under the surface, things were a little different.

Bobby O' found he really didn't like being back home all that much. The people here were often mean and disrespectful to him, and for that matter, to all Viet Nam veterans. Once when on a whim, he'd gone to an anti-war rally up in Seattle at the UW with some other Viet Nam vets, a protester had called him a "baby killer."

He tried to explain about how he'd just driven truck there but no one would listen. He finally gave up trying and left, driving back to Tacoma.

But by far, the single biggest factor contributing to his unrest was that driving truck back here in "the world" was pretty goddamned boring, compared to Viet Nam. And then on top of it, the pay wasn't all that great, either.

Bobby O' had salted away most of the money from his business in Viet Nam, so after a year of driving truck, he quit the company, intending to go to a technical college to follow his childhood dream: he wanted to become a boiler operator.

Two years later, with a Facilities Maintenance Engineer certificate fresh in hand, Bobby O' hit the streets looking for a job.

But there weren't any. None at all.

As a temporary measure to hold him over, he took a job with Oliver Taxi, just for a couple months.

Nearly twenty years later, he was still driving cab. He'd been with BlackTop for most of the last ten years.

The truth of the matter was that he liked driving cab. It was a whole lot more fun than driving truck. Probably even more fun than running a boiler.

And it was the people and their environment that made it that way.

After working as a cabbie for only a few months, he'd finally figured it out.

The thing he'd really been missing since he left Viet Nam was that element of danger he'd found in his side business with Murphy – and of course the danger of just being in a war zone itself.

What he found was that working as a cab driver, he was able to recapture that. The Hilltop area in Tacoma was most definitely a war zone – just ask any cabbie, they'll tell you. And because Bobby worked the Hilltop, the majority of his customers were on the shady side of life: drug dealers, hookers, pimps, and thieves, and so on.

Bobby O' decided he liked it that way. Overall, he thought, they were a lot more interesting than normal people.

Now his wife, of course, thought he was nuts. But, she but tolerated it. Exhibiting a true mercenary streak, she was more interested in the money than anything else. Bobby usually made a fair bit of money, driving cab. As long as he kept the money rolling in and didn't keep a mistress – or at least wasn't overt about it – his wife was just fine with the whole thing.

And this was a good thing. Because Bobby absolutely loved driving cab. He loved the intrigues; he loved the drama; the adrenaline; he loved every little bit of it.

Or at least *almost* all of it.

Gang members were not a big turn-on for Bobby.

Bobby figured older criminals were no big deal. They reacted in fairly predictable patterns and were generally respectful and civilized when they weren't actively practicing their crafts. They had *honor*. But now these little gangbangers like he had in the car presently – that was another story.

These current passengers were Bloods from the Eastside, all of them probably under sixteen. He'd found that with kids this young, you really never knew what they would do. They didn't have enough sense to know their limits. Plus, they were always trying to impress each other with how macho they were. And the word respect wasn't even in their vocabulary.

That made them pretty damned scary in Bobby's book.

He'd picked up the first two at an apartment house over by the city dump – The Overlook Apartments – an apt name for a complex that looked out over the dump.

From there they'd driven to a place over on south Thirty-fourth and Ainsworth, where they'd picked up two more kids.

They were driving him nuts. They had a gun, and they were playing with it, spinning the chamber and dry firing it.

Bobby focused on his driving, trying to ignore them, but it was difficult.

“...and when we bring this Bulldog to the ‘hood, everyone gonna listen,” said the leader, sitting directly behind Bobby.

“Yeah, they’s gonna shit, goddamned niggers,” said the one sitting in the front seat next to him, looking back.

“We’re gonna clean it all up, nigger,” said the first one again, as he dry fired the gun for what seemed like the ninety-ninth time.

Another one chimed in, “And we won’t take no shit, neither!”

“They won’t mess with the Bulldog!” said another.

The kid next to him, trying to look mean, said, “Hey Mr. Taxi, you ever get held up?” The kid giggled and glanced back at his friends, who laughed, egging him on.

Bobby, eyes on the road, answered, “Yeah, I been held up twice, actually. Why?”

“Oh, nothin’. I just wondered what happened. You lose a lot of money?”

The kids in the back seat laughed again, and clicked the gun’s trigger.

Ignoring them, Bobby shrugged. “Nope, not really.”

“How come they didn’t get your money? You broke?” They all laughed again.

Stone faced, Bobby focused on the road and said, “They didn’t get any money because I killed ‘em, that’s what happened.”

This set the kid back a bit. Eyebrows raised, he said, “You full of shit.”

Bobby O’ gave him a sidelong glance, then eyes back on the road, he went on, “No, it’s the truth. I let him take my money, and then as he was leaving, I pulled out my piece and shot him in the head.” Bobby signaled, and then turned left onto Nineteenth Street, going up the hill. He continued, “It almost wasn’t worth it. The cops came and they said it was justified, but shit, it must have taken a day and a half to fill out all goddamned the paperwork. I lost more money sitting talking to the cops than what the guy tried to steal!”

Wide-eyed, the kid said, “No shit?”

Bobby nodded. “No shit. Now the second time it happened, I got smart. I just figured fuck all this paperwork and shit and I dumped the body down by the Mission and just drove away.”

“What’d the *po-lice* do?” Asked one of the kids in the back seat.

Bobby shrugged again. “What the fuck ya expect? Nothing. The guy was a junkie, so what the hell do they care if someone capped him off?” Bobby felt good, screwing with the kids. He figured he was getting back at them for having made his life miserable playing with their gun.

The leader sitting in back was unconvinced. “I think your white ass is lying. You ain’t capped nobody off. You full of shit.”

Bobby turned the corner, left onto Alaska, and said, “You think I’m lying, then maybe you wanna give me a try, huh? Feeling like you’re really lucky, today, huh?”

The kid sitting next to him turned to the one in back and said, “Hush up, now nigger!”

Bobby turned again, onto Seventeenth, and then a few seconds later, right onto Sprague Street. “Which house is it?” he asked.

“The white picket fence,” answered the kid next to him.

There was a crowd of people milling around in front of the house. More gangbangers, thought Bobby. Drunk gangbangers having a party. Oh, great!

As they pulled up, Bobby could feel the kids were nervous about something. They eyed the people in front of the house, watching closely.

Bobby parked at the curb in-between two cars. He stopped the meter.

“Okay, that’ll be Ten-fifty,” he said.

The kid next to him dug in his pocket, and then smirking, he said, “All I got is eight. That’ll have to do, right taxi man?”

Bobby just glared at him, unwilling to get into it over two-fifty.

The kid threw the money on the seat and began to get out.

*“Watch out! It’s Levon!”* screamed one of the kids from the back seat.

There was a loud bang and the passenger window exploded in a cascade of tiny glass chunks.

The kid in the front seat ducked down behind the door, half in the car, half in the gutter.

More shots rang out.

The adrenaline racing through his system, Bobby ducked down, desperately trying to avoid getting shot.

He wanted to leave in the worst way but he couldn’t. The kid was lying half-in and half-out of the car, with the door open. The way they were parked, if Bobby took off, the open door would hit the car next to them and probably kill the kid.



More shots rang out. The back window starred and then sagging inward, and collapsed. Bobby could hear impacts on the doors.

He grabbed the mic from the holder on the dash and shouted into it, “Car double-nickel, shots fired at twentieth and Sprague. Call the cops!”

The kids in the back seat screamed and the car shook.

Carnahan’s voice came back immediately, “You have an emergency five-five?”

Huddling on the floor of the cab, Bobby O’ keyed the mic and said hurriedly, “Yeah, they’re fucking shooting at us! Call the cops. Twentieth and Sprague.”

There were another series of shots, and the screaming from the kids in the back seat continued.

Carnahan responded immediately, “All cars, we’ll have radio silence. Car five-five has declared an emergency and so we’ll have radio silence until it’s over.” Microphone still open, Carnahan paused, and then said, “The cops are on the way, Bobby. Hold tight!”

There was another loud explosion and the car shook.

Bobby made his mind up quickly.

Sitting up, he lunged over and grabbed the kid next to him by the scruff of the neck and roughly hauled him back into the car.

There was a *fusillade* of shots, and one struck the dashboard in front of him.

Bobby ducked down again, after making sure the kid’s legs were inside the car, and then dumped the gearshift into drive and floored it. He steered left, hoping he would miss the car in front of him.

He didn't, but they only struck the car a glancing blow.

After the impact, Bobby took a chance and sat up enough so he could see to steer.

Ten seconds later, he turned the corner and was fish-tailing back out onto Nineteenth.

Two minutes following that, he was at the emergency room entrance of St Joe's Hospital.

They carried the kid from the front seat off in a gurney – he'd been shot in the leg. The others, including Bobby, were okay.

The car wasn't so lucky. They counted twenty-one bullet holes and three windows blown out. The cops impounded the cab as evidence.

Following a tip from Bobby, the cops searched the other kids and came up with some drugs as well as the gun they'd been carrying. They were whisked off to jail.

That made Bobby's day.

Smiling, Bobby waved at them as the patrol car receded into the distance.

The cops made him out as a hero, saying he probably saved the kid's life by pulling him back in the car.

Bobby was absolutely glowing. He hadn't felt so good in years and years and years.

God he loved this job!

### **XXIII. I don't believe my eyes**

Almost a month had passed since Carnahan's aborted date.

Medina was driving down Pacific near the bus station when he thought he saw someone flagging him down. He quickly pulled over to the curb and in a brief moment, the passenger door opened.

“You!” he said, eyes wide in disbelief.

It was Suzy.

She was dressed in faded jeans and a light-blue calf-length lab coat. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and a few stray wisps had escaped, in disarray. There was a dark smudge of dirt on her forehead, and she looked beat.

She sat down beside him and closed the door.

“Hey, I’m glad I found you,” she said, opening the small black purse she carried. “I been looking for you and Mack for the last couple three days.”

Medina shook his head, looking at her, still unable to believe she was in his cab.

Ignoring him, she dug in her purse and came out with a handful of bills, which she offered to him.

“Here,” she said. “This is all I can come up with right now, but I should be able to come up with the rest in a week or two.”

Completely incredulous, Medina said simply, “What the holy hell is this?”

Suzy’s face hardened. “I ain’t no rip-off. Here. Take it.”

Medina’s self-preservation instincts took over and he accepted the money and stuck it in his shirt pocket. He shook his head, and then asked, “So like what on earth happened? Did Ed do something? Why did you split?”

She frowned and looked away, out the window. “It wasn’t nothing he did,” she said quietly.

“So? So why did you leave?”

She shook her head. “I just had to.”

“Do you have any idea what you did to Carnahan? It’s been like almost a month and he still won’t talk to any of us, now – or to anyone else, damn near. It’s like he’s always gloomy, and really out of it. Snapping at people all the time. Acting like a real asshole, mostly. And he was *never* like that before.” Medina shifted in his seat.

On the radio, Rosie began giving out the eight-thirty time calls.

Medina wasn’t even close to top in the zone, so he turned the volume down. He went on, “Everyone blames me and Mack and the boys for what’s happened to Carnahan because we set the thing up. They’re all pissed off to the max. Nobody’ll even talk to us anymore, hardly. That being the case, I figure you owe me some kinda explanation.”

She bit her lower lip, looking anxious. “I really hurt him?”

Medina nodded. “Sure as hell looks that way.”

She shook her head. “God, I’m sorry. I never meant that to happen.”

“It did. He’s like really screwed-up behind this.”

He continued to stare at her.

“Well?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It really wasn’t his fault. It was mine.”

“How so?”

She stared at Medina for several moments, mouth partly open. Then she took a deep breath, and letting it out, said in a small voice, “I’m not actually a hooker. I just couldn’t go through with it.”

Medina's eyes narrowed. "You're not a hooker?" he said sharply. "Like if you're not a hooker, then why the hell did you agree to do it? You agreed to date him."

She looked uncomfortable, squirming in her seat. After a moment, she answered, "I really needed the bucks. I thought I could do it. It was the easy way."

Medina gave a short laugh, and then angrily asked, "Well why the hell didn't you follow through, then?"

"I was gonna – *really* – but then we were talking. He made me realize I shouldn't. It was the wrong way for me to go. I needed money, the right way for me to get it was the hardest way – and that's what I'm doing," she added, a look of pride now on her beautiful face.

"What in the holy hell are you talking about?" asked Medina, looking puzzled.

"Hooking was the easy way out – the wrong way. I'm doing it the right way now – I got me a job at Sauro's Cleanerama. It don't pay diddley squat, but it's honest money. It feels so damn good."

"Carnahan told you to get a job at Sauro's?" Medina asked, confused.

She shook her head. "Naw. We were talking about how to figure out the right path when you gotta make a decision. He just said, look at all the options and then take the hardest one. That's what I did. And he was dead-on right."

Medina narrowed his eyes. "So you're not mad at him?"

She smiled. "Mad? You gotta be kidding! Mister, I owe him big! He straightened me out. God knows what I would done if I hadn't met him!"

This was all a little much for Medina. He was dumbfounded. It wasn't even close to the scenario he'd figured.

She went on, "Look, I'm really sorry what happened to Ed. And to you and to Mack."

Medina stared at the dash, absorbing what she had said.

She continued, “Like I said, there’s nothing I can do about what’s happened, but I’ll make sure to get the rest of the money back to you.”

“Huh.” He was silent for a few moments, and then asked, “So where are you staying?”

She frowned. “At the YWCA women’s shelter.”

“That sucks.”

She nodded, smiling. “Bigtime. But it’s temporary. I’ll have you paid off and enough to get a place of my own within the next couple weeks. I’m saving every penny.”

“Would you be willing to talk to Ed? Tell him what you told me?”

She looked uncomfortable again.

“It might help him deal with what happened,” said Medina, continuing.

Her eyes widened. She looked like the thought scared her. “I dunno...”

Medina pressed on. “If you’re really sorry about all the trouble you caused Ed, you’ll do it.”

A pained look on her face, she stared at Medina, then after a moment, she looked away and said slowly, “Okay, but not right now. I gotta get back on my feet, first.” She frowned, and then went on, “I really am sorry for what happened, Marty. I really screwed everything up good.”

“So like when can you talk to him?” asked Medina, wondering if there was any way he and Mack could get Carnahan to actually talk to her.

She shook her head. “Soon. Like I said, after I get back on my feet. Gimme a couple weeks or so at least.”

“How will I contact you?”

She shrugged. “I told you. I’m working at Sauro’s. I get off when it closes at eight. Monday through Saturday. You wanna talk to me, that’s where I’ll be.”

“Six days a week?”

She nodded. “I need the bucks. That’s the way to get ‘em.”

Medina looked at her closely. She looked very defiant, her chin jutting out, a hard and purposeful set to her face. But at the same time, she seemed fragile, like it wouldn’t take too much to push her over the edge.

After a moment, Medina nodded. “Okay, we’ll play it your way.” He was silent for another moment, and then asked, “Can I give you a ride somewhere?”

She shook her head. “I told you, I’m saving every penny. I ain’t got money for cab fare.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. Like this one’s on the house. Where can I take you?”

She looked at him, eyes narrowed, and then said, “Well, I was gonna go back to the shelter...”

“You want a ride?”

She smiled. “For free? Sure! I gotta say I wasn’t looking forward to all those hills. It’s been an awful long day.”

Medina nodded. “Cool. Let’s boogie.”

He took a quick look out the back window, then put the heavy car in gear and moved off into traffic.

**XXIV. You know it's really slow when...**

One slow winter's night, Dan Dinwiddie was sitting in his taxi at the Amtrak cab stand. There were traces of dirty snow lying here and there on the ground in the parking lot. It was less than a couple weeks before Christmas and very cold outside. Unlike typical Tacoma weather – where the snow usually lasts less than a day – this snow had been there since the week before because it had never really warmed up yet.

There wasn't any business anywhere and Dan was extremely bored. He'd been sitting with the engine running for almost an hour, trying to stay warm. He'd read the paper twice, already. He'd actually almost memorized the want ads.

Dan was getting ready to call it a night when suddenly Ralph Mack came whipping in, parking behind him in the taxi stand.

Ralph's heater wasn't working very well and he was chilled to the bone. As soon as his cab came to a stop, he put it in park and turned off the ignition, and then he got out and quickly jumped into Dan's car. He was hoping to warm up and talk for a bit.

Just as Ralph was hopping in, Dan had a crazy impulse – an inspiration, actually – on how to relieve his boredom.

The moment the door slammed shut, Dan popped the meter on and dropped the car in gear.

“Hey! What are you doing?” asked Ralph, wide eyed.

Deliberately ignoring him, Dan stepped on the gas, and started towards the exit of the parking lot. “And where would you like to go, sir?” He asked courteously. He turned right onto Puyallup Avenue, and headed towards Pacific.



“Hey man, my car’s back there and the goddamn key’s in it!” said Ralph, looking out the back window of the cab at the Amtrak station, disappearing into the distance.

“And why would you leave your keys in the car, sir?” Asked Dan, glancing sidelong at Ralph.

Mouth hanging open, Ralph was wide eyed, staring at him. “You popped your noodle, didn’t you?” he finally asked. “You crazy sonofabitch!”

Still ignoring him, Dan turned right onto Pacific and went all the way down, over to Eleventh Street. Dan stayed in character, and continued to pretend that Ralph was a normal fare – and it was driving Ralph crazy.

“Why the hell are you doing this?” Asked Ralph, wide eyed.

Gazing straight ahead at the road, Dan calmly answered, “It’s my job, sir. I’m doing it for money.”

Ralph looked over at the meter, as it continued to turn, going click, click, click.

“Hey, what the hell you think this is?” said Ralph, pointing at the meter as they turned the corner on Pacific. “I’m not paying that, you crazy sonofabitch!”

“Then you’re going to go to jail sir, if you don’t pay,” said Dan, heading out East Eleventh Street.

“This ain’t very funny, Dan.”

“Sir, I’m a cabbie, not a comedian.”

And so it went.

They went all the way past the Shipwreck Tavern, all the way around the Tideflats until maybe a half hour later, they finally came back to Amtrak.

Dan hadn’t even gotten the car stopped at Amtrak when Ralph jumped out.

He never did get his money.

**XXV. I don't believe my ears**

“She’s working at *Sauro’s*?” asked Mack, incredulous at the thought.

Medina nodded. “That’s a fact.”

“And she gave you the bucks?”

Medina was getting tired of repeating himself. “You have them in your hand...”

“Somebody pinch me.”

Medina went on to tell Mack the rest of the story.

They were sitting in one of the back booths at Phil’s. They’d come in for *Morning Tea* after the end of their shifts and Medina had cornered Mack immediately to tell him of their good fortune at finding Suzy.

And it really was good fortune: the money Suzy gave them couldn’t have come at a better time – they were both nearly broke.

As well as being ostracized and shunned by the other drivers and BlackTop employees generally, they had both suffered financially as well.

For example, the day dispatcher, a sadistic bastard named Tony Trujillo, had decided to punish them, and since the days following the aborted date, he would now only dispatch them to grocery runs on the Hilltop.

Hilltop grocery runs were about as bad as it gets – everyone hated them and avoided them like the plague if they could. This was the type of run where you’d get to the store and find the people would still be in line, checking out. Fifteen minutes later after they finally paid for their

food, invariably, it'd take them another ten minutes to completely load every nook and cranny of the car with the groceries and a few screaming kids. Then you'd drive a whole half a mile to their squalid, house. Then – probably twenty-five minutes into the trip – it'd take them another ten minutes to unload the groceries, and then finally at the end, they'd count out the three dollar and ten cent fare in pennies.

Mack tried to avoid the runs by changing zones and other ruses like calling in phony trips to Puyallup and Lakewood. But as he found out, it didn't work. Because no matter where in the county he was, the only thing Tony would give him were Hilltop grocery runs. He could vacate twenty miles away at Ft Lewis, and he'd still hear Tony tell him, "Vacant? Good, then pickup Safeway, Eleventh and M Street, for Louise."

Eventually, both he and Medina gave up and started calling in-service only after Tony had left each day.

Rosie Glen, the evening dispatcher, treated them better – but still, the calls she gave them didn't seem as good quality as they had before.

Really, the only one who treated them the same as before – at least in terms of trips – was Carnahan himself – and he still wouldn't talk to them. Or anyone else, for that matter.

When Medina had finally wound down and Mack had wrung as much information out of him as possible, Mack downed the rest of his shot of *Old Tennessee*.

Wiping his mouth on the cuff of his sleeve, he said, "Well, don't that beat all. Who the fuck woulda figured she wasn't a hooker?"

Medina nodded his head. "If we could only get him to talk to her, maybe we could end all this?"

“No shit. If I get one more grocery run, or one more cheap drunk, I’m gonna scream.”

Mack signaled the bartender for another drink, and went on, “You know Rosie gave me Mr. Ugly again last night? That’s three times this week! Fuck, I can’t stand this.”

Mr. Ugly was one of the driver’s least favorite fares.

An elderly, kidney dialysis patient, he would spend all day drinking at his favorite North Tacoma bar, getting roaring drunk, then roll into dialysis and get sobered up. According to Mr. Ugly, his body was already shot, and dialysis did sober him up, so what the hell?

Drunk or sober, he was always nasty and abusive towards the drivers.

He lived just around the corner from the bar – the fare to the bar was the minimum fare of three dollars and ten cents. It usually took him five minutes or more to get in and out of the car with his walker, screaming all the while “*What’re you looking at, asshole!*” and so on. And then he’d pay exact change. If he was feeling good, he’d tip the driver ten cents. Three dollars and twenty cents for a fare that took twenty minutes to a half hour.

Medina nodded, thinking about his own most recent Mr. Ugly trip and then said, “Yeah, I had him last week myself. One cheap, nasty, evil sonofabitch.”

Mack nodded. “Rosie usually don’t do that to me. I gotta think it was ‘cause a Carnahan.”

The bartender placed a new shot of *Old Tennessee* in front of Mack, and Mack handed him some money.

Continuing, Mack said, “You’re right. We gotta get them together and get this shit sorted out.”

Eyebrows raised, Medina asked, “Right. But how?”

Mack shook his head. “Dunno. I guess we need to go talk to her.”

“She said it’d be a couple weeks or so before she’d do it,” said Medina. He took a sip from his beer, and then went on, “What about we try and talk to Carnahan, ourselves?”

Mack frowned, shaking his head. “I dunno. I guess we can try it. But I don’t know how far we’re gonna get.”

## **XXVI. The bare truth**

Medina waved at Carnahan again. He and Mack were standing outside on the deck in front of the dispatch office. It was three-thirty in the morning, and dead as anything.

Carnahan ignored them for several minutes, looking away, ostensibly engrossed in the book he was reading. Finally after it became clear they weren’t going away, he put the book down and went out to meet them.

The door of the driver’s lounge opened and Carnahan came out, lighting a cigarette as the door swung closed. He flicked the match off towards the wash rack, and then stared at them, letting out a long plume of smoke.

Mack and Medina were standing awkwardly by the railing.

Medina cleared his throat, and then Mack said, “Ed, like we’re sorry as hell about what happened.”

Carnahan frowned and shook his head, saying, “I told you I didn’t want to discuss that.” He started to turn back towards the door.

“Eddie, we found her,” said Medina quickly.

Carnahan stopped in his tracks.

“And she’s not a hooker,” said Mack.

“Not a hooker?” asked Carnahan tentatively. He turned back towards them. “She’s not a hooker?”

Medina shook his head. “Naw, she was just someone who was down on her luck, who was trying to make a fast buck. She found me last night and we got to talking.” He went on to relate the full story, leaving nothing out.

Carnahan sat down in one of the deck chairs and listened closely, absorbed in the story. When Medina finished, Carnahan simply sat there shaking his head.

“That’s why she left?” he asked.

Medina nodded. “Because going through with it woulda been the wrong thing to do. The wrong *path*, she said.”

“No shit?” asked Carnahan.

Medina nodded again. “No shit.”

“She wasn’t mad at me?” he asked.

“Mad at you? Just the opposite. She told me she figured you helped her a helluva lot. She said she was in your debt.”

Seizing the opportunity, Mack added, “And she wants to see you again, to explain.” Which was sort of close to the truth, he thought.

Eyes wide, Carnahan said, “She does? She wants to see me?”

Mack nodded quickly. “You betcha.”

Carnahan frowned. “It wouldn’t do any good. There’d be no purpose in meeting her again.”

Medina broke in, “It might or might not do any good. Never know if you don’t try it.” He paused for a moment, then went on, “It’s gonna be a couple weeks before she’s ready. Like I

said, she wants to get back on her feet before she sees you. That gives you a while to think about it.”

Eyes downcast, Carnahan said, “I really don’t see the purpose, here.” He sighed, and then continued, “But thanks for trying, guys.”

Mack frowned, then said quickly, “Look, you been such a fucking wreck for the last month, somebody’s gotta do something. We got you in this mess, it’s our job to get you out.”

Eyes narrowed, Carnahan asked, “Has it been that obvious?”

Medina laughed.

Mack went on, “Only if you’re not from Venus or something. Yeah, I think everybody noticed that you been down in the dumps.”

Medina nodded. “Just try it, Ed. All you gotta do is talk to her. Clear up all this mess. Then maybe we can all get everything back to normal.”

Carnahan shrugged. “We’ll see.” He gave a cautious smile. “But like I said, thanks for trying.”

## **XXVII. Capitalism’s finest hour**

Lyman Clark was a capitalist.

He’d been a night driver at BlackTop for about five years, and in that time, had amassed what everyone acknowledged to be the premier collection of strange and interesting items that had been taken from people in lieu of cab fare.

He had several TV sets (two color, one black and white). Boom-box radios up the kazoo. A couple cell phones. Leather jackets. Concert tickets. A passport and several drivers’ licenses.

Groceries. Cigarettes. Cosmetics. French perfume. Car stereos. Pawn tickets. Booze.

Cameras. Watches. But these were things that most all the cab drivers traded for at one time or another.

Lyman had a great number of more *exotic* items as well.

There was the walker that he'd taken from one elderly lady who'd been unable to find her money. Another elderly gentleman forfeited his false teeth until he could pay up. There was the hypodermic syringe and insulin he took from a diabetic. A bottle of antibiotics that he got from a lady with pneumonia. A purebred terrier with six puppies. A giant economy-size box of rubbers from a hooker. Crutches. And even once, he took a man's wife (though only for several hours).

As was the custom, he generally waited a few days for the people to redeem whatever it was he got from them, but then if they didn't produce the cash in time, he would offer his wares to the other drivers and to the public at large. He was often found out in the parking lot with the trunk of his car open, showing off his latest acquisitions.

And then for a time, he had also operated a traveling after-hours bar.

Wisely recognizing the demand for booze after the bars closed each night, Lyman stocked his trunk with a number of bottles of liquor. Then every time he'd pick up someone after bar closing, he'd offer them their favorite libation – at \$20 a drink. He justified the high price by correctly pointing out the fact that he had, as he said, a corner on the market and if they didn't like it, they could find someone else that would sell them a drink after two AM.

Business was quite brisk until a drunk Canadian tourist ruined it all one night by whining and complaining to the company about being gouged. The drunk couldn't remember the car



number so they never were able to actually identify Lyman. Still, it scared him pretty good, so he decided to lay low for a while and his traveling bar became history.

Capitalistic bent aside, Lyman was never one of the top moneymakers at BlackTop. He could frequently be found sitting at the Greyhound Depot, parked out back, bullshitting with other drivers. More often than not, when he got a call, he'd continue talking for fifteen or even twenty minutes before he left – and then he'd wonder why the fares weren't there when he finally got to the address.

And then usually when the calls got really hectic around bar closing, he'd take off and call out-of-service to eat breakfast.

None of this particularly endeared him to the dispatchers.

For his part, he just figured the dispatchers didn't like him because he was too smart – too good a businessman to be at BlackTop.

All of which was well and fine. But his latest exploit had landed him in *real* trouble.

He'd been on his way to the north end with a couple of teenagers coming back from a night out on the town, when Ed Carnahan had called on the radio, telling him he wanted him at his window, to talk to him in person, *right now*. Lyman dumped the teenagers off and then made his way back to the office.

He walked up the stairs to the deck and waved at Carnahan through the window of the dispatch office. Carnahan acknowledged him with a curt nod of his head, but it was fifteen minutes before he could break free to come out on the deck and talk. Lyman was all butterflies by the time Carnahan finally came out.

Visibly annoyed, Carnahan sat down beside him on one of the deck chairs, and then lit a cigarette.

As Carnahan blew out the match, Lyman asked him in a casual tone, “Cindy complained, huh?” His stomach was doing flip-flops as he waited for the answer.

Carnahan nodded, smoke trailing from his nostrils. “Yeah. What exactly did you expect?”

Trying to sound indignant but not really pulling it off, Lyman said, “Well she couldn’t pay me. What was I supposed to do?”

Blowing out a long plume of smoke, Carnahan shook his head, and then said, “Look. Obviously you’ve gotta be paid. I mean Cindy’s a regular. Sure, sometimes she gets short of cash, but she always pays up, eventually. We’ve been doing business with her for a helluva long time, Lyman. She’s a good customer.”

Lyman pushed his case. “She was drunk as shit. Really sloppy. And she was acting like a real asshole.”

Carnahan nodded. “Yeah, I know how she gets. Murphy took the call tonight. He told me she was pretty soused.”

Lyman nodded, feeling more relaxed now that it sounded like Carnahan was finally taking his side.

Carnahan took another big drag off his cigarette and then went on, “But Lyman, that still doesn’t excuse what you did.”

Confused at the reversal, Lyman narrowed his eyes and said, “Whadayamean? She’ll get it back when I get paid.”

Carnahan shook his head. “I really don’t give a shit what she did or said, but you *do not* take a paraplegic’s wheel chair and then leave them laying out on the goddamn sidewalk, at two-thirty in the morning – *and in the rain*, much less!” Looking embarrassed, Lyman frowned and

looked away. Carnahan waited a few moments for the words to penetrate, then continued, “It took her a half hour – *a half a fucking hour* – to drag herself up to the door of the building, and she probably never would have gotten inside except that one of her neighbors found her and helped her in.”

Lyman seemed to shrink into the chair.

Carnahan pushed on. “It took me almost twenty minutes of really fast talking before she calmed down and stopped shouting. And then I still had to talk her neighbor outa calling the cops. Do you even realize exactly what you did? She coulda died of exposure or something! You could have ended up charged with murder, for god’s sake.”

Lyman continued to melt into his chair. “Sorry,” he said meekly.

Carnahan looked closely at him, taking a big drag off his cigarette. Then exhaling, he went on, “If we’re lucky, neither of them will say another word about this. But I’ll tell you right now, that if Elmo ends up hearing about this, I can *guarantee* you’ll be down the road in an instant. Do you understand?”

Looking scared, Lyman nodded quickly, and muttered, “Yes.”

The sound of the radio squawking with people trying to call in was audible through the open window and Carnahan was distracted momentarily. Then he turned back to Lyman, and said curtly, “Look... I did the best job I could to smooth this over. Like I said, if we’re lucky, this’ll be the last anyone hears of it. But now you’ve got to do *your* part.”

“My part?” Lyman said weakly.

Carnahan nodded. “Your part. I want you over at Cindy’s ASAP. Give her back the wheel chair, and it better be bright and shiny and looking better than new. And if you know

what's good, you better kiss her ass like you never kissed ass before in your entire life. She's got your balls in a trash compactor, and her hand's on the switch."

"But... but...what about the money she owes me?" asked Lyman, looking perplexed.

Carnahan shook his head, looking quite angry. He spoke quickly, "Nope. That's the exact wrong question. The correct question is 'how do you feel about being *owned* by her?' Lock, stock and barrel. Lyman, if she goes to the cops, you'll end up in jail. I'm certain of it. No other possible outcome. At the very least, it's reckless endangerment. At the worst, it's attempted murder. And then if she gets an attorney and files a civil suit against you, she'll get thousands and thousands of bucks in damages. *Thousands*. And given that, it's pretty much a certainty your career as a cab driver would be over. Why even Army-Navy wouldn't hire you then – *after* you get out of jail. So I think you better write-off the cab fare and get your ass over there and start kissing up. *Or else.*"

Almost choking, Lyman sputtered, "Or else?"

Frowning, Carnahan said flatly, "Look. You have this resolved in the next one hour, and I hear back from Cindy that you've been a good boy and everything is righteous, or I'll make a full report to Elmo this morning and your career as a cab driver is *ended*. Period. Do you understand?"

Lyman nodded, looking grim.

Carnahan flicked his cigarette butt in a long arc out over towards the wash rack, and then standing up, said, "Good. Get over there right away. You might wanna take her a bottle of booze if you've still got your stash. Do anything and everything to make her one happy camper."

Looking scared, Lyman nodded agreement.

“Good. Don’t disappoint me. I’m going way out on a limb for you on this.”

Without saying a thing, Lyman clambered to his feet and quickly left.

Carnahan watched as Lyman climbed into his cab. Then shaking his head, he opened the door to the driver’s lounge and went back inside.

### **XXVIII. Preacher Dave and Crazy Leroy**

“Now it’s time to turn to your brother, and give them a big, big hug...”

Mack turned the volume of the radio down, eying a couple of almost-good-looking hookers standing at the street corner, wondering they’d do if he tried to give them a hug.

Dave McDonald, one of the phone people, was pinch-hitting for Rosie who was probably outside goofing off. If it wasn’t real busy, McDonald almost always took the time to do his preacher act when he subbed for her. Or if not that, then he’d do his AM radio DJ persona. McDonald was a real ham, and tonight, he was *really* getting into it.

On the radio, McDonald continued in his best tent-revival, preacher voice, “Are you hugging them? Are you *hugging* them? Praise the Lord, then! Praise the Lord!” He paused for a second, then went on quickly, “Yes, my brothers, all we’ve gotta do is just try and get along and love one another. And if we can do that one thing – *that one small thing* – then the world, as our sister Dionne Warwick would say, will be a better place.” McDonald took a deep breath, foot still on the mic pedal, and then said, “Alright now my brothers and sisters, with the spirit of *love* in our hearts, who is the next car?”

Mack keyed the mic. “Car sick-o.”

“Yes, my brother, car sixty?”

Mack shook his head, trying not to laugh. He keyed the mic. “Sick-o’s vacant, Nineteenth and K.”

“Very good, my brother. Now is the spirit moving inside you? Do you feel it? Do you *feel it?*” he said, almost shouting at the end.

McDonald was such a goddamned ham, thought Mack. “Oh, yeah right, for real,” he said into the mic, bored and hungry, hoping he wasn’t top in the zone so he’d have a chance to get a bite to eat.

McDonald continued, “Well since the spirit is inside you my brother, then why don’t you get the WA Grocery, Nineteenth and Prospect, for Leroy.”

Mack was at once alert and said crisply, “Sick-o copy.”

“Thank you my brother, now, who’s next?”

Mack dropped the car in gear and quickly turned and accelerated up Nineteenth Street. He knew who Leroy was. All the drivers did.

Leroy was a Viet Nam veteran who had an eighteen hundred dollar a month disability check. He was also nuts as hell – a schizophrenic – who liked to ride in cabs.

Several times a month or more, Leroy would go for long, aimless rides all over the county. Sometimes he’d stop at a restaurant and have the driver sit outside while he ate, and then sometimes they’d just drive without stopping. Each time, the fare would always be at least forty or fifty dollars, without fail.

Mack had driven him several times. The guy was pretty creepy – he talked to himself constantly, and supposedly had all these “voices” that told him where to go. He was one strange cookie, for real.

But, for that kind of money, Mack figured creepy was just fine.

Mack pulled into the grocery's parking lot, and saw Leroy standing next to the pay phone. Long hair and a shaggy, unkempt beard, and an old army jacket and jeans. The guy looked like a derelict, but he had bucks. Mack stopped next to him.

Leroy got in the back seat.

Mack turned the meter on before the door closed.

“So where can I take ya? He asked. The guy had really crazy looking eyes, thought Mack.

Crazy eyes narrowed, Leroy was silent for a moment, and then said, “They’re telling me I need to go to Lakewood.”

Mack nodded, smiling to himself. This was going to be a very good trip, he was sure of it. “Oookay... Now, do they say *where* in Lakewood?” he asked.

Leroy was lost in thought, a look of concentration on his face. Then he looked up. “No, they just say Lakewood.”

Mack smiled broadly, his suspicions confirmed. “Oke doke. How about we just go down the freeway towards Lakewood, then maybe when we get there, they’ll have the actual destination?”

A worried expression on his face, the man held his hand over his forehead and was silent for a moment, and then looked up and said, “They say that’s okay.” He then stared blankly into space, and started talking to himself, in a low, almost inaudible mumble.

The little Mack could hear sounded like nonsense.

Ignoring him, Mack picked up the mic. “Car sick-o.”

On the radio, McDonald responded immediately, “Yes my brother, car sixty?”

“Sick-o’s got a charter – probably a round trip. I’ll be out for a while.”

“You see? God does love you! Now let’s all just love one another, my brothers! And who’s the next car?”

They’d been driving aimlessly through Lakewood for almost an hour. The fare was fifty dollars and climbing. Leroy mostly kept to himself, mumbling softly, except when telling Mack where the voices told him to go. Mack was pretty well getting used to him.

He wasn’t used to his car. He’d gotten car sixty back from the shop only just that day – Evil Justin had held it hostage for almost two months. Compared to car thirty-one, sixty was a brand new Cadillac. Mack couldn’t quite get over what it felt like to drive something that was not a smelly, noisy, wreck.

He’d had the volume on the radio down and hadn’t really been paying attention, but he thought he’d heard Rosie calling him. He picked up the mic.

“Car sick-o?”

Rosie’s sexy, sweet-young-thing voice came back, “Car sixty! There you are! Goodness gracious, you know how I get when you guys don’t call-in for a long time. So how are we doing?”

Mack keyed the mic. “Just fine. I don’t have a clue how much longer. I’ll most likely vacate back where I started.”

“That’s fine, dear,” said Rosie. “I also wanted you to know you have a personal, downtown.”

Mack narrowed his eyes. “A personal? Who?”

“She didn’t give her name. The address is near the fast puppy.” The fast puppy was the driver’s shorthand for the Greyhound Depot. Rosie continued, “Shall I put that on your hook?”



It was Suzy. It had to be, thought Mack.

He keyed the mic again. “I know who you mean. Yeah, go ahead and put it on my hook. I’ll do that after I vacate. It’ll probably be a local. I’ll call going when I pickup if it’s gonna take more than a couple minutes.”

“Thank you, dear. And you remember to check-in, too. I get so worried!” She paused for a second, and then went on, “Alright now, I’m holding six bells in the town, three in the Tideflats, four bells on the Eastside, who’s calling?”

Mack turned the radio back down and then made a violent u-turn in the middle of Bridgeport Way, and headed back for the freeway.

Leroy woke up from his trance with a start. “Hey! Where are we going? This isn’t the way!”

Mack glanced back at him, over his shoulder and then after a second, said, “They’re telling me we have to go downtown.”

Mouth hanging open, wide-eyed, Leroy said, “No! That isn’t what they said! They want me to go the other way!”

Mack frowned, and said, “Well dipshit, you’ve got your voices and I’ve got mine. Mine say we’re going downtown. We’ve got a lady to pick up, and if we don’t, they say we’re in deep shit.” He put his hand to his ear and went on, “What was that? What are you saying? You what? Oh, no!” He glanced back at Leroy again, and said, “Leroy! We’re really up shit creek, now! They planted a miniature Claymore inside you while you were sleeping and they’ll explode your head if we don’t go downtown! A fuckin’ A Claymore! Goddamn tricky sonofabitches! Poor Leroy! I won’t let your head explode, man!” Then Mack continued in a soft monotone, “Downtown... downtown... downtown... downtown...” Over and over and over.

Leroy looked scared and put his hands over his ears, slowly rocking backwards and forwards in the seat.

Fifteen minutes later as they pulled up in front of Sauro's Cleanerama, Suzy walked out from the doorway where she'd been waiting. She opened the front door and got in.

"Hi, how ya doing?" said Mack as she got in.

"Hey, Mack," she said. Then she saw Leroy in the back seat, and asked, "You got a fare?"

Mack nodded, and then to Leroy said, "This is the lady they're telling me we gotta pick up. You understand? They're telling me it's life and death. It's a secret mission from the commander himself. We don't pick her up, you head's gonna explode right now! And we don't want that, do we?"

Looking worried, Leroy shook his head, and was silent.

Mack looked back at Suzy. A serious expression on his face, he said, "Thank you, ma'am, for letting us pick you up so Leroy's head don't explode." Suzy grinned, and he paused for a second, and then went on, "I just got sixty back today and I'd sure as hell hate to mess up the upholstery on the first night."

"No, we sure wouldn't want that," said Suzy. "Are you gonna be okay, Leroy?" She smiled at him.

He gave what looked like might have been a fleeting smile, but didn't answer.

Suzy shrugged, and then opening her small purse, she pulled out a wad of bills. Holding them out towards Mack, she said, "Here's the last. Now we're square."

Mack accepted the money and put it in his shirt pocket. "Thanks," he said. "So, you gonna be able to get together with Carnahan now?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

A smile on her pretty face, she shook her head. “God, will you and Marty never stop?”

Eyebrows still raised, Mack said, “Stop? Us?”

Frowning, Suzy said, “Look, I told you guys I’d do it and I will. I like him. He’s a nice guy. I owe him for setting me straight. And I’m real sorry about what happened. But I don’t need any more build-ups or guilt trips!”

“Guilt trips?”

Her face softened. “All the stuff you and Marty been telling me about him for the last month sounds just great. And I really do owe him. But lighten up, already. Quit pushing so hard!”

Mack shrugged. “He was really fucked up behind this – we just wanna see him get over it. And talking with you may just do that. It’s been over a month since you told Marty you’d do it.”

She frowned again. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, what?”

She paused for a moment, staring at Mack, then said, “I can do it.”

“When?”

“Whenever.”

“Tomorrow night?”

She drew a deep breath, and then looking down at the floor of the cab, she said softly, “Okay, I guess so.” Chewing her bottom lip, she looked up, and then went on, “I finally got a room at the Winthrop. Any chance you can help me move my stuff down there?”

Mack put his hand on his forehead, and then wide-eyed, looked back at Leroy.

“Ohmigod! Leroy! They’re saying we have to help her move, now. You hear them? You do hear them, don’t ya Leroy?”

Leroy looked blankly back at Mack.

Smiling, Mack turned to Suzy. “I and Leroy would be most pleased to help you move, ma’am.”

Mack was waiting at the door of the YWCA women’s shelter when Suzy returned, pulling a cart loaded with her possessions. Men – *all* men, even cab drivers, weren’t allowed inside.

“Is this it? Mack asked. There were a couple garbage bags of clothing, a small suitcase, and an old portable TV.

She nodded. “One of the ladies here gave me the TV. It works and everything.”

“Okay. It should all fit into the trunk.”

They picked up the stuff and placed it in the trunk. Mack slammed the trunk lid and they got back in the car.

Leroy was very agitated, talking quite loudly now. “Fire! Fire! Yes I can. The angels aren’t apples today if the Christmas is red! No you won’t! Alright Lieutenant, let’s go. Dive, dive, dive!”

Suzy looked alarmed, but Mack held up his hand. Looking back at Leroy, he said, “Leroy.” Leroy ignored him, staring off into space, continuing to speak gibberish. Louder, Mack said, “Hey Leroy!”

Mouth gaping open, Leroy looked over at him, silent for a moment. “Huh?”

Mack put the car in gear and turned right down Fourth Street, and said, “Put a cork in it, huh?” Eyes wide, Leroy stared at him. Mack went on, “Okay, my voices are telling me we gotta help this lady get her stuff upstairs to her new apartment. You cool with that? How’s the head? It ain’t close to exploding yet, is it? I told you I was gonna take care of ya, didn’t I?”

Mack looked back at Suzy. In a lower voice, he said, “So maybe you and Ed can go to dinner tomorrow night?”

Suzy looked away and shrugged. “I dunno. Whatever.”

“I was just thinking you might kinda pickup where you left off.” Mack paused for a second, and then went on quickly, “I mean just the dinner, nothing else. I wasn’t trying to say nothing.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You better not be thinking I’m gonna do anything...”

“Not even close.”

Suzy finished in a curt tone, “Because I ain’t no dirty whore.”

Mack nodded his head. “Course. I’m just saying like you guys can start over, like you just met off the street. Two regular people. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Her expression softened. “Okay.”

Mack was silent for a moment. From the back seat, Leroy droned on, mumbling incoherently.

“So how’s it working out at Sauro’s?” asked Mack, after a few more moments.

She shrugged. “Oh, good I guess. Awful long day. But I like it. The customers are mostly nice. The money ain’t great, but the guy that runs the place is real easy to get along with.” She was silent for a moment, staring out the window of the cab, and then went on, “I am doing it the right way. I feel like I got control of my life back. And that feels *damned* good.”

Mack stopped in front of the Winthrop.

Built back in the twenties, the Winthrop had long been one of the premier hotels in Tacoma, a gathering place for the elite. The Knights of Pythias had their friendship galas there; the Plywood Association had their conventions there; the Aquinas Academy held their dances in the opulent Crystal Ballroom; giggling debutants made their first forays into the society pages – For years and years, the Winthrop was a place of elegance and grandeur.

Then in the sixties with the advent of the Tacoma Mall, the downtown had all but died and the hotel fell into disfavor and disrepair. In those years, it was more common to see bums than debutants standing in the entrance.

Through a fitful decade as the hotel struggled with solvency and slowly sank into oblivion, it was finally rescued from the wrecker's ball and turned into low income housing, mostly for old people.

Now shabby and seedy, the glorious days of the past grandeur had faded into obscurity.

It wasn't a great place, but it was alright.

Mack put the car in park and turned off the ignition. Looking back at Leroy, who was still mumbling quietly to himself, Mack said, "Hey, Leroy! Leroy!"

Leroy looked up.

"C'mon, get out. My voices are telling me you can help us carry the stuff up to her apartment." Leroy sat stock still, looking a little angry, so Mack continued, "C'mon! You want 'em to explode that Claymore? C'mon an' help us! Quick!"

Mack and Suzy got out, and Leroy reluctantly followed.

The trunk open, Mack gave Leroy the TV set. "Now don't drop it," he said.

He took the garbage bags of clothes and Suzy took the suitcase. Together they walked in through the lobby, and stopping in front of the elevators, Suzy punched the call button.

Moments later, creaking and groaning, the old elevator deposited them on the sixth floor.

“It’s this way,” said Suzy.

They followed her down the dingy hall. The place smelled like boiled cabbage and moldy old people. Mack wrinkled his nose.

Suzy opened the door, and they stepped inside. A small studio apartment. There was a couch that was probably a hide-a-bed, and a small kitchen table with two chairs. On the right was a small kitchen. It looked neat and clean.

To Leroy, she said, “You can put the TV over there. Thanks for carrying it up.” She pointed towards the kitchen table.

She set down her suitcase and took the bags from Mack.

Leroy set the TV down gently, and stood placidly, eyes roaming over Suzy’s gorgeous face and body. He may have been nuts, but apparently he wasn’t so nuts as to be unable to appreciate Suzy’s good looks.

She smiled at him, and then looking back at Mack, said, “I gotta thank you guys for helping me out.” She looked back in Leroy’s direction again.

Leroy looked away, his cheeks red beneath the bushy beard.

Mack said, “Ain’t nothing.” He paused for a second, and then went on, “So what time is good for you tomorrow night? I can give you a ride to the restaurant if you like.”

She frowned, looking away. “You really are a pushy sonofabitch, aren’t you?”

Mack smiled broadly. “Who me?”

The frown softening, she said, “Whatever. I get off at eight. It’d be nice to come home and take a shower before I go out. How’s nine o’clock?”

“What say, I pick you up at work at eight, then bring you back here and wait for you. That way you could probably be ready by eight-thirty?”

She tried to hide her smile, but couldn’t. “Okay. That’ll work.”

“Cool. We’ll see ya then.”

Back at the WA Grocery, Mack stopped the meter and put the car in park.

They were sitting in the grocery’s parking lot. Leroy had been pretty quiet for the rest of the ride since they dropped Suzy off. He’d been acting almost like a normal person.

Mack turned the interior light on, then said, “Okay Leroy, my good man, that’ll be eighty-seven fifty.”

Leroy stared blankly for a moment, and then said, “The voices are telling me to pay you.”

Mack nodded. “Yup. And mine are telling me you oughta give me a twenty dollar tip.”

Leroy’s eyes narrowed. “No, they’re saying I should pay the exact amount.”

Mack shrugged. “Aw, what the hell. You sure they’re not saying to tip me?”

Leroy looked puzzled. “Not at all.” He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket and counted out eighty-seven dollars. Then from his pants pocket, he pulled out two quarters.

“Here,” he said, handing it all to Mack.

“Cheap fuckin’ voices,” Mack muttered under his breath.

Leroy opened the door and got out, slamming the door behind him.

Smiling, Mack picked up the mic, waiting for a break in the busy radio traffic to call-in vacant.



**XXIX. The Second Chance**

“Are you sure this looks okay?” asked Carnahan nervously.

Medina straightened the lapels of Carnahan’s corduroy jacket and brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his shoulder. “You’ll like knock ‘em dead, man.”

They were standing in front of the Happy Dragon, a small Chinese restaurant in the North End. Medina had met Carnahan at the restaurant, and they were waiting for Mack to deliver Suzy.

Carnahan was wearing the corduroy jacket and khaki-colored Dockers with a blue dress shirt. He looked very neat and couth.

Carnahan looked at his watch. “Shouldn’t they be here by now?” he asked.

Medina nodded. “Yeah, pretty close. Like I heard him call going about five minutes ago.”

“You’re sure I look alright?”

Medina shook his head. “Man, you look just fine. Now will you relax, for Christ’s sake?”

Car sixty pulled into the lot and parked in a space by the sidewalk.

Suzy and Mack got out, and walked towards them.

Suzy was wearing brown slacks and a light-blue blouse. She looked very pretty, in a subdued sort of way.

She and Mack stopped in front of Carnahan and Medina.

Feeling awkward, Mack cleared his throat, and then said, “Okay folks, let’s try this again, huh? Ed, I’d like you to meet Suzy. Suzy, this is Ed.”

Staring into her slanted, almond-shaped, green eyes, Carnahan said, “Pleased to meet you, I’m sure.”

“Same here,” said Suzy, returning his gaze.

As Carnahan and Suzy stood staring at each other, Mack cleared his throat again, and said, “Okay, then this is where we bow out, guys. Time for me and Marty to split.” To Suzy, he continued, “Ed’ll give ya a ride home. Okay?”

Coming out of his trance, Carnahan nodded quickly. “Sure,” he said, still staring at her, awed by her beauty.

Suzy nodded in agreement. “Yeah, okay, I guess.”

“Okay. Later then,” said Mack.

He and Medina turned, and left for their cars.

Alone together, Carnahan and Suzy were silent as they watched the pair leave.

Carnahan broke the spell. “Shall we go inside?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Sure, it’s getting kinda chilly out here, anyways.”

They turned and walked towards the entrance, and Carnahan opened the door of the restaurant for her. It was a small place, only about ten booths.

The building had started its life in the early sixties as an English fish and chips place – H. Salt, Esquire. H. Salt weathered a few bad years and as the craze for English-style fish and chips waned, the place finally folded. A number of other fast-food restaurants came and went over the years, but nothing lasted very long. Then in the mid-nineties, the Happy Dragon people took it over.

Unlike the others, they were determined to break the place's fast-food mold and make it a *real* restaurant, serving *good* Chinese food. And in this, they succeeded.

They were helped out early on by a favorable review from the hired belly of the local newspaper. The customers came in droves after that, and so over the next few years, the Happy Dragon flourished where the others had foundered. Their delicate, delicious sauces were some of the best in town.

The hostess, a tiny Chinese woman, met them at the door. "Two?" she asked.

The place was only about half-full. Tasteful, classical music came from speakers in the ceiling. There was a large aquarium with some koi in the middle of the entry foyer.

"Yeah, two for dinner," said Carnahan. Suzy's shoulder brushed against his.

"This way, please," said the hostess.

They followed her around the corner to a small booth, and sat down.

The booth had blue, plastic seats – a holdover from the fish and chip days. The table had a linen tablecloth with Chinese Zodiac place mats, with a sheet of glass over the top. The wall to the left of the booth held Chinese figurines. Paper lanterns hung from the ceiling.

The hostess placed menus before them, and then left.

Carnahan and Suzy stared at each other for a few moments, and then awkwardly, Carnahan, said, "So, uh... Mack and Marty told me what happened."

A flush rising on her face, Suzy said, "God, I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. But I had to leave."

He nodded. "That's what they said."

Cheeks still flushed, she asked, "They told you everything?"

"About you not being a ..."

She cut him off. “Yeah. Exactly. I just couldn’t. It’s nothing against you or anything like that.”

He stared into her almond-shaped, green eyes. She’d put on some makeup, he saw, and she looked even more beautiful than the last time. Truly awe-inspiring.

“And so that’s what you were talking about?” he asked. “That night...”

She nodded her head. “Yeah, exactly. The easy way would have been to go through with it. But it was the wrong way, so I couldn’t do it.” She paused for a second, dabbing at the corner of her eye with the napkin.

Carnahan stared at her, waiting.

When she saw Carnahan wasn’t going to say anything, she went on, “When we were talking, it’s like you really put it all into focus for me. The whole thing. I don’t think I never woulda figured it all out for me, by myself. I woulda just kept going the way I was, diggin’ myself deeper and deeper. But you set me straight.”

“I did?” he asked quietly.

She nodded. “You did. And now I’m doing it the right way.”

“The hard way?”

She smiled. “You said it! Yeah, it’s hard as hell. But it feels so damned good. I really got you to thank for that.”

Carnahan smiled. “Well, at least I did something good, then.”

She smiled widely. “Damn straight, you did. Thank you!”

“You’re very welcome.”

He stared at her, now basking in a warm glow. In all his wildest fantasies, he’d never imagined it turning out like this.

The waitress, a young Chinese girl pushing a small stainless-steel cart came to the table and pulled him back to earth. “Hi, you leady order?” she asked in heavily accented English.

“Can you give us a few minutes?” asked Carnahan.

“Shu. You like tea?”

“That’d be great.”

The waitress turned over the teacups and filled them, then left the teapot on the table. She left, pushing the cart in front of her.

Carnahan picked up the menu, then asked, “They’ve got some good combination dinners here. Would you like to do one of them?”

Suzu smiled. “Sure.” She picked up her menu and studied the choices. “How about Family Dinner B? You like Mongolian Beef?” she asked, after a few moments.

Carnahan nodded. “That’s it, then.” He picked up his teacup, and took a small sip.

Suzu took a small sip from hers, and then eyes downcast, she said, “I truly am sorry for what happened. Mack and Marty told me you got really upset. That’s about the last thing I ever wanted. I really wanna apologize for that.” She looked up at him, across the table.

It was his turn to blush, now. Uneasy and embarrassed, he shrugged it off and said nonchalantly, “It’s cool. I got over it. And as it turns out, it was for a good cause – so that makes me really happy.”

She smiled. “It does?”

He nodded. “It does. If you can help someone out, then that’s a good thing.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

Pushing her cart, the waitress returned. “You leady odder now?”

Thankful for the interruption, Carnahan nodded. “Yeah, we’d like two Family Dinner B’s,” he said.

The waitress wrote down the order. “You like drink with?” she asked.

He looked over at Suzy. She shook her head. Carnahan said, “No, we’re fine with just the tea.”

The waitress nodded and left.

Carnahan and Suzy both took drinks of their tea.

After a few moments, he asked cautiously, “Marty told me you had a rough childhood?”

She took another sip of tea, then answered, “It wasn’t no bed a roses.” She picked up the teapot and refilled her cup and then Carnahan’s. As she was doing so, she went on, “My parents divorced when I was about three. I ain’t never seen my old man, since. My mom was an alcoholic. She ran off when I was sixteen. I got put in foster homes.”

Carnahan felt a rush of sympathy for her and he frowned. “That sounds terrible.”

She shrugged, taking another sip of her tea. “It wasn’t so bad. The last couple foster homes they had me in were really religious, really strict. The people were a pain in the ass, but they did help me. I wasn’t real crazy about it at the time, though.”

His interest was truly piqued and he wanted to draw as much as possible out of her.

“You went and lived in LA?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

She nodded, cheeks red again, looking at the floor. “Yeah. I was gonna be a movie star. God, I was so stupid!”

She was so naive, so pure, he thought, as a wave of emotion broke over him. Ignoring it, he shrugged. “That’s a problem everyone has,” he said, hoping to minimize her pain.

She laughed bitterly. “Not like me.”

“Just like you.”

Shaking her head, she took another sip, and then went on, “No, *not even* like me. Nope. For me, everything went okay for a couple three years, and then I met this guy. He told me a lot of things. He had this big fancy house, lots of dough. Connections up the butt. He was gonna make me a star.”

“Yeah?” Carnahan was hanging on her words, waiting for her to continue.

Her faced reddened again, and after a short pause, eyes cast down at the floor, she went on, “He talked me into sleeping with some men. Told me they were big studio execs and that if I wanted an acting job, this was the only way to get it. God I was so fucking *stupid!*” She hid her face behind her hands.

Carnahan was bitterly stung by her pain, and he wanted nothing more than to comfort her. “You’re not the first woman to have that happen,” he said ineffectually. “It’s so common it’s a cliché.”

“He was a goddamned pimp!” she exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, still hiding her face.

Another wave of emotion swept over him. It felt almost like... like... er, like ... well, *love*... Carnahan disregarded the thought instantly, unwilling to admit his feelings.

Suzy continued to shake her head, hands over her eyes. It looked like she was close to tears.

Carnahan took a deep breath. Letting it out, he said gently, “Look, it’s like I said, you’re not the first woman to have that happen.” He wanted to put her at ease, and so he went on, “You always wanna believe the best in others. I’m the same way. We all are. I’m sure this guy was very convincing.”

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and then composing her face, folded her hands in front of her on the table. She said simply, “I’d been living there three years. I wasn’t fresh off the goddamned turnip truck. I shoulda known better.”

Carnahan felt another wave of emotion break over him. He was in severe denial about *which* particular emotion it was, and he was starting to have some difficulty concentrating because of it. Fighting back those uncomfortable thoughts, he stared at her for a few moments as he regained control, and then he said, “Look. What’s important is that you’re here now, and you’re doing the right things? Correct?” He was pleased that this sounded so rational and logical.

She stared at him for a few seconds, and then looked away. “Right.” She nodded her head, slowly, like she might even believe it. She took a sip of her tea.

They were silent for a few moments. Carnahan took a sip of his tea, looking outwardly calm, as his battle with denial raged on.

Sipping her own tea, Suzy gazed down at the place mats. They had the signs of the Chinese Zodiac on them, along with a little blurb about each sign.

“So what sign are you?” asked Carnahan, as she read the chart. He was hoping to steer the conversation into some more innocuous subject.

She focused on the place mat. Eyebrows furrowed, she said, “According to this, I’m a rat. It says, ‘You are noted for charm and attractiveness for the opposite sex. You work hard to reach goals and get possessions. You’re thrifty, honest, and want things just so. You get angry easily, but manage to look calm. You should marry a Dragon or a Monkey.’” She looked up at Carnahan, and then asked, “So what year were you born in?”



“Nineteen fifty-two,” he said. He was *very* interested in how she’d react when she found out he was a dragon. She was so much younger, he thought. And so lovely... so vulnerable... so pure... so...

Eyebrows furrowed again, she asked, “Fifty-two? Here’s yours.” Her eyes widened in alarm and she looked up. “You’re a dragon.” She looked back at the place mat and was silent for another second, reading to herself, and then she went on, “Okay. ‘You have good health plus lots of pep and energy. You get excited easily and may get angry easily, too. But people trust you because you’re honest, brave and softhearted. You’re nobody’s fool though, and you never borrow money or make speeches. You should marry a Rat or a Snake.’” She slowly looked up, across at Carnahan, her eyes wide with disbelief.

They stared at each other across the table, unable to speak.

Now, there was a *different* sort of look in her eyes, he thought as they stared at each other. It was like... almost like...

Pushing her cart, the waitress arrived with their food and began setting steaming dishes on the table.

Carnahan was so glad for the interruption, he almost wanted to shout with joy. The thoughts he’d been experiencing were *extremely* uncomfortable.

The waitress placed large dishes of Mongolian beef, spring rolls, sweet and sour chicken, fried wontons, barbeque pork, and pork fried rice in front of them.

“Could I get chopsticks?” asked Carnahan as she set the last dish on the table. He’d calmed down some, and was thinking more clearly now.

She handed a pair to Carnahan, and then looking at Suzy, asked, “You like chopstick?”

Smiling warmly, Suzy nodded. “Sure. I’ll try anything, once.”

The waitress handed Suzy a set of chopsticks, and then left.

In control of himself again for almost the first time since they'd sat down, Carnahan began serving the food. In a minute, both had their plates loaded, heaped with the delicious, steaming food.

Carnahan picked up his chopsticks, and showed Suzy. "Here, like this. You hold the first one between your thumb and forefinger, with it resting on the tip of your middle finger. The second one, you hold kinda like a pencil." He demonstrated for her.

She studied him, and tried it herself. "Like this?"

He nodded. "You got it. The first one stays still; it's the second one you move."

Wide eyed, she nodded, and tried to pick up a piece of broccoli. It worked. "Hey," she said, smiling, and then ate the broccoli.

He felt another wave of that nameless emotion wash over him, and safe within his wall of denial, he decided to go with the flow. Whatever it was...

They ate in silence for the next few minutes.

Carnahan struggled with his thoughts as they ate, waffling back and forth, still unwilling to admit anything more than a simple attraction to her. But steadily, persistently, the errant thoughts continued to chip away at the wall.

In just a few minutes, he had pretty well cleaned off his plate. Suzy had almost eaten everything on hers, too, he saw.

He reached for the Mongolian beef. "Would you like some more?" he asked.

She smiled widely. "God, it's good! But I don't know if I'm gonna be able to get everything I have, already."

"Maybe some more barbeque pork?"

“God, I wish I could!” She put her chopsticks down, and with her hand daintily over her mouth, she stifled a burp. “That was wonderful! But there’s no way I can eat another bite.”

Carnahan was positively glowing with good feelings. The food had been great, like Suzy said. And the absolute capper: here he was, sitting with the most beautiful woman he’d ever met – who was his *perfect match*, according to the stars, he thought. What could be better?

She’d been looking at him awfully funny, he reflected, ever since she’d read the zodiac.

But then of course he’d saved her from a life of sin, too, he thought soberly. *He’d* done that! Ed Carnahan to the rescue! What a deal.

Maybe this was the way it happened? Really! And they all lived happily ever after? Right? Right? Could it be?

His mind was spinning out of control.

The obvious conclusion finally fought its way to the surface, crashing through his shield of denial. The wall tumbled, crashing down.

*He was in love!*

She smiled warmly at him, leaning back in her seat.

Defense mechanisms take many forms, and work in many strange, often subtle ways. At an early age, you learn that fire is hot and will burn you, and so you subconsciously avoid touching flames. You don’t even have to think about it – the defense mechanism works on a subconscious level.

Now Carnahan had been burnt many, many times – *in relationships*. So it was not exceptionally surprising that his mind and body had adapted and evolved some rather elaborate defenses against possible re-injury.

As soon as he caved in to the fact that he was falling in love with Suzy, strong, dark forces went quickly to work deep inside him – all without his conscious knowledge. The forces struggled to assume control, to protect him from the perceived danger. It was a hard, decisive battle. But self-preservation is a very strong instinct – perhaps the strongest instinct of all – and it quickly won.

Carnahan smiled back at Suzy, outwardly feeling very mellow, oblivious of the war that had just been lost. Setting down his own chopsticks, he pushed his plate away and asked, “So what was it like living in Hollywood? That must have been really fun, hanging out with all the movie types and stuff.” She shrugged, smiling, and Carnahan went on, “Did you sleep with anyone famous?” As soon as the words left his lips, he instantly regretted it, wondering if he’d finally gone insane.

Her face hardened. “Hey! Whada ya think I am?”

Carnahan’s mind locked-up momentarily, as thoughts raced round and round. He stammered, “I mean... I mean, well, you said you slept with these guys, I... I just wondered if any of them were famous?” Even as he was saying it, he knew it was the wrong thing to say, but he couldn’t stop. It was almost like he was possessed.

Her green eyes narrowed and her lips drew back. “You think I’m a goddamned whore? Don’t ya? *Don’t ya?*” she asked angrily, her voice rising.

Other diners were looking at them now. Interested, questioning faces were staring at them, wondering if it was going to be a good, messy fight.

Carnahan was suddenly boiling hot, and he felt his face flush. Heart pumping a million miles an hour, he answered haltingly, “I know you wouldn’t a done it if you’d known. The guy tricked you, you said.”

She balled up her napkin and threw it on her plate.

Looking away, she said, almost as if to herself, “I think that’s about enough. I shoulda known better than to try this shit.”

She stood up. Opening her purse, she pulled out several bills and threw them on the table in front of Carnahan. She went on, “Here. This’ll cover my share of the food.”

Mouth hanging open, Carnahan stared at her, unable to speak.

She turned and walked towards the exit.

Carnahan sat staring at his plate, shaking his head in disbelief at what he’d done.

### **XXX. Bumper Cars in Tacoma**

“That’s the house over there,” said the man sitting in the back seat, pointing at an old, rundown two-story Victorian.

Dewey Mitchell pulled up at the curb, and put the cab in park.

He’d picked up the fare in Bonney Lake about a half hour ago.

The fare was a guy in his twenties, who looked reasonably neat and clean. He’d asked to go over by Sixth and Oakes in Tacoma – a very good trip from Bonney Lake.

Early in his career as a cabbie, Dewey had been ripped-off endlessly by people who would run away as soon as they arrived at the destination. With Mack’s help, he’d eventually wised-up and had gotten into the habit of asking for the money up-front – at least on most all the longer trips over ten dollars or so.

Dewey had found that usually, the people didn't protest when he asked them for the money up-front. But still occasionally, someone would get pissed off and decide they didn't want the cab. That had happened just two days ago with a guy who wanted to go to Seattle.

Another driver who was more broadminded than Dewey had ended up taking that fare and had made almost a hundred dollars from the trip. All of which was bad enough, but to make it worse, the driver had been crowing to everyone, all about how he'd gotten the best of Dewey, and that stung, rather much.

So, here he was with the guy from Bonney Lake. It was still daylight, and everything seemed on the up and up. The guy was clean cut. He was going to a good destination, not on the Hilltop or anything. He wasn't a junkie or obvious low-life, slimeball.

So just this once, after much careful, laboring thought, Dewey decided to let down his guard and he didn't ask for the money up-front.

And so, off they went.

Dewey stopped the meter and stared at it for a moment. After the amount finally registered in his brain, he turned to the guy. "Okay, Bud. Uh, we're looking at thirty-five dollars," he said.

The man smiled. "Great." He stretched and fumbled in his back pocket for his wallet. Looking embarrassed, he said, "Damn pants are too tight. Hang on."

The man opened the door and put one foot on the ground, then reached into his back pocket again.

And like a flash, he was off running.

A runner!

Dewey's stomach had been doing back flips ever since the guy had opened the door – deep down inside, he'd known right away something was *very* wrong – so within a couple moments from when the guy split, Dewey was out his own door, lumbering heavily after him.

The guy had about a hundred foot lead, and for a few moments, Dewey gained on him. But he rapidly became winded, and the gap widened.

Puffing like a steam engine, Dewey stopped and then loped back to his car.

He had the car going in an instant and burnt rubber up the street – just in time to see the man run into a parking lot in back of a church.

Ten seconds later, Dewey rounded the corner, the cab bumping over the entrance, sliding sideways into the parking lot. For a brief instant, he saw the man's head pop out from behind a dumpster sitting in back of the church.

Like lightning – which for Dewey was *quite* exceptional – graven images flashed through his mind. Through a fuzzy blur in his mind's eye, he saw fleeting pictures of the cab sliding to a stop in front of the dumpster, and then he jumped out and went behind the dumpster and brought the guy out by the scruff of his neck, kicking and screaming.

It was just like on a TV cop show, he thought. He was gonna be a hero, he thought with glee! A hero!

And then some *other* images began to form in his mind. *Disturbing* images.

Dewey covered the last hundred feet across the parking lot in two or three seconds. In that short period of time, the man's head popped out again briefly and in that single instant, the man's fate was sealed.

In his whole placid, innocent life, Dewey had hardly ever gotten *angry*. But now there was a growing fire burning deep within him – the spark of indignation at being ripped-off, that had been fanned into open flames.

Dewey was disturbed at the thoughts he was having, as unfamiliar as he was with that particular emotion. But the feeling grew and consumed him and for a brief instant he was possessed. He knew *exactly* what he had to do.

The dumpster flew backwards, rebounding from the cab's push-bumper. The taxi was doing about five miles per hour when it hit.

The man's screams were audible as the dumpster slid to a stop.

"Stop in the name of the law!" screamed Dewey, out the open window, jamming the car in park.

As quickly as it had come, his anger had vanished completely. It was as if it had never happened, and truthfully, Dewey had almost no memory of his momentary rage.

In its place, Dewey had reverted back to living his cop fantasy, where he was going to be a hero and catch a criminal. Blotchy images of his all-time favorite TV cop, TJ Hooker, flashing through his head, he started to open the door.

From behind the dumpster, the runner shakily stood up. Blood dripping down his face from a gaping cut on his forehead, his mouth hung wide open, and there was a look of sheer terror on his face.

He took one quick, horrified look at Dewey, and then instantly set off running again, out around the corner of the church.

Dewey quickly closed his door and put the car back in gear and followed.



Limping now, the man ran out across Sixth Avenue, and down the street, dodging pedestrians and cars on the busy street.

Lost in his cop dreams, Dewey stayed close behind in hot pursuit.

Honking his horn, Dewey blew through a red light and turned west onto Sixth, nearly causing an accident. The drivers of the cars at the light waved their fists and screamed. Consumed by his desire to catch a crook, Dewey just ignored them and continued to follow the man down Sixth, easily keeping up.

The man pressed on but was limping worse, going slower and slower with each step. It was obvious he was getting winded.

After a couple more blocks, the man slowed and then finally stopped, hands on his waist, his chest heaving for breath. Blood flowed freely from the cut on his forehead and had dripped down over his shirt, which was a bloody mess.

Dewey pulled up next to him and then yelled out through the open passenger window, “Up against the wall, scumbag!”

The man’s eyes filled with terror in an instant as soon as he became aware of Dewey, and hands held out in front of him, he stumbled backwards. “Stay away from me, stay away...” the man gasped, his chest heaving as he struggled for breath.

Feeling guilty about bumping the dumpster, Dewey shouted, “Look Bud, I’m sorry if I hurt ya. You shouldn’t a oughta run. I just want my bucks.”

Between huge breaths, the man panted, “I ... don’t ... have ... any...”

“You don’t have any?” shouted Dewey.

“No... I ... don’t.”

Dewey thought about that. In cases where the fares wouldn't pay, Mack always said you should call the cops. Usually the fares would pay, then, Mack said. He'd drilled that into Dewey's head, over and over and over.

Dewey looked up at the guy, chest still heaving.

“Well, too bad then, Bud. I guess we're gonna have to call the cops,” said Dewey, reaching for the microphone.

The man's breathing had eased a little. He wiped some of the blood off his face onto the sleeve of his shirt. He shrugged. “Call 'em. I don't care. Just stay the fuck away from me.”

Microphone in hand, Dewey eyed the bloody gash on the man's forehead. The guy was still bleeding like a stuck pig.

As Dewey watched the red blood ooze down the man's cheek, another stray thought popped up in his mind. Hadn't this happened before? He just couldn't remember.

Dewey thought about that for a few moments. *Something* was nibbling at the back of his brain and it bothered him no end. He was *sure* he remembered that something like this had happened before, and what's more, he was pretty sure it was important.

Finally, after rummaging around in the cluttered, hazy, attic of his mind, bingo, he dredged up the answer: *Don Hickman*.

Don Hickman had driven for BlackTop several years ago and had been one of Dewey's best buddies before he got locked up. Don was a really nice guy. He was a grandfather who was a former mess sergeant in the army, who back in the fifties had once gone three rounds with Sugar Ray Robinson in an exhibition match.

The fact that he had boxed gave him a lasting bond with Dewey. They'd spent hours at a time reliving old fights and talking shop. Don looked out for Dewey, and became the father-figure that he had never known. For several years, they were almost inseparable.

Don's problems had started one night, when he had gotten a call to Marilyn's restaurant down on Puyallup Avenue.

Don had picked up a guy who wanted to go to Lakewood. Even though he'd been warned to GTM, he hadn't collected any money up front, and so when they got to the destination, naturally, the guy had split in an instant, running like a gazelle off across a parking lot.

Now it wouldn't have been so bad, but this was the third runner that Don had gotten in the last week and a half, and because of it, nice guy or not, he just snapped.

He floored the gas pedal of the cab and used the guy for a speed bump. *Twice.*

Bump, bump. Bump, bump.

Now, Don was not entirely without luck: the guy hadn't died. And more good luck: they decided he was crazy, and so rather than becoming a guest of the state at the penitentiary in Walla Walla, he ended up at Western State Hospital, instead. A much cushier deal, all the way around. Much better food... And they had cable TV!

Dewey remembered the trial clearly, now.

The thoughts turned slowly around and around in Dewey's battered brain, like cheap vanilla pudding in a blender. All the thinking was making his head was ache from the unaccustomed effort. And worse, it scared the hell out of him.

He most certainly didn't want to go to jail. And the nuthouse wasn't any better...

After a prolonged silence, Dewey finally decided to give up the idea of cops.

He looked over at the man. The guy still had his hands still on his thighs, breathing hard.

“Look Bud,” Dewey finally asked. “You sure you ain’t got no money?”

The man straightened up a little, his breathing now more in control. “I could get the bucks from my brother. That’s his house where you dropped me off at. That’s where I live.”

Dewey was so relieved and after thinking about his good fortune for a moment, he said, “Okay. Get in, I’ll take you back there and you can get the money for me.”

The man drew back a little, still looking scared. “No fuckin’ way! I’m not getting near you. I’ll walk.”

“Suit yourself, Bud. I’ll follow.”

The man wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand, and then with a break in traffic, he started limping back across Sixth Avenue.

Dewey put the car in gear and followed at a discreet distance.

They arrived back where Dewey had dropped him off. While Dewey waited in the car at the curb, the guy walked up to the front door of the house and knocked. And knocked. And knocked. No one answered the door.

The man turned around facing Dewey and shrugged.

Dewey beckoned him over to the car.

The man came around to the driver’s side of the cab and then said, “Jeeze, I’m sorry man. I guess he’s not home. And dammit, I don’t have my keys with me, either, otherwise I could go inside and get it for you.” He gave a very earnest look.

Brow furrowed deep in thought, Dewey stared off into space for several seconds and then finally remembered what Mack had told him to do in something like this. He looked up at the guy.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The mans eyes narrowed, and after a short hesitation, he answered, “Uh, Johnny Smith.”

“Okay, Johnny. I’m gonna give you twenty-four hours to come to the cab company and get me my money.” He reached over to the card holder on his dashboard, and then handed the guy a card with his name and cab number on it. He went on, “If you ain’t paid me by this time tomorrow, then I’m gonna call the cops and give them your name and address.”

The man nodded his head. The blood had finally stopped.

“And so you’re gonna bring me the bucks tomorrow?”

The man nodded again. “Oh yeah, for sure. Absolutely.”

Frowning, Dewey said, “Okay, then get outa here. I’m trusting ya. And if ya don’t make it in time, you can figure the cops’ll be knocking at your door tomorrow night. Okay?”

Pure innocence on his face, the man nodded his head. “Oh, I’ll be there, man. You can count on it!”

“Right,” said Dewey thinking he was kind of hungry.

The man turned and walked off towards the alley behind the house.

Dewey picked up the microphone to call vacant.

### **XXXI. It must be fun being crazy**

“So anyway,” said Mack, “There I was. These two broads are going at it in the back seat. Got all these squishy noises going.”

Eyes narrowed, Medina looked interested. “Like squishy noises?” He took a sip of his beer.

It was *Morning Tea* at Phil's Saloon, and almost everyone had shown up. Mack and Medina were both in excellent spirits, the cloud of doom having been fully lifted, now that they'd finally gotten Suzy and Carnahan back together.

Mack was telling the others about one of his fares.

“Yeah, squishy noises. I think the one bulldagger was finger-banging the other. They were making out real heavy, and you could smell the pussy. They was really going at it bigtime, let me tell ya.”

Bobby Wood leaned closer to Mack, peering intently out of his Coke bottle lens glasses, and asked, “Were they good looking?” An ash tipped off of his cigarette into his glass of *Old Tennessee*.

Mack nodded. “Yeah, they was pretty good looking. The blonde one was kinda heavy and looked a little butch, but the other one, man, she was all woman.” He took a sip of his own whisky, and then continued, “So anyway, they're going at it, and I'm getting horny as hell. This is serious shit we're talking about. Pussy smell, squishy noises, all this shit. I'm just going nuts.”

“Was it fresh pussy, or old pussy smell?” asked Whitey, blowing out a long plume of smoke.

Mack narrowed his eyes. “What the fuck? Fresh pussy or old pussy?”

Whitey shrugged. “You know what I mean. Like had she washed that morning or was it kinda stale-like. Fishy? That stuff.”

Mack shook his head, frowning. “Look. All I can tell you is that if it was in front of my face right now, I'd have my tongue inside it and that's that. It smelled *damned* good! I'm pretty sure it was the good-looking one that was getting it. And I'd eat her snatch in a heartbeat!”

Shaking his head, Whitey rolled his eyes and settled back in his seat, a dreamy look on his face.

Bobby O’Dea, just returned from the bathroom, said, “Eat whose snatch in a heartbeat?” He sat down next to Medina, who was lost in thought, fantasizing about making it with the bulldaggers.

“He drove a couple of dykes around last night,” said Bobby Woods. “They was sucking and fucking in his back seat.”

Bobby O’ smiled and picked up his drink. “Dykes sucking and fucking?” he asked.

Mack nodded his head. “Yup. This butch one was finger-banging the good looking one.” He took a sip of *Old Tennessee*, and then went on, “So anyway, there I was. Horny as hell, these two broads going at it all the way up to Auburn. I’m silent most of the trip, listening to all this heavy breathing and slurping sounds. It’s driving me nuts. So we finally get where they’re going, I take their bucks, and then I ask ‘em if maybe they’d like some help. I tell ‘em we’ll do a threesome, right? Get some dick action going, huh?”

The drivers were hanging on his words now, everyone staring in rapt attention, waiting for him to continue.

Mack took another sip of whiskey, and then said, “So anyway, we all get out. We’re standing there next to the cab. The good-looking one’s clinging to the butch one. Her jeans are still unbuttoned. I coulda creamed just lookin’ at her.” He drained the rest of his *Old Tennessee*, and then went on, “We stare at each other for a couple seconds, then the butch one looks at me and says, ‘So you wanna help us, huh? What makes you think we need a man?’ I just tell ‘em, ‘Well, the more the merrier, huh?’”

Mack held up his empty glass to the bartender, signaling for another drink, and then went on, “The butch one kinda smiles, then reaches over and lifts the good looking one’s shirt. Tits! Man, she had the best looking set of knockers I seen in years. *Beautiful*. So anyway, the butch one she asks, “You want these, huh?’ I’m just fucking creaming. I nod my head yes. Then they look at each other, smiling, and then all of a sudden, they crack up laughing.”

The bartender arrived and placed another shot of whiskey in front of Mack and Mack paid him.

“So what happened? Why was they laughing?” asked Dewey Mitchell, thinking back to the time he’d gone to bed with a woman.

Mack took a drink of his whiskey, and then said, “My question exactly. I wondered what the fuck was going on. These bitches were just falling all over themselves, bustin’ up. So I ask, ‘Well we gonna get it on, then ladies?’ The butch one’s got this big wide smile on her face, she’s staring at me, and then finally says, ‘Go to bed with a man? I’d rather fuck a dog!’ Then they turn, still giggling and shit, and walk into the house. I just about died. I’m standing there with a hard-on that’d cut steel, and feeling like the biggest fool ever. Last time I ever drive a bunch of goddamned lesbians around. Fucking dyke bitches!”

Looking thoughtful, Medina nodded and said, “Yeah, I hate bulldaggers. They really are no fun. Always like so serious, and out to prove how *macho* they are. But now *bisexual* ladies are different. There was this one time me and three ladies spent a whole weekend together, and let me tell ya...”

Dave Murphy broke in, “Hey ain’t that Carnahan that just set down at the bar?”

Eyebrows furrowed, Mack looked over at the bar. “It is. What the fuck’s he doing in here? He oughta be home in bed. Or *somewhere* in bed,” he said thoughtfully.



He stared at Carnahan for a couple more seconds, then said, “I’m gonna go see what’s up. See how it went with Suzy. You guys hang tight.”

Mack got up and walked over to the bar. He could see Carnahan had a grave look on his face.

“Hey Eddie!” said Mack, as he sat down on the stool next to Carnahan. “So how’d it go?”

Carnahan turned towards him and nodded. Frowning, he said, “Not so good.” Pausing, he took a long drag off his cigarette, and then blowing it out, he went on, “Actually, I screwed it all up. *Royally*.”

Eyes narrowed, Mack asked, “Screwed up? Whadayamean?”

Carnahan closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I’m insane. No other answer.”

“What the hell you mean?”

“Well, everything was going great. Then I opened my mouth and put my foot in it. Both feet, all the way up to my thighs. God, how could I be so stupid?”

“What in the Sam Hill are ya talking about?” asked Mack, perplexed.

Carnahan shook his head and then said simply, “I asked her if she’d slept with anyone famous in Hollywood. Of all the stupid, *asinine* things to ask...”

Frowning, Mack said, “Hmm. Yeah, I guess that probably wasn’t a real good thing to ask. So why’d you do it?”

Carnahan downed his shot of whiskey and pushed the empty glass across the bar towards the bartender. Still shaking his head, he answered, “I wish I knew. It just kind of popped out, before I could stop it. It was like I was watching myself on TV. I wasn’t in control. I was just an observer, not a participant.”

“So what’d she do?” asked Mack.

“About what you’d expect. She got angry and left.”

Seeing the proffered glass, the bartender walked over and gave him another shot, leaving the bottle on the bar, close by.

Carnahan paid him, and then took a sip from the new glass. After another few moments, he went on in a wistful tone, “Mack, as long as I can remember, I’ve been in love with women. I love their shape, their smell, the way they talk. The way they brush their hair in the morning. The slight indentation they leave in the bed after they get up. I love the way their pillow smells when they’re gone. That stray hair you find on your car seat. I love everything about them. Everything.” He took another sip of the whiskey.

Mack was silent, and so Carnahan continued, “As much as I love being with a woman, I still can’t ever seem to be able to make a relationship work. Ever. There’s always one thing or another, something that screws it up. My marriage lasted the longest – we were together about twelve years before we split up. Since then, it’s gotten worse. It seems that lately, the best I can do with a lady is about six months before it all falls to pieces. And then now with Suzy, oh yeah, with Suzy, I’ve really surpassed myself. With Suzy I self-destructed before we even really got going.” He put his head in his hands, covering his eyes, and spoke softly, “Mack – I just can’t handle this, anymore. I really and truly must be going insane.”

Mack shrugged and took a sip of *Old Tennessee*. “I used to know this guy that got drove insane by his old lady. They had some terrible fights. He drove for Radio Cab. She used to put salt in his coffee just to screw with his head.”

Carnahan took another sip of his drink and ignoring Mack, said, “It’s like a love hate thing for me. When I’m by myself, I’m absolutely miserable. Absolutely and completely. I tell

myself, to be complete, I *have* to be in a relationship. So, then I go out and find a woman, and we start seeing each other. Everything's rosy for a while. Then, as soon as it starts getting really serious, I do something stupid and that's the end. The party's over." He paused for a second, and then went on, "I'm a reasonably smart man. I'm only just a few credits short of my BA in business. But put a good looking woman in front of me and I turn into a babbling idiot and that's the end of it."

Mack shrugged, and trying to be sympathetic, said, "Well you know it's like they say, it takes two to tango. It's never all one person's fault that things go down the shitter."

"With me it is." He lit a cigarette and took a long pull, and then exhaling, he continued, "After Suzy split, I went out and got in my car. I spent all last night driving around thinking about it, just thinking about what I'd done. Thinking about what happened. You know what I saw? I'll tell you: What I saw is that it's *always* been my fault when things start to go south, every damned single one of the relationships, these last few years. With Suzy, with Lucy, with all of 'em. I might have told myself something else at the time, but I look closely now, I can see the truth. I was just bullshitting myself, seeing what I wanted to see." He took a long drag off his cigarette.

Mack lit his own cigarette, and then after exhaling a long blue plume, he said, "We all do that, too. You ain't no different than the rest of us, Eddie."

"That's not true – I'm a lot worse. I'm digging my own hole, Mack, even though I'm telling myself something else. And that's bullshit – it's denial in the worst way. And then the very worst part, tonight, I hurt someone I really care about. And that is just plain *wrong*."

"You really like her?" asked Mack, sipping on his *Old Tennessee*.

Carnahan nodded. "Yes, I do."

“She is awful damned beautiful,” said Mack, looking wistful.

Carnahan nodded again. “She is indeed. But that’s not even half of it.”

“Whadayamean?”

He shook his head. “I spent a whole lot of time thinking about this last night. Basically, the main attraction, believe it or not, is that we compliment each other really well. I have all these things that she needs. Areas where I can help her to become complete, and to realize her goals. But the real kicker is that in doing so, I complete myself. We’re like ying and yang.”

Looking puzzled, Mack asked, “You guys’re Chinese? I don’t get it.”

Carnahan took another long puff from his cigarette, and then ground it out in the ashtray. Looking back at Mack, he went on, “Mack, she’s very smart, that much is obvious. Tremendous drive and determination. Those are qualities I truly admire. But the way she was brought up, and all the awful stuff that have happened to her since have prevented her from reaching her potential.” He lit a new cigarette and took a long drag, and then went on, “I can change that.” He tipped the glass of *Old Tennessee* to his lips and drained it, and then placed it out on the bar for a refill.

Focusing back at Mack, who was looking introspective, he continued, “I think I’ve always loved to be the teacher and wanted that kind of relationship, deep down. A *Pygmalion* type of thing. Which parenthetically, is why I often end up in co-dependant relationships. I end up with the wrong sort of women for all the wrong reasons – you know, where I’m trying to *save* her.”

Eyebrows furrowed, Mack asked, “What the hell kinda pig?”

Ignoring him, Carnahan took another sip off his glass of whiskey and then said, “But okay, so here you’ve got Suzy. She’s all pure and good-natured, even despite where she’s been.

She's kind, she's thoughtful, considerate. A *good* person. Unspoiled. She's like an open book, waiting for you to fill the pages, so eager to do the right thing and succeed." He looked directly at Mack and went on, "The fact that she looks like a model that just stepped out from the pages of *Vogue* or whatever just caps it off."

After another couple moments, he went on in a shaky voice, "I think I'm in love with her, Mack." He pushed his empty glass back across the bar for a refill.

Eyebrows narrowed, Mack inspected him closely for a few moments. Shaking his head, he said to himself under his breath, "Houston, I think we got a problem..."

### **XXXII. Take that little hummer out and de-nut him...**

The lunch rush had passed and it was nearly one-thirty. Dan was getting really hungry.

He'd had a good trip from Lakewood to Federal Way, and then after he'd called vacant, he'd gone back down Highway Ninety-Nine, through Fife and had ended up back at the Amtrak Station, where he'd been sitting for the last fifteen minutes, bored and hungry, listening to the radio. He was five in the zone and it didn't sound like he'd be moving anytime soon.

Tony Trujillo was dispatching today, as always during the week.

Tony was in a foul mood. He'd been riding one of the new drivers all morning and when the poor guy wasn't able to find a doctor's office on South Hill, Tony started screaming at him and demanded he come to his window immediately.

They'd been going back and forth over the radio now for the last several minutes, and Dan listened with interest – it was always entertaining as long as you weren't the center of attention. Dan turned up the volume of his scanner so he could hear the driver's side.

“... But I found it on the map, I can be there in ten minutes,” said the driver.

The radio crackled and spit, and then voice dripping venom, Tony said, “I don’t think you understand me. I’m not going to argue anymore. You’re at my window before you get another bell, period. You waste any more of my time with this, I’ll have you parked for good. *Capisca?* For good! So you better shut up right now, or else.” His foot still on the mic pedal, Tony took a deep breath, then went on, “Okay, next car.”

The driver continued talking, but Tony screamed, “I said *next* car!”

The radio was silent for a few moments, and then Tony came on again, “Car nine?”

Car nine was Ralph Mack, who to everyone’s great surprise, was driving during the day for the third time that week. There were rumors of unrest on the home front, as the cause.

Ralph answered, “Car nine.”

Trujillo responded, “Your girlfriend called again about her apartment keys. She’s pretty pissed off. I want you to take her the keys. I do not want her to call here again. Copy? She will not call again or else. Period!” Tony still sounded pretty angry.

Ralph answered pleasantly, “Sure thing. Car nine copies. I’ll get the keys to her right away.”

Moments later, Ralph pulled into the cab stand behind Dan.

Dan got out of his cab and slowly walked back to Ralph.

“S’up?” asked Dan.

Ralph was slouched back in his seat, staring up at the sun visor. He looked over at Dan, and then pointed up at the visor.

Dan leaned down and peered into the car. Ralph had a small LCD television hanging from the sun visor. Dan couldn’t make out what he was watching. He shook his head.

“What is it? A talk show?” Dan asked, still leaning down.

Ralph nodded. “Jerry Springer. He’s got this Nazi guy and his best friend on. The guy doesn’t know it, but his best friend’s really a Jew – and get this – he’s also *gay* and has a crush on him! They’re gonna surprise the Nazi with it right after the commercial. This is gonna be fucking A good!”

Dan shook his head. “Oh, yeah. Right.” He straightened up, then said, “Look, I’m gonna go get lunch over at Marilyn’s. Wanna come?”

Ralph stared up at him wide-eyed. “And miss this? You gotta be kidding!”

Dan sighed and then rolled his eyes. “I gotta eat. Lemme know how it turns out.”

He turned and walked slowly across Puyallup Avenue to Marilyn’s.

He pushed through the door and walked over to the counter, taking a seat just to the left of the register.

In front by the windows, were booths, then a row of tables across the middle of the floor, and then the lunch counter. To the right was the dark, dingy hall to the lounge, the smells of smoke and sour booze wafting out.

The place was nearly empty, the remnants of the lunch trade mostly gone. Four chubby-looking young women sat alone at the counter, and two more were seated in a booth, talking. Possibly hookers, thought Dan, although they looked a little pokey for whores. In the corner, was a young mother with a couple of kids and some bags – these people were obviously refugees from Amtrak, he thought. Behind the counter stood the waitress. Dan knew her slightly. Her name was Pam, and she had coffee stains on her white blouse. She looked beat.

Pam came over to him. “Hey, how’s the taxi business, Dan?” she asked.

Dan smiled. “Picking up.”

“So what can I get you today? Special’s gone.”

Dan looked thoughtfully off into space, and then answered, “How about a BLT with soup? What’s the soup today?”

“Clam chowder. And it’s good.”

“That’ll work.”

“Coffee?”

Dan nodded. “Sure.”

She wrote out the ticket and then grabbed a pot from the counter behind her and filled his cup. She hurried off.

The two women in the booth were talking. Dan tuned in.

“...the sonofabitch has got my apartment key and won’t bring it back.”

The other one spoke up, “Well I got the same sort of problem. This boyfriend of mine, he’s got my little portable TV and he won’t bring it back.”

Dan’s ears perked up. A combination like that, he thought they both had to be talking about Ralph. They *had* to be. He listened closely.

“A little portable TV?” the first one asked.

“Yeah,” said the second one. “Like he takes it with him to work, so he can watch it when he drives. He’s a cab driver. He was s’posed to a given it back a couple a days ago.”

Very interested in the exchange, Dan turned slightly so he could see.

Wide eyed, the first woman, said, “Your guy is a cab driver? What company?”

The second one shrugged. “BlackTop. Why?”

The first woman gasped, holding her hand to her mouth. “Honey, what’s your guy’s name?”



The second lady looked alarmed. “Ralphie. Why?”

The first woman’s eyes narrowed and her lips curled. “That two-timing sonofabitch! Ralph Mack is *my* boyfriend!”

The second woman looked indignant. “No he isn’t, he’s mine! And I’m pregnant by him!”

“You’re pregnant by him? *I’m* pregnant by him!” shouted the first woman.

The four women at the counter all stood up and turned around.

“You can’t be! I’m pregnant by Ralph Mack!” said woman number three.

“No, I’m pregnant by Ralph Mack!” said the next one.

“But I’m pregnant by Ralph Mack!” said the next in a shocked voice.

“I’m pregnant by Ralph Mack, too!” said the last one, almost wailing.

Dan shook his head in wonder. They were *all* pregnant by Ralph Mack, or so it seemed. Ralph had really out done himself this time!

In no time at all, the six women started comparing notes, talking furiously while Dan and the waitress and the other patrons all watched.

They were so loud and all talking at once, it was difficult to follow any of the conversations, although Dan did overhear one comment about how they were going to “... take that little hummer out and de-nut him.” Based on that and several other comments he was able to catch, it seemed like the consensus was that they needed to find Ralph ASAP and make sure he never got another woman pregnant ever again in his entire life. It went on and on.

After listening for a few more minutes, Dan couldn’t restrain himself any longer. He felt it necessary to break in, and try to help his friend, Ralph.

“Ladies, ladies,” he shouted, trying to get their attention.

“Ladies...you want Ralph, don’t ya?”

Six heads nodded in unison.

Dan pointed. “Okay. You see that BlackTop Cab across the street at the train station?”

Six heads turned and looked. Dan went on, “That’s Ralph.”

They stared for a moment, speechless. Then the spell was broken.

“C’mon girls, let’s get him!” screamed one of them, and they all stormed out *en masse*.

The waitress, one eye on the departing stampede, arrived with Dan’s BLT and the chowder.

Dan just smiled at her and picked up the sandwich.

### **XXXIII. How Ashley got her boobs back**

“Thank you Mr. Jackson,” said Suzy, smiling. “We’ll have your suit ready by Wednesday.”

“Thank you, young lady.” Leading with his cane and teetering ominously, the elderly Mr. Jackson turned and left.

Mack stood at the end of the counter looking at her expectantly as she placed a tag on top of the pile of clothes.

Ignoring him, Suzy proceeded to bag and tag several other loads of clothes as Mack stood and stared.

After several minutes when it became apparent that he wasn’t going to leave, she finally turned to Mack and said, “You might as well split. I ain’t got nothing to say.”

Mack saw his only chance, and said quickly, “He’s really sorry. He didn’t mean to insult ya. He didn’t mean nothin’ by what he said. He wants to make it up to ya if he can.”

A tired-looking woman pushing a cart came up from the back room and began gathering up the bundles of clothes from the counter. She turned to Suzy and asked, “Suzy, did Mr. Goretti bring in his tux? You heard he called? It was s’posed to be a rush job.”

Suzy nodded. “Sure thing, Betty. It’s right there on the top. He said they’re having a big too-do at the Masonic Temple tonight. Something with the Knights Templar.”

Betty collected the pile of clothes and pushing the cart in front of her, she left.

Continuing to ignore Mack, Suzy pulled an invoice book out from under the counter and began studying it.

A worried expression on his face, Mack moved closer and said, “Look, he just wants to set things straight. He’s really sorry if he hurt you. He’s really broken up by what happened.” Mack paused for a second, wondering how far he should go, and then went on, “He really *cares* about you.”

Eyebrows narrowed, looking angry, Suzy glared at him, and said in an acid tone, “Do you know what he did? Do ya? Well, I’ll tell ya: He asked me if I’d ever slept with anyone *famous* when I was with Henri in LA. Now what kinda question is that? No, he thinks I’m just a whore, it’s obvious. If he cares about me so much, then why’s he treat me like a whore?”

Mack took a deep breath. He’d been thinking about the answer for this for quite some time, and hadn’t come up with anything real good. Reluctantly, he answered, “It’s just conversation. You ain’t never asked no one that before?”

Still glaring, Suzy replied, “He knows what happened to me down there in LA and how I feel about it. It tears me up inside to think of the awful stuff I done. But anyway, that still ain’t a

proper question to ask a lady. Only an insensitive jerk'd ask a question like that. A real flamin' jerk."

"So maybe he wasn't thinkin' straight..."

Suzy cut him off. "I really don't give a damn. I don't wanna have nothing more to do with him. Life is too short to spend it dealing with jerks."

Frowning, Mack went on, "He really is broke up by this. All he wants is a chance to straighten things out."

"I'm not gonna go out with him again."

"Please? Just give him one more chance?"

The anger burning within her was visible, smoldering in her slanted green eyes. Her gaze level, she looked Mack in the eyes and said, "The only way I'd ever go out with him again is if he were dying. Period."

"That's it?" asked Mack, looking disappointed.

She shrugged, and then said in a flip tone, "Well, okay. Maybe if he was on fire. Yeah, I'd go out with him if he was on fire."

"You're sure that's it? No way I can convince ya?"

"Absolutely sure."

"He's really gonna be broken up about this."

Looking hard and cold, she answered, "Tough." Suzy stared at him for another few moments, and then softening a little, she went on, "Look Mack, it's like me and Ed just weren't meant for each other, I guess. I got nothing against you or the others. I know your hearts are in the right place. But I ain't gonna see him again. Not for you, not for nobody. I'm sorry, but that's the way it's gotta be."

Giving up, Mack shrugged. “Sometimes shit happens, sometimes it don’t.”

“You understand?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You and the boys a been good friends, all a ya. I don’t want you guys to be strangers because a this.”

Mack sighed. “Naw, we won’t be.” He checked his watch, and then went on, “Well, I guess I better get back in service. I’m losing big bucks.”

Suzy smiled. “Okay. And look, thanks for stopping by. I’m just sorry you got caught in the middle a all this. He’s lucky to have a friend like you.”

He shrugged again. “Aw, what the fuck.” He turned and walked towards the door. Pausing at the threshold, he turned back and asked, “If you do change you mind?”

Eyes wide, she made as if to throw a pile of clothes at him.

He ducked and slipped out the door.

Suzy heaved a sigh of relief, and went back to work sorting clothes.

Almost an hour later, Suzy was pretty well caught up on her work when a tall, willowy, blonde woman dressed in a conservative business suit walked in through the door.

Suzy looked up and then did a double take – and finally realized it was Ashley.

Ashley smiled and did a curtsy. “My god, darling! I thought you’d never recognize me. So how do you like my new look?”

Smiling, Suzy shook her head, taking everything in. Short, blonde hair, fashionably coiffed. A gray tweed jacket with a blue blouse and red scarf. Matching tweed skirt with nylons. Ashley looked like she was ready for a power lunch or something. She must have

recently shaved because there was no five o'clock shadow. Her makeup was tastefully done, in a subdued sort of way. She looked quite pretty. And *very* feminine.

“Hey, Ash. You're right. I almost didn't recognize you. How you doing?”

“Good. You like the look?”

Suzy smiled. “I love it. You look great!”

Ashley batted her eyes, and leaning against the counter, she said, “I decided to up-grade. I got on with this out-call service. It's all out-of-town businessmen and executives and stuff. No more goat ropers for this girl!”

“Hey, that's fantastic!”

“It is!” Ashley smiled still batting her eyes, and then went on, “Look, I'm sorry I missed you last week, but I'm gonna make it up to you. I came over to take you to lunch. Can you get some time off? You ready for some food? Let's go to Bimbo's.”

Suzy shrugged. “That sounds good. Let me tell Ellen. I gotta get someone to cover the counter.” She walked over to one of the ladies working a press, and then quickly returned.

“She's gonna cover for me. Let's go.”

Arm in arm, they left.

Bimbo's was a landmark restaurant on Pacific Avenue in downtown Tacoma. For nearly eighty years, the Rosi family had been cooking their famous homemade spaghetti sauce. It was one of those restaurants where for a long, long time, everyone there actually spoke Italian. They had all the usual Italian fare, the different spaghettis, ravioli, linguine with white clam sauce and chicken cacciatore, pizza and cannoli for desert. But they also had the less common traditional dishes, like rabbit sauté and tripe.

The interior was dark, and the wonderful smells of garlic and the delicious sauces wafted out as Suzy and Ashley opened the door. The kitchen with its stove and the large pots of spaghetti slowly simmering, dominated the left-hand portion of the long, narrow room.

They walked down past the counter and sat in one of the booths in the rear.

Ashley took off her jacket and folded it neatly over the back of the booth, and then leaning forward said, “I’ve just got to show you this, dear.” She began unbuttoning her blouse.

Wondering if Ashley had gone nuts, Suzy turned and looked towards the front of the restaurant. It was almost empty and no one was looking their way.

“What in the name of Cain are you doing, Ash?” She asked.

Wide-eyed and grinning, Ashley held open her blouse. “Look. Boobs! Real ones! I did it. I’ve been on the hormones for the last few months and they worked!”

Mildly embarrassed, Suzy inspected Ashley’s breasts. They did indeed look like proper boobs, she thought. “Congratulations,” she said. “Now button up before someone notices and we get thrown out a here, huh?”

Smiling broadly, Ashley complied. “I didn’t wanna tell anyone till I was ready. The past week, my B-cup bras have been getting pretty tight, so I figured it was time to let everyone see them. God, I’m so happy! It’s my dream come true!” She finished buttoning up her blouse and sat smiling.

Suzy smiled back. “I’m very happy for you, Ash. Congratulations, again.”

“Wanna touch ‘em?”

Suzy laughed at the thought. “Oh, god! Not right now, but thanks, huh?”

“They’re real! Really real. And you know what? My doctor says I could end up with a C-cup! You believe it?”

“That’s really great!” Suzy picked up the menu and studied it, hoping Ashley would change the subject.

Ashley picked up her menu, and then looking over the top, said, “So how have you been? It’s been over a week since we talked.”

Suzy shrugged, and then said, “Okay, I guess.”

“Did you finally go out with the taxi guy? What’s his name? Ed?”

Suzy frowned. “Last night.”

Eyebrows arched, Ashley asked, “Well? So what happened? Give me all the juicy details.”

The waitress, a thin, older woman wearing a black skirt with a white blouse, came to the table, holding a pad. “You ladies ready to order? The lunch special is gone.”

Still holding her menu, Suzy nodded to Ashley.

Ashley said, “Okay, I’d like the spaghetti with meatballs.”

“Salad or soup?”

“What’s the soup?”

“Minestrone. It’s good.”

“Okay.” The waitress took Ashley’s menu and then looked over at Suzy.

Suzy crinkled her eyebrows in thought for a few moments, and then looked up. “Okay, what I want is the cioppino.” She looked over at Ashley and continued, “The owner of the cleaners told me to try it.”

“You do work across the street, don’t ya? Pete told you to try it? I’ll make sure the cook gives you a big portion, then.” The waitress wrote the order down, and then went on, asking, “You want salad with that?”



“Okay. House Italian?” She handed the menu to her.

The waitress nodded. “Okay. Thanks.” She left for the kitchen.

Ashley leaned back in the seat, and inspecting her nails, asked, “So? So what happened on your date?”

Suzy shook her head. “It was a disaster. I ended up getting pissed off and splitting.”

Ashley leaned forward. “What’d he do?”

Embarrassed, Suzy took a deep breath, and then said, “He asked me if I’d slept with anyone *famous* while I was in LA.”

Ashley cocked her head. “Yeah, and then what?”

Suzy shrugged. “That was it.”

Ashley narrowed her eyes. “I don’t get it. What’s the big deal?”

Suzy shook her head. “He knows how I feel about all that. I’m really ashamed of all that,” she said in a defensive tone.

Ashley rolled her eyes, and then shaking her head, said, “You’re *sooo* narrow-minded about that. You really need to wake up and smell the coffee.” She paused for a second, smiling, then went on, “So *did* you sleep with anyone famous?” She blinked her eyes, grinning seductively.

“*Ash!*”

“It’s just a question, dear. I didn’t mean anything wrong by it, and I’m sure he didn’t either. It’s just conversation.”

The waitress arrived with their soup and salad.

Suzy was feeling hurt and confused. This wasn't at all the sort of reaction she had expected from Ashley. She took a tentative bite of her salad, and then after swallowing, said, "It's not the proper sort of question a man asks a woman on the first date. On *any* date."

"Your foster parents really did screw up your head with all that religion they forced down your throat, didn't they? Poor child."

Suzy frowned, silent, eating her salad.

Ashley continued, "You seemed so positive about him before you went out. You haven't talked about anything else, hardly. You're really attracted to him, you said. If that's the case, then why don't you give him another chance?"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

Suzy looked away. "I don't know."

Ashley looked startled, and then reached under her jacket and pulled out a pager. She read the message, and then placed the pager on the table. She looked over at Suzy. "It vibrates! I love it!"

"You've got to go?"

Ashley nodded. "Yeah, they gave me a two o'clock. No rest for the wicked. But I'm going to finish lunch first, I don't care what. Mr. Businessman can wait. Either way, I don't think he'll be disappointed." She grinned.

Suzy was still looking sad, so Ashley asked, "Are you going to be okay, dear?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

“Look... I’m gonna take the night off, tonight. Asia and I are gonna party – she’s got this fantastic new connection. The rocks are as big as your thumb, and *soooo* good! You oughta come with us.”

“I told you, I don’t do that stuff any more. Not at all. Zero.”

Ashley sighed, shaking her head. “You really are too narrow-minded.”

Suzy shrugged. “It’s just the way I feel.”

Dabbing at her lips daintily with her napkin, Ashley said, “Whatever.” She paused for a moment, and then went on, “Hey, did you hear about the weird trick that Hazel turned the other night? God, this John was rolling hardboiled eggs at her pussy, like golf or something!”

#### **XXXIV. Always shoot junkies in the head**

“I’m really very disappointed in you, Hans,” said the cop, a detective named Gary. He thumped his notebook on his closed fist for emphasis, glowering at Hans. “You’re gonna be in deep shit over this.”

Hans looked away from the cop, and leaned back on the fender of his cab, frowning. On the street in back of the cab were several other police cars and an ambulance. The fire truck had already left.

When Gary had arrived, Hans had been happy to see a familiar face. He’d known Gary for several years – they often ate breakfast together at the Busy Bee Café downtown. He’d figured having someone friendly in charge would help. But now he wasn’t quite so sure.

Sixty years old and counting, Hans Sdorra was still in his prime. He was born and raised in Germany.

He'd had excelled as an athlete as a teenager. Soccer was his game, and fresh out of school, he was recruited by the Borussia Dortmund *Fußball* club as a center forward. With Dortmund, he refined his play and went on to participate in two German Cup playoffs with the team. By the time he was in his late twenties, he found a place on the German national soccer team and played in several exhibition games in South America.

Injuries took their toll and by the time he turned thirty, Hans was sidelined. He'd been smart and salted away most of the money he'd made playing soccer, so following a lifelong dream, he bid *auf wiedersehen* to Germany and headed west to the United States.

For the next dozen years, he knocked around the US working at a variety of jobs, from selling insurance, to washing windows, to a lifeguard job, to carpentry, to a stint as an auto mechanic, which led to a season as a ski instructor, and on and on and on. He stayed in one place at a job till the area bored him, then he left, traveled to a new town, and picked a new occupation.

Eventually, Hans decided to stop for a while in Tacoma to visit a friend from the US Army who was now stationed at Ft Lewis. Hans liked the area so much, he decided to stay put for a while. That was twenty years ago.

True to form, he'd tried a number of different jobs around the Tacoma area before he settled into taxi driving. He'd been with BlackTop now for over fifteen years, and was one of the most senior of the "*professional*" drivers.

Hans was quite the ladies' man, and could always be counted on to have a very flamboyant girlfriend. Dull or ordinary women were of no interest to Hans, who fancied himself a connoisseur of fine women.

His current girlfriend was named Marim, a fiery, diminutive, Brazilian lady who worked as a registered nurse at Tacoma General Hospital. Marim, a gifted amateur astrologer, was twenty years his junior.

As he leaned against the fender of the cab, trying to ignore the angry cop, Hans sadly reflected that he should have taken Marim's advice and stayed home that morning. She'd cast a new horoscope for him and according to the stars, he was going to be in for a rough ride that day. How right she was!

Gary the cop thumped the notebook on his knuckles again, still looking annoyed. "So you wanna tell me what happened?" he asked.

Hans turned towards the cop. "Vat do you vant to know?" he asked. Even after more than twenty years in the US, he talked with a decided German accent, which coincidentally, he often used to his best advantage, in wooing the ladies.

"Everything. Start at the start."

Hans shrugged, and took a long drag off his cigarette. "It's like this. I picked the guy up at a bar – the Old Lonesome. He wanted to go to the Rescue Mission, so I asked him for the bucks up-front. He gives me the money and we take off. Soon as we get to the Mission, he pulls this knife on me, so I let him have my money. He gets out of the car and starts to split. I get out and yell at him to stop. He turns around, goes at me with the knife, so I pull my gun and shoot him. I had the dispatcher call you guys, and that's that."

"How far away was he when you capped him?"

"Maybe ten feet."

Looking displeased, Gary shook his head. "You fucking asshole! How could you do it?" the cop said angrily.

Hans shrugged, now on the defensive. “I don’t know. He was robbing me, he had a knife, so I shot him. Vat? I’m supposed to feel bad or something?”

The cop stared at him with a level gaze. “You fucked up, Hans.”

“Vat the hell are you talking about? He’s a fucking junkie who tried to rip me off!”

“You fucked up. It’s a fact.”

“You mind telling me why I was wrong to shoot him? It’s not like I killed him. He’ll be vell as new in a few veeks.” Hans was staring to get a little angry himself, now. This wasn’t at all the reaction he’d expected from the police, and particularly not from Gary.

Gary smiled. “You hit the nail on the head, brother. The fucking slime-ball *is* gonna live. So what the hell’s the matter with you, Hans? C’mon. I *know* you can shoot better than that!”

Confused and relieved, Hans shrugged. “I’m sorry, Gary. I guess my aim was off.”

The cop nodded. “That’s what I wanted to hear. You better not be getting soft on me. Promise me the next one, you’ll finish the job, okay? It’s a whole lot less paperwork that way.”

Hans smiled. “Okay.”

### **XXXV. Strike three, and you’re outathere**

“S’cuse me.”

Suzy turned around and when she saw Ed Carnahan, she just about fainted. He was standing at the counter with a bundle of laundry.

Carnahan frowned, looking a little nervous, and then said, “Look, I’m sorry to barge in like this, but I really need to get this suit cleaned. I got a ticket a couple days ago, and I’ve got to go to court on it.”

Outwardly, her face was a mask of stone. Inwardly, she was lime jello. Stifling her emotions, she said, “Alright. When do you need it by?”

Eyebrows raised, he asked, “Could I get it by next Monday?”

She nodded, and grabbing a receipt book, she wrote the order down. She looked up. “Anything else?”

He stared at her silent for several moments, and then after taking a big breath, he said, “Well, you could forgive me for acting like an insensitive ass. I hope you’ll accept my sincere apology.”

Her eyes flared briefly, and then she said, “It wasn’t nothin.”

“I was a stupid asshole to ask a lady a question like that. You have no idea how much I regret it. The last thing I ever wanted was to cause you any heartache.”

“It don’t matter.”

“To me it does matter. Very much.”

She shrugged. “Okay. Whatever. I accept your apology.”

Eyes wide, he looked closely at her. In a tentative tone, he asked timidly, “So maybe we could start over and try it again? Could I buy you lunch, maybe?”

Biting her lip, she looked away and then shook her head. She sighed. “No. I really don’t think so.”

“Are you sure?” asked Carnahan, crestfallen.

She nodded. “Real sure. I thought a whole lot about it. I just think we’re wrong for each other. So there really ain’t no point in trying again.”

“I see.”

Speechless, he stood staring at her for several moments. Finally, he pulled himself together, and said, “Well, I had to try.” He took a deep breath, and then went on, “I guess I should get out of here. If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

Receipt book still in hand, she looked down at the book and then said, “Here, let me give you the claim ticket for your suit.” She tore off the receipt and handed it to him.

Their fingers touched as he took the receipt from her and was as if an electrical charge jumped between them, startling them both.

Wide-eyed, Carnahan stared at her hand, and then he turned and left the cleaners.

Suzy stared at the door long after he left. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

### **XXXVI. Alas sweet love, alas**

“She wouldn’t talk to you?” asked Mack, sipping on his *Old Tennessee*.

“She talked to me – but she refused to go out with me again,” said Carnahan in a bleak monotone, eyes downcast. He took a long drag off his cigarette, and then after blowing out a long plume of blue smoke, he went on, “Nope. I screwed it up royal. I really have outdone myself this time.” Cigarette in hand, he picked up his own glass of whiskey and took a sip.

Trying to be upbeat, Mack said, “Hey look, if she’s talking to you, there’s hope. That’s a start, right?”



Carnahan slowly shook his head. “No. No start. It’s finished. Completely, totally and unequivocally.” He paused, taking another long drag, then continued, “The one woman I could have spent the rest of my life with, Mack, and I blow it! How stupid can you get?” He shook his head, and then went on, “No, I oughta just end it now, get it over with.”

Alarmed, Mack looked closely at him. “What in the flying fuck are you talking about?”

Carnahan shrugged. “Oh, I dunno. I guess maybe I’m talking about blowing my brains out. Or maybe jumping off the Narrows Bridge. How about parking my car on the train tracks? What the hell exactly do you think?” He asked, the tone of his voice rising at the end.

Eyes wide, Carnahan paused for a second, staring at Mack, and then he shook it off and took another sip of his drink. He focused back on Mack briefly, and then eyes downcast, he shrugged and went on, “I’m admitting defeat, Mack,” he said in a quiet tone. “I’ve finally come to the realization that there’s no hope for me. None. And if that’s the case, why should I prolong the agony?” He took another sip, and then added bitterly, “If I had any balls at all, I’d do it right now. You know that?”

Staring into his glass, Mack thought furiously as he swirled the remains of his whisky in a slow, lazy circle. He was worried Carnahan might mean what he was saying. He stopped the swirling and drank the whisky, and then setting the glass back on the bar, he shrugged, and said, “Y’know, they say as sometimes it takes more balls to *not* do it.”

The bartender spotted his empty glass and refilled it, taking a couple bills from the small stack next to the glass.

Looking gloomy, Carnahan was still silent, so Mack went on, “C’mon, it can’t be that bad, Eddie.”

Carnahan shook his head slowly, and Mack thought he saw a tear in the corner of his eye.

“It is that bad, Mack. It is. And when you get down to it, it’s even worse yet. I kid you not, Mack – much worse – I mean ... she’s the woman I’ve been waiting all my life for. I know it. I’m absolutely certain.”

Carnahan took another long drag from his cigarette and then ground out the butt in the ashtray. Exhaling a long plume of blue smoke, he said in a quiet tone, “I’ve always had problems with women, that’s just a fact of my life. I can accept that. I always have accepted that. But this with Suzy is so much more important. I’m sure of it. We were meant for each other, no other possibility. So for me to have screwed that up, it’s like the *coup de la resistance*. And then to make it even better, I hurt her in the process. Yeah, just fucking great.” He took a deep breath, and then letting out, went on, “No, I can’t possibly do anything more stupid than what I already did. So rather than stick around to see if I can top myself and screw up something even worse yet, I think the best thing for me and everyone concerned is if I just check out. I’m going to abdicate. I’ll resign the game.”

“That’s the coward’s way out.”

“You’re probably right, Mack. And it’s fitting and proper.”

“Bullshit. You ain’t no coward. Eddie, you’ve got a lot of people here at this cab company depending on ya,” said Mack. “You go off yourself, you’d be letting all those people down. I don’t think you could do that.”

Frowning, Carnahan shrugged.

“Women ain’t everything. She might seem real important right now, but you let a few days pass and your feelings may change. Promise me you’ll hold off all this bullshit for a few days until things had a chance to kinda settle down?”

Looking glum, Carnahan nodded. “I suppose so. I probably wouldn’t have the guts, anyway. And if I did, I’d just screw that up, too.”

Mack peered intently into Carnahan’s eyes. “You gonna be alright, Eddie?”

Carnahan shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.” He stared into his glass.

The black depression held Carnahan in its grip, and he couldn’t think of anything except how he had screwed things up. He saw this as a culmination of everything he had gone through in the last few years. The capstone event in a long string of messy, ugly failures with women.

What if you only get one shot at true love? He thought. If you mess it up, is that it? Are you condemned to spend the rest of your life alone, paying for your mistake?

He wished there was some way he could change what had happened. To make it right, to make it up to Suzy.

The fact that he had hurt her truly appalled him. In analyzing it, he finally understood what had happened – which he privately acknowledged as a major breakthrough in self-understanding – but even so, that didn’t lessen the shame. He really did love her, and hurting her was about the last thing he ever wanted to do.

She was so fragile, he thought, like a beautiful wildflower on the night before a heavy frost.

In his more rational moments, he knew he’d eventually get over Suzy. But it was going to be a long, painful time.

**XXXVII. Dewey and the Coyote Angel**

Word quickly got around about what had happened, and how depressed Carnahan was, and so for the next few days, everyone at BlackTop tread lightly.

Dan Dinwiddie had been in making a lease payment and had mentioned it to Elmo, and Elmo had gone off the deep end.

Carnahan was the best night dispatcher they'd ever had at BlackTop and Elmo was deathly afraid of losing him. Good dispatchers, as Elmo knew, didn't grow on trees. So for the next several days, Elmo came in early and spent time with Carnahan, trying to cheer him up. He even gave him a *ten cent an hour raise*.

Now the only time in anyone's memory that Elmo had ever been nice to an employee was right before the person had been fired. Danny Sarducci had been dispatching for a couple of years and out of the blue, Elmo started hanging around with him. They went to lunch, played golf and tennis together, acting like the best of friends.

Then three weeks after it all started, it ended, and there was suddenly a new person working on Danny's shift.

No one actually knew what had become of Danny, or what precipitated his departure, but everyone had their own answer. Some people speculated that he'd been caught with his hand in the till, taking kickbacks from drivers for feeding them the good runs. Other people thought that Elmo, who was sexually ambiguous, had maybe made a pass at him and been rejected. Other people were convinced that Elmo had murdered him and had dumped the body. Whatever the facts, Danny Sarducci was gone, never to be seen again.

That being the case, Elmo's current ministrations had the exact opposite of the intended effect. Now Carnahan, afraid he was about to be fired, or worse, that Elmo was going to make a pass at him or murder him, became even more depressed.

He also started wondering if maybe he was a closet homosexual, and that depressed him even more.

Everyone at BlackTop was affected in one way or another by Carnahan's depression.

Evil Justin passed up a perfectly good opportunity to harass a driver and gave him his car, simply because he knew it was busy and he didn't want to upset Carnahan. Lyman Clark who was hungry, decided to get lunch later after bar closing had died down, because he knew Carnahan would be disappointed if he called out of service during the rush. Hans Sdorra decided to talk to his Brazilian girlfriend to see if she could set Carnahan up with one of her friends from the hospital. Steve LeMay decided to write a song for Carnahan.

Everyone was affected.

Dewey Mitchell was affected. He'd heard Mack telling Medina about how Carnahan had actually been discussing suicide. This frightened him badly.

He didn't understand the issues, really. Just that Carnahan was crazy about Suzy and that she wouldn't go out with him again, and because of it, that Carnahan was really upset.

Dewey stewed over this for a couple days – which was far longer than he'd *ever* sustained a thought before in his entire adult life. He just couldn't get it out of his head. Carnahan was his friend. He wanted to help him. He just couldn't quite figure out how to do it.

Finally, he decided to confront Suzy.

It was late afternoon when he showed up at the Cleanerama.

“Hi ya, Dewey!” said Suzy, a big smile on her face. She closed the drawer on the cash register, and blew a wisp of black hair out of her eyes. She was wearing a light blue lab coat and a white blouse. Her green eyes sparkled. She looked lovely. “What can I do for ya? Got some laundry for us?”

Dewey frowned. This wasn't starting out as he'd figured. He hadn't expected her to be nice to him and it threw him off. He stared at her for a second, and then his face softened, and he said, “Uh, I just came by to talk with ya. I don't have no laundry.” He was suddenly afraid he was in trouble because he hadn't brought any laundry.

She shrugged. “That's okay. I could use a break right now anyways. Lemme see if I can get Betty to cover. Back in a sec.”

She disappeared and then was back in a few moments.

“C'mon, let's go for a walk. I need to stretch my legs.”

He followed her out the door. They turned and began walking up Pacific, towards the Greyhound Depot.

She lit a cigarette, and tossed the match into the gutter. Letting out the smoke, she asked, “So what did you want to talk about, anyways? Is this about Ed?”

Nearly a foot and a half taller than her, Dewey hunched down so he could see her eyes. “How come you won't go out with him?” he asked.

Suzy smiled, letting out a long plume of smoke. “Boy! You don't beat around the bush, do you?” She stopped walking.

They were in front of the Greyhound Depot. Inside, a group of soldiers sat on the hard plastic seats, their duffle bags at their feet. They were playing cards, using one of the duffle bags as a table.

Suzy stared through the window at the soldiers for a moment, and then answered, “Is he really upset?”

Dewey nodded. “Yeah. Bad. He’s been talking about all kinds of stuff.”

Suzy glanced up at him. “Like what?”

Dewey looked away. “Mack said I ain’t s’posed to tell.”

“Tell what?”

“I can’t say nothing.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause it’s *terrible*.”

Eyebrows narrowed, she looked up at him and moving closer, she said, “Dewey, what exactly is going on? I don’t care what Mack said, I want you to tell me right now! What’s this ‘terrible’ stuff? Is he gonna come after me, or what?”

“Aw it ain’t nothin’ like that. You don’t gotta worry.”

Suzy looked angry. “Then what the hell is it? Dammit! I’m getting sick and tired of these twenty questions games.”

Dewey looked worried. He thought ponderously for a few moments, and then caved.

“It’s like he was talking about sui... er, sewer... aw, you know, killing himself.”

Wide eyed, she asked, “What? Killing himself?”

Dewey nodded. “You won’t tell no one I told you?”

She frowned, staring at the ground. “I won’t.” She flicked her cigarette into the gutter, and then asked, “This is for real? Why’s he so broken up?”

Dewey shrugged. “I dunno, but he is. Mack’s really worried about him. Everyone’s real worried.”

She stood silently, still frowning, staring off into space.

“Mack said if you’d go out with him again, he might get better.”

She shook her head. “I can’t, Dewey. It just wouldn’t be right.”

“But Mack said you might go out with him if he was dying or something. Ain’t this close enough?”

A faint smile lit her face. “Yeah, I remember. I told him that. I said I’d go out with Ed again if he were dying. Or maybe if he was on fire. But he isn’t. People say lots of crazy things they don’t mean. He ain’t gonna kill himself. Not over me.”

Eyebrows narrowed, a worried expression on his face, Dewey stared down at her. “But if he did?”

She sighed. “Then it’ll be on my shoulders.” She shrugged, and then went on, “Look, he’ll be okay, Dew. We both just wasn’t right for each other. I’m sorry to hear he’s hurting, but it’s the best for both of us if we just leave things as they are. Okay?”

Dewey was filled with sadness, because in that moment, he knew he’d lost his mission.

He spent the rest of the night in quiet desperation, certain that he’d failed his friend. The thought of failing Carnahan consumed him, enveloping him, and he became stuck on the one train of thought as he had never been before in his entire adult life.

The next night, soon after the start of his shift, Dewey saw a man standing near the entrance of the Albertson’s supermarket wave at him. It looked like his fare, he thought.

Dewey pulled the cab over to the curb.

The man opened the back door and got in.

Dewey looked back at him. “Hi. You Samuel?” he asked as the man closed the door.



The man nodded. “Yeah, I am.” He had a strong, Okie accent.

He was rail thin, and was dressed in a cheap black suit, with a white shirt and a narrow black tie, the tie loosened at the neck. Judging from the stubble on his craggy face, it looked like he might not have shaved in a day or two. He looked an awful lot like either a junkie who’d just gotten out of prison, or maybe Harry Dean Stanton – an actor Dewey had seen in different movies.

“So where can I take ya, Bud?” asked Dewey glumly, still stewing over Carnahan’s predicament.

“I need to go over near Oakbrook, friend. By Steilacoom Boulevard and Thunderbird Parkway.”

After much deliberation, Dewey determined that from where there were, that was only a six or eight-dollar trip, so he didn’t ask for the money up front, even though the guy looked like a junkie.

“Okay, Bud.”

Dewey put the car in gear and started off though the crowded parking lot. As they drove, he picked up the mic off the dash, and finding a break in radio traffic, he keyed the mic and said, “Car five-nine.”

Rosie responded immediately, “Car five-nine.”

He keyed the mic again. “Fifty-nine’s going to Oakbrook.”

“Going. Next car.”

Dewey turned the volume down and concentrated on driving, planning out the route in his head.

From the back seat, the man asked, “Hey brother – you mind if I smoke?”

Dewey processed the question, and then said, “It don’t bother me, Bud. Go ahead if you want.”

“Thanks.” The man pulled out a cigarette and lit it from a big silver Zippo lighter. He blew out a long plume of smoke, then arms draped over the back of the front seat, he said, “The body’s weak so I allow myself a few worldly pleasures.”

He took another long drag off the cigarette, and then letting it out, he began coughing, gasping for breath.

“Hey, you okay, Bud?” asked Dewey, concerned.

The man held up his hand as the coughing fit continued, sounding like he was going to die at any minute.

The fit continued, but finally after a couple minutes, he was able to stop coughing.

A little shaky, the man tipped a long ash off the cigarette into the ashtray, then in his Okie twang, he said, “I have succumbed to the temptations of methedrine and cocaine and women, and the Lord makes me pay for these transgressions. But I will fear not. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” Beads of sweat stood out on his pale, white, forehead.

Eyebrows narrowed, Dewey turned back to look at the man and asked, “Hey, you some kinda preacher?”

“Yes, brother, I am. Samuel Guthrie Ayers at your service.” He tipped an imaginary hat, and then wiped away the beads of sweat with the back of his hand.

Dewey was cowed. He’d always been afraid of ministers, ever since he was a kid. “I’m Dewey Mitchell,” he said.

“Pleased to meet you my brother,” said Ayers, arms draped over the back of the front seat again.

Ayers looked closely at him and then said, “I can see you are truly afflicted with grief my brother. What’s wrong?”

At once, Dewey was certain the man was reading his mind. He’d been thinking about Carnahan and Suzy nonstop for the last couple days. Dewey spilled his guts.

“My buddy, one of the dispatchers got woman problems. He’s really torn up by it. He’s thinkin’ a killing himself.”

The man lit a new cigarette with the Zippo, and then stuffing the lighter back in his pocket, blew out a long stream of smoke. “That’s a tough one. All your friend can really do is to do his best to cope and give his soul to the Lord. In Jesus we are all one.”

“But I wanted to help him,” said Dewey plaintively.

“I see your predicament,” said Ayers, rubbing the stubble on his chin. He shook his head, and then continued, “It’s good you want to help him. But you may or may not be able to do anything.”

“I owe him big. I really want to help him.”

The man smiled. “One thing you gotta remember. The Lord doesn’t give us what we want; He gives us what we *need*. There’s a whole big difference, you know. Your friend thinks he wants this woman; well the Lord knows that he *needs* something else. You want to help him, but the Lord knows you need to do something else. It’s the Lord’s decision, not ours.”

“The lady said she’d only go out with him again if he was dying or on fire.”

“And so is he dying?”

Dewey shook his head. “Nope.”

“Then that’s it, friend. That’s your answer.”

Dewey was silent for a few moments as he processed all the information. The effort he was expending was excruciatingly painful. Never in his whole life had Dewey thought about anything one thing so much. His brain was wracked from the effort. Finally, he arrived at the only conclusion he could.

Glancing back at the man, he asked cautiously, “If you had to do something really bad to help someone, where you hurt them, would it be okay?”

The man stared at him. “You love this friend that much?”

Dewey nodded, looking very serious. “I do.”

The man shrugged. “An act of love is never wrong.”

“Oh,” said Dewey, thinking furiously.

### **XXXVIII. Make mine medium rare**

The smell of wood smoke and toasting marshmallows was intense as Carnahan sat on a log at the edge of the campfire, staring into the dancing, flickering flames. He held the stick with the marshmallows right at the edge of the flames, close enough so that it toasted them, but not so close that they caught fire. As he watched the marshmallows blacken, he thought that their smell was one of the very finest things he could ever think of in life.

And then he woke up.

The transition from sleep to waking was abrupt, and Carnahan realized he was home, in bed, and that he’d dreamed he was camping. He burrowed deeper into his blankets.

But the smell of the campfire and toasting marshmallows persisted, and it puzzled him.

Becoming alert in an instant, he sat up in bed, alarmed. He switched on the lamp on his night table.

He could hear faint crackling noises. Looking at the door to his room, he could see curling wisps of smoke coming in under the door. In a flash, he realized his apartment was on fire.

He grabbed the phone from the nightstand and dialed 9-1-1.

“So, you got any enemies?” asked the young fireman.

Reeling with the shock but outwardly calm, Carnahan shook his head.

He was standing in the parking lot of his apartment complex, an old green army blanket draped over his shoulders. He was barefoot, dressed only in a pair of jeans and the blanket. The stark red lights of the fire truck revolved, and washed across the apartment complex in a continuous, moving red blur.

The fireman continued, “It looks like someone squirted charcoal lighter fluid – you can still smell it – through the crack of the window you left open, then set it off. It must have burned itself out pretty quick, but it was enough to get the couch going. The couch must have smoldered for the next couple hours – it didn’t really flame-on until the last few minutes, right before you woke up. You’re lucky as hell. No real structural damage or anything, except to the wall behind the couch. The couch is a total loss, but that’s about it. Just some smoke damage to the other stuff in the living room and kitchen. You really are lucky.”

Carnahan stared at the bleak scene. “What am I gonna do?” he asked, uncomprehending.

The fireman shook his head. “I dunno. We have a chaplain you can talk to, if you want. And the Red Cross can help with a place to stay and some money if you need it.” Reaching

inside his turnout coat, the fireman took a small notebook out of his shirt pocket and wrote on it, and then tore off the sheet and handed it to Carnahan. “Here’s the Chaplain’s number. Look, it’s gonna be a few days before you can move back in here. The Fire Marshall’s gonna wanna go through this. The cops, too.”

“Can I get some clothes and stuff out of there?”

The fireman shook his head. “I can’t let you back in. It’s a crime scene. I’ll have someone get you a shirt and some socks and shoes, though.”

Carnahan simply stood there, deep in shock, listening to the fireman talk. “Why would someone do this to me?”

The fireman shrugged, and then continued, “Probably no reason at all. We’ve got this arsonist operating down here. Been at it for a couple months. This isn’t his usual MO, but it is close. The guy seems to pick his victims at random. No rhyme or reason. More than likely that’s it – not someone that’s mad at you.”

Carnahan shook his head, slowly trying to absorb the news.

The fireman went on, “Do you have a place to stay, or should I call the Red Cross for you?”

### **XXXIX. Destitute in Tacoma**

“So he’s out in the street,” said Whitey to Mack and the group of drivers assembled in the driver’s lounge. “Ed Miller talked to the firemen there. They said it may be a week or so before he can move back in.”

Johnny Avalon spoke up. “I thought I saw his car up there at the back of the lot. I wondered what the hell he was doing. It’s his night off.”

Whitey nodded. “He slept in his car tonight – parked it out there in the back of the lot. He’s there now. Billy Seamans looked in the windows and saw him, fifteen minutes ago.”

There were murmurs of astonishment from the crowd.

“Poor sonofabitch,” said Dave Murphy, sitting on the edge of the desk.

“What can we do?” asked Bobby Woods, staring out of his coke bottle lenses.

Mack had stopped playing his game of pinball at the first mention of Carnahan’s new troubles and was standing motionless in front of the machine. “Now just hang on a minute, you guys,” he said in a loud voice. Then he turned to Whitey and continued, “How’d the fire get started?”

His Indiana Jones hat tilted at a rakish angle, Robert Ransoon spoke up. “They said it was arson. Some pyro’s been setting fires down there in Parkland.”

Mack stared off into space for a moment, thinking furiously. He’d run into Dewey at the AM-PM station just an hour or so before while gassing up, and had noticed that Dewey stank of charcoal lighter fluid. He hadn’t really thought anything of it at the time, but now, he thought maybe he should have a little talk with Dewey.

He turned to the crowd. “Hey. Somebody wanna play the rest of my balls? I just remembered I gotta do something.”

He found Dewey sitting in his car, out in the parking lot. He was collapsed over the steering wheel – and it almost looked like he was crying.

Mack tapped on the window. “Dew. Dewey. Roll down your window.”

Dewey turned towards him, rolling down the window as ordered. His eyes were wet and red, and he looked awful. Mack could still smell the charcoal lighter fluid.

“You had a great night, huh?”

“*Oh, Mack!*”

“Dewey, you smell like a barbeque. What’s going on?”

“Mack, I shouldn’t a oughta done it.”

“You started the fire at Carnahan’s?”

Dewey burst out crying. “Oh, Mack, I had to do it. I had to. She said she’d only see him again if he was dying or on fire. I had ta do it, don’t ya see?”

Mack bit his lip, and then shrugged. “You did okay, Dewey. Just calm down.” Mack was silent for a moment, thinking, and then asked, “You ain’t told no one else have ya?”

Dewey shook his head. “Nope.”

He spotted Marty Medina walking down the stairs from the deck and called out, “Hey Marty. C’mere for a minute, would ya?”

Medina walked over, saw Dewey still crying, and then asked, “S’up?”

“You heard about the fire Carnahan had?”

Medina nodded. “Yeah. A helluva trip. Too bad.”

Mack jerked his thumb at Dewey, and then said, “Well, here’s the man responsible. You know what? He did it ‘cause a what Suzy said. All that about where she’d only go out with Ed if he were dying or on fire. You believe this shit?”

Dewey hung his head in disgrace.

Medina shrugged. “Hey, like I’ve worked here so long, I’ll believe almost anything. So what are we gonna do? You aren’t gonna call the cops are you?”



Wide eyed and offended, Mack said, “Cops? Are you kidding? No fucking way. We’re not gonna let nothin’ happen to Dewey.” He was silent for a few moments, and then he went on, “Nope. Look... What we’re gonna do is *use* this. Dewey got more sense than all of us put together. Here’s what I want you to do. Get Bobby O’ and Murphy. Tell ‘em what happened, on the QT. Then tell ‘em to take Dewey home and sit with him there, so he don’t go nowhere and *especially* so he don’t blab to anyone else and tell them what he did. We can’t let him be talking to people about this or he’ll be in jail, sure as shit. Next, get a couple other big guys, say Johnny Avalon and Bill Richards, and put ‘em out in the lot, so as no one bothers Carnahan. Tell ‘em not to let *anyone* even come near his car. Then meanwhile, you and me are gonna go look up Suzy and tell her what happened. More or less.”

Medina looked thoughtful. “You think she’ll like buy this?”

Mack shrugged. “I dunno. Either way, it’s worth a chance. We don’t have nothing to lose.” He paused for a few moments, staring at Dewey, still hunched over the wheel of his car, crying softly. Then he went on, “Dewey. You’re gonna go for a ride with Bobby O’, okay?”

Refusing to meet his gaze, Dewey nodded. “Okay,” he said, between sobs.

Mack continued in a soft voice, “You can quit crying, Dew. You ain’t done nothin’ wrong. You understand?” Dewey nodded again, this time glancing up at Mack. Mack went on, “Just the same, I don’t want you talking to no one about this anymore. No one at all. *Capisca?*”

Dewey nodded again, looking a little less grim.

Mack turned back to Medina, and said, “Okay. It’s almost six AM. We’ll wait a couple hours before we go over there. Make sure she’s up and awake and had a chance to have some coffee. Right now, let’s get the boys together and get Dewey the hell out of here, double-time,

before he spills the beans. Once we get him stashed, then we can go get some breakfast and plan what we're gonna say to Suzy. Okay?"

Looking thoughtful, Medina slowly nodded. "Cool. Let's boogie."

### **XL. Mack and Medina knead the dough**

Suzy was startled by the knock on her door. The Winthrop was a security building, so she figured that it was one of her neighbors, perhaps the elderly man from next door. The elderly man was an early riser, she thought, so it must be him. No one else was likely to moving at seven-thirty in the morning.

She tightened the belt on her tattered blue bathrobe, and coffee cup in hand, opened the door.

Mack and Medina stared back at her, both with solemn looks on their faces.

"You guys? What ya doing here so early? And how did ya get in?"

Mack shrugged. "Lady we know off Paratransit let us in."

"Huh. Well, you want some coffee?" asked Suzy, stepping back from the door.

"No, like I'm floating in the stuff already. But thanks," said Medina walking in. "Hey this is a nice place. You have it done up real good." The small apartment was crammed full of stuff.

Just inside the door was a Murphy bed, which Suzy folded back into the wall as they came in. On the other side of that was a small, floral print couch with a coffee table sitting on it. To the right was a small rectangular Formica kitchen table with two chairs. Directly in back of that was the kitchen, separated from the living room by a breakfast bar, which was littered with

knick-knacks. The hardwood floors were mostly covered by a nice Afghan rug Suzy had placed in the center of the room. On the walls hung paintings, some of which were actually pretty nice.

Suzy took the coffee table off the couch and placed it on the floor.

“Have a seat, boys,” she said, sweeping a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. To Mack she asked, “How about you. Would you like some coffee?”

Mack shook his head. “Naw, I’m fine.” He sat down on the couch. Medina sat on his left. Both stared at Suzy.

Edgy and wondering what was going on, she asked, “So you guys wanna tell me what’s up? It’s way past your bedtime, so I figure it must be something good.”

Mack glanced at Medina, and then launched into his prepared speech.

“It’s like this. We just came by to tell ya some bad news.”

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. “Bad news?”

“Like we wanted you to hear it from us first, so you got the straight story,” said Medina.

Suzy sat down facing them, on the edge of the coffee table. “What bad news?” Her heart was racing, certain that something terrible must have happened.

Medina and Mack exchanged glances again, and then Mack spoke. “It’s Eddie. He was burned out of his house last night. He’s homeless.”

“He’s what?” asked Suzy, wide-eyed.

“Somebody torched his place last night. Now Ed’s living in his car,” said Mack.

“They torched his place? Who?”

Medina shook his head. “The cops don’t know. All they said was they think it was like a random arson. They’ve got some guy setting fires in Parkland. They said he just hits people at random. No particular reason.”

“Ohmigod! Was he hurt?”

Mack shook his head. “Naw, he’s okay – on the outsides, at least. Inside, well that’s a different story.”

“Whadayamean?” asked Suzy, eyebrows arched.

This was where the story got difficult, though Mack. He paused for a moment, rehearsing what he was supposed to say, and then said, “Well, it’s like he flipped his lid. Everything that’s come down in the last couple weeks, this fire thing was just too much. He parked his car out back in the lot at the cab company, and he won’t come out. He won’t talk to anyone. It’s really sad. We’re all afraid he’s gonna do something...” His voice trailed off.

Wide eyed, Suzy crossed herself, and then covered her mouth with her hand. “What can I do to help? She asked.

Medina leaned forward and frowning, said, “I know it’s a lot to ask – I mean we know you two guys had some problems – but could you come talk to him, and see if you can get him to calm down, maybe? I think he might listen to you.”

Mack nodded in agreement, and broke in, “I think if he just knew you weren’t still mad at him, it’d mean a lot, maybe help him come back to earth.”

Suzy frowned, staring off towards the window. “The poor guy,” she said softly. She looked back at Mack. “I’ll do whatever I can to help. Lemme get dressed. I’ll be ready to go in twenty minutes. ‘Kay?”

**XLI. Sometimes all you need is a swift kick in the ass**

The early morning sun had been shining on his car for about twenty minutes when Carnahan woke up sweating.

Dazed and disoriented, it still only took him an instant to remember where he was and what had happened. He stretched – as well as the confines of the back seat would allow – and then he peeked over the edge of the window sill. It was difficult to make out because of all the cabs in the way, but he thought he could see a couple people standing out on the edge of the lot. Bill Richards and Johnny Avalon, perhaps? He must be seeing things, he thought. Those two would have gone home long ago.

He cracked a window on either side for ventilation, and then he settled back on the seat, trying to get comfortable.

Following the fire, he'd done a good deal of thinking.

It had taken a couple hours, but he'd overcome the initial shock of the fire.

He'd left as the firemen were still mopping up, and had gone to Marilyn's for breakfast. With some food and coffee in his stomach, the world seemed a somewhat better place, and he was able to view the whole sequence of events a little more rationally. What an ass he'd made out of himself!

Sometimes, he reflected, what you needed most was a good swift kick in the ass.

Here, he'd been all depressed because he had screwed things up so horribly with Suzy. He'd dug himself into this horrible pit of despair, where there was no relief in sight, totally consumed by his feelings.

And then there was the fire.

But for the fact that he had woken up smelling smoke, he could very well have become a crispy critter, tonight. And he found that to be a *very* sobering thought.

He'd found out that he didn't want to die. Not even a little bit.

With that minor revelation, the dike cracked and a flood of truths hit him like a smelly wet fish, smack in the face.

He'd acted like an asshole with Suzy and had hurt her. He'd acted like an asshole with Mack and the boys. He'd been a burden to them.

No more.

What's done is done, he thought. You can either wallow in the past, ruminating over failures and mistakes, or you can learn from them and move on. To be stuck in one place, hung up on a single bad trip just compounds the original problem. It's punishment pure and simple, and what's the virtue of punishing yourself? That's for masochists and other morons and idiots.

No, you should learn from your mistakes, then move on, he thought. Anything beyond that is just self-flagellation, and that's plain stupid.

He was a smart man, he thought. An educated man, just a couple semesters away from his business degree. He could think through most any problem. And yet when it came to women, he was so stupid. Why was this so?

Mostly because of his emotions, he thought. Because his emotions clouded his rational thinking.

No more.

If it won't work out with Suzy, then it's time to move on, he thought. There are a lot of other women in the world that might just as easily be the *one*, and to sit around lost in despair

moping about Suzy would be stupid. Being depressed over *any* woman really is stupid. There are so many, many worse things that could happen.

Like for instance dying in a fire.

He really owed a great debt to Mack and the boys, for putting up with him.

He resolved to make things right, for everyone, including Suzy.

It was so late after leaving Marilyn's, he decided to go sleep in his car in the lot at BlackTop rather than find a motel. He'd parked way up in back by the ivy-covered retaining wall. He didn't think anyone had seen him come in.

It was going to be difficult to make amends to everyone, and pull his life back together and get on with the business of living. But he could do it. He *would* do it.

As he saw it, this was a second chance at life. And this time he wasn't going to screw it up.

### **XLII. Our hero redeems himself**

Carnahan was lost in his reverie when he was startled by someone tapping on his window. He looked up.

*It was Suzy!*

Fighting back his panic, he sat up and moved to the window. How beautiful she looked, he thought. He rolled down the window.

She bent down, to so she could see him.

“The boys told me what happened,” she said tentatively. She looked at him closely, a slight frown on her face. He looked pretty good for being suicidal, she thought. She went on, “Wanna talk about it?”

Fighting back an urge to tell her it was none of her business, he simply nodded. “Yeah. Okay,” he said.

She gave a slight smile, then said, “Look, my back ain’t gonna stand all this being hunched over very long. Why don’t you open the door so I can get in and sit down?”

As if in a dream, he nodded, and opened the door, and then moved back across the seat.

Suzy got in and sat down, closing the door.

She smelled like peaches. She looked lovely.

Turning to him, she said, “Mack and Medina said someone set your place on fire?”

He nodded. “Yeah, squirted charcoal lighter fluid through an open window. I was lucky I woke up. I coulda died.”

“You’re homeless?”

He nodded again. “Only for a while. The place isn’t that bad off. Mostly smoke damage. As soon as the Fire Marshall finishes their investigation, I’ll be able to clean it up. Maybe a week or two before I can move back in, tops.”

“That’s not too bad.” She stared at him wondering if Mack and Medina had lied about him being suicidal, and then said, “You’re dealing with it pretty well.”

“Yes, I am. I wasn’t for quite a while, but then it all just hit me: I’m alive and that’s what’s important.” Feeling more relaxed now, he settled back in the seat and went on, “Sometimes it takes a swift kick in the ass before you realize what’s *really* important. That’s what this fire has done for me – it’s made me realize what is truly important.”



Suzu stared at him, silent, so he continued, “It made me realize what an ass I made of myself with you, too.”

“It did?” she asked, eyebrows arched.

“Yes, it did.” He thought for a moment, and then said, “I’m very attracted to you, on so many different levels. I’m also very afraid of commitment – I mean I’ve had some really bad relationships, and because of it, at least on the subconscious level, it makes me say and do some really strange things, all in the interest of self-preservation. Or what my subconscious perceives as self-preservation. I want to apologize to you for that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re attracted to me? Why?”

He looked down for a moment, and then stared back into her lovely green eyes. “A lot of reasons. First, I admire the way you’ve turned your life around. You’ve shown great strength and determination. Not many people would have had the balls to do what you did. Most people would have taken the easy way – the fast money – but you didn’t. That’s one thing.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re also a good person. You’re honest, you’re dependable and loyal. You don’t screw people. You live by the golden rule. You’re a *nice* person. Maybe that doesn’t seem important to a lot of people, but those qualities are very important to me. *Very* important.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re also quite smart, and you’re ambitious. I’ve seen the way you can pick up on things – you’re very quick on the uptake, very perceptive. It just kills me all the shit you went through in your childhood, and all the later stuff.”

“I ain’t asking no one for sympathy,” she said, in a challenging tone.

“And I’m not giving you any,” said Carnahan. “I’m just telling you why I’m attracted to you. Right?”

“Oh.”

“The fact that you were disadvantaged as a kid and screwed over as an adult, but still remain a bright, cheery, strong, determined person – even in the face of all that adversity – makes you doubly attractive to me.”

“It does?”

He nodded. “Yes, it does. It shows me how strong your spirit is.”

“My spirit?”

“Yes. What really gets me is where you’d be today if all the bad stuff hadn’t happened. Do you ever wonder about that?”

She looked down. “Oh, yeah. A lot.”

“The real challenge and the biggest attraction for me is that if we were together, I know I could help you surmount all those obstacles and achieve your true potential. And in doing so, you would complete me.” He paused for a second, staring at her, and then continued, “I’ve always had this weird need to do something significant and to help people. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“And then the last thing – the frosting on the cake – is the way you look. I haven’t seen many women more beautiful than you. The long, shining black hair, the beautiful green eyes. The gorgeous figure.”

She looked up at him, smiling now. “Thank you.”

He drew a deep breath, staring into her lovely green eyes, and then said, “And so that’s why I’m attracted to you.”

She sighed, and then said, “Jeeze, I wished you had said something before. If I’d known...”

He shook his head. “Wouldn’t a mattered. Because subconsciously, this all scares me shitless. And because of that, I’ve done some stupid, asinine, horrible things to drive you away, all because deep down, I’m scared of getting involved.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“What else? Being hurt!”

She laughed almost to herself, and then said softly, “Hey, that’s my line.”

Carnahan shrugged. “No. It’s universal, I think.”

“Maybe you oughta take a chance sometimes?”

He nodded slowly. “Maybe.”

She was silent for a few moments, staring out at the cabs in the lot, and then looked back at Carnahan. She drew a big breath and then let it out slowly and said, “You know, if you’re gonna be out of your place for a week or two, I got a couch you can use.”

He smiled at her. “You do?”

She nodded. “I do. You’re welcome to it if you want.”

He felt a warm glow spreading through his body. “Thanks. I accept the offer. You’re most gracious.”

She dipped her head. “You’re quite welcome.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, and then Suzy said, “Look – you hungry? I’ve got bacon and eggs at the place. And lots and lots of coffee. Whadaya say we climb in front and drive?”

“I’d say that’s the best offer I’ve heard in years. Let’s do it!”

And they opened their doors and climbed in the front seat.

### **XLIII. Channel L-O-V-E**

“What are they doing?” asked Mack, standing in the doorway of the driver’s lounge.

Whitey, who was crouched behind a wrecked cab in the driveway of the shop answered in a stage whisper, “They’re getting in the front seat!”

“Both of them?” asked Mack.

Medina, who was sitting out in the open on the deck in front of the dispatch office answered, “Yeah, both of them. It looks like they’re gonna go somewhere.”

Staring out through the window at Medina, Dave McDonald, who was filling in as the day dispatcher, pushed the mic pedal and spoke in a hushed voice, “Well ladies and gentlemen, that’s it. It looks like brother Carnahan is leaving with the woman. Hallelujah, brothers and sisters! Now stay tuned for all the latest details, this is your BlackTop radio, channel L-O-V-E. And the next car is...”

There was a crowd of people in the driver’s lounge – several night drivers who had stayed up to see what was going to happen, as well as a bunch of day drivers and Dan Dinwiddie, who had come in to collect his bookings. Mack had been holding the people at bay against the possibility of someone disturbing Carnahan and Suzy as they talked.

Now with Carnahan leaving, the crowd pushed out around Mack, filing out onto the deck and into the parking lot beyond.

They all waved at Suzy and Carnahan, and many cheered as the car passed.

Big wide smiles on their faces, Suzy and Carnahan waved back.

Then the car turned right onto McKinley Street, and was gone.

The crowd milled around for a few moments, and then one by one, people began to drift off.

Dan Dinwiddie walked slowly back into the driver's lounge, trailing Billy Seamans who wanted some money. Whitey leaned back on the wrecked cab, scratching his bald spot, thinking he would go visit his brother. Evil Justin spied a driver down in the shop talking to one of his mechanics, and he quickly walked over, screaming at the driver to leave. Elmo came out on the deck, wondering what all the commotion was, and slipped on a patch of grease and nearly fell down. Bill Richards stood out in the lot, wondering if Mack would let him go home. When Johnny Avalon was getting into his car, ready to go home and go to bed, he saw Bill Richards still standing out in the lot and he wondered if he should tell him to leave. Ralph Mack, big dark sunglasses on, slithered silently in through the door of the driver's lounge, uncomfortable because of the daylight. Steve LeMay sat out in the lot on the hood of his car, happily playing his guitar, writing a new song about Carnahan and Suzy. Hans Sdorra got back in his cab, thinking how he was going to die if his Brazilian girlfriend made love to him even one more time this week. Ed Miller and Don Murdock walked towards the business office, talking about the latest lease rate increase. Bobby Wood sat in his cab dreaming of racecars while he waited for Dolly the phone person.

Mack walked over and sat down next to Medina in one of the chairs on the deck.

“Well, you think they’ll make it?” asked Medina.

Mack shrugged, pushing the chair back and putting his feet on the bottom board of the railing. “Who the fuck knows? I guess they got as good a chance as anybody.”

Medina sat up straighter. “Huh. Hey, like you wanna go have a couple cold ones before we split?”

Mack frowned, thinking, then said, “Naw, I just wanna set for a couple minutes, then I think I’ll go home.” He looked up at the sky, then went on, “Damn near too late to go to bed.”

Medina laughed. “Naw, no way, man. Never too late for that.” He stood up and continued, “Like then I’m just gonna go home and crash, I think. Take ‘er easy, man.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Medina left and Mack remained sitting with his feet up on the railing staring off into space. He was just thinking he’d get up and leave, when a man approached.

Halfway up the stairs, the man stopped and looked at Mack.

“Is taxi company?” asked the man. He was wearing a shiny, tattered blue suit, with a white shirt, open at the neck.

Mack thought the guy must be a Russian from his accent.

“This is taxi company?” asked the man again, in halting English.

Wishing he was in bed, Mack reluctantly focused on the man. “Taxi company? Bet your sweet ass, Boris,” he said without much conviction.

The man reached the top of the steps, and pointing his index finger at the deck, he said, “Taxi company, da?”

Mack frowned, becoming disinterested. He was too tired to deal with idiots, he thought. “We already covered that, you fucking commie asshole.”

“I need taxicab,” said the man, smiling broadly. “I go landpor. *Дочь моей сестры имеет ребенка,*” he added in Russian.

Mack smiled thinly back at the man. “No shit you slimy cocksucker? I bet you ate fucking maggots for breakfast, didn’t you? And did you have fun porking your little sister?”

The man nodded pleasantly. “*Я хочу идти, желаю им хорошо.*” He paused for a second, looking at his watch, then went on in broken English, “We go now?”

Bored with the game, Mack settled back in his chair, ignoring the man. His eyes stung, and he rubbed them with his fists.

The man peered at him, eyes narrowed, looking a little worried. “We go landpor?”

Mack sighed and stretched, tired to the bone. He just wanted to go home and go to sleep. “Go on, get lost, commissar. Find somebody else to take you to land of the poor, or whatever the flying fuck it is. I gotta go to bed.” He stood up.

The man moved closer, standing in Mack’s way, and took a piece of paper out of his pocket. He handed it to Mack. “We go?” he asked again.

Mack was becoming angry at the man’s insistence and he almost tossed the paper away. Hesitating at the last moment, he decided to look at it.

“Pytor Brezinski, 217 N Hayden Bay Drive, Portland, Oregon. Phone 503-555-1237,” read the note. Mack stared at it. Then comprehension finally dawned. Gears started turning in his head and his tiredness vanished.

Alert, Mack looked back at the man. Eyes narrowed, he peered closely at him. “You wanna go to Portland, huh?” he said slowly. “Is that it, Portland? Portland, Oregon?” He had the scent of a kill now, and *gallons* of adrenaline flooded into his system.

Smiling again, the man nodded vigorously. “Yes, Portland. Portland. We go?” He went on in Russian, “*И я хотел бы добраться там прежде, чем моя новая племянница - подросток, Вы идиот.*”

“No shit, you commie bastard. You got money? Cost lots of money go Portland. Lots money. *Capisca*, money? Dollars?” His eyes narrowed, studying the Russian closely.

The Russian took a wad of money out of his pocket and handed it to Mack.

Mack counted the wad, quickly. Close to five hundred dollars, he saw.

He looked up at the man. “Got any more, Boris? More money?”

The man narrowed his eyes, looking worried again. “We go?” In Russian, he asked, “*Что Вы хотите? Мой первый рожденный сын?*”

Mack looked at the wad in his hand. The fare to Portland was only about three hundred dollars. What the hell, he thought. Five hundred should cover that. Plus a *very* nice tip.

Mack stuffed the wad of money into his pocket. He took a deep breath, and then said, “Well, you slimy, cocksucking commie bastard. I guess this is your lucky day. I’m *gonna* take you to Portland. Ya know, it’s lucky you got just the right amount of cash. Exact change, huh? *Comprenez vous*, exact change?”

Smiling, the man nodded.

Mack turned and walked over to the window of the dispatch office. Through the open window, he said to Dave McDonald, “Hey Dave? Dave! I got this guy here who wants me to take him to Portland. Henry still got my car?”

McDonald glanced at him through the open window. Into the mic, he said, “Cars stand-by. On the phone.” He looked up and nodded. “Yeah, Henry’s in Puyallup.” He cocked his head, looking at the Russian standing in back of Mack, and then continued, “This guy wants to go to Portland? No shit?” He shook his head, eyes wide, looking at Mack. “Jesus! You’re sitting there on the deck and you get a flag to Portland? Man, you gotta be about the luckiest



SOB alive! Absolutely.” He smiled, and then went on, “Okay lucky man, so you want a loaner, then? How about sixty-eight?”

Mack scowled. “Aw, c’mon, that’s a piece of shit. You *gotta* have something better than that. I want something that’ll make it there and back, without any tow trucks. I don’t do tow trucks.”

McDonald stared at the keys hanging from the hooks on the dispatch board, and then after a few moments, said, “Hey – okay, here we are. Ernie Harris never came and got thirty. How ‘bout that?”

Nodding, Mack smiled broadly. “That’ll do just fine. Thanks, Dave. I owe ya.”

He took the key from McDonald, and then turned to the Russian.

“Okay, Boris. Let’s go to Portland. We’re off to see the wizard.”

Mack took him by the shoulder and steered him toward the stairway.

“Have I ever told you about the time I fucked your momma?” Mack asked, a big smile on his face.

The Russian smiled back, and shaking his head, said, “*Homep.*”

They started down the stairs. Hand still on the Russian’s shoulder, Mack said, “Ya know Boris, I think this may be the start of a really good friendship...”

The End

October 2002 – at Tacoma Washington

62,0026 words

		<u>2/22/3</u>	<u>2/24/3</u>
25,218	25128	24,867	24,867
20,880	23013	23,019	23,501
<u>16,422</u>	<u>16432</u>	<u>16,444</u>	<u>16,774</u>
62,520	64573	64,330	65,142

2,023 Bobby O'

64,523 New total