

BARE KNUCKLE

GHOST PRECINCT



MATTHEW J. DRURY

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Bare Knuckle: Ghost Precinct
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Streets of Rage Saga
EDEN²

The accomplice to the crime of corruption is frequently our own indifference.

- Bess Myerson

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PART ONE
THE SILENT CRIME WAVE

Wood Oak City, population 1.2 million.

A happy, peaceful place, named for the wealth of Charter Oaks growing in forests on the city's outskirts. In 1868, Mark Twain wrote, "Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see, this is the chief amongst them." The city's location at the mouth of the Stowe River, which feeds into a naturally sheltered harbour and then into the Atlantic Ocean, has helped the city grow in significance over the years as a prosperous trading city.

Things, however, changed.

Now, the city is choking under a crime wave on an unprecedented scale. Much more than just a series of small, isolated incidents, it's apparent an organised criminal element is at work. And at the moment, business is good. So good, in fact, there appear to be no eyewitnesses to any of these crimes. With complaints ranging from purse-snatching to breaking and entering, muggings, beatings, murders, drive-by shootings and mindless vandalism, the crimes are random, unpredictable, and happen in broad daylight.

Police switchboards have been swamped ever since the crime wave started some months ago, with the angry voices of more and more citizens who have fallen prey to this surge that has made many ordinary folk afraid to leave their homes, day or night.

Instead of getting better, things have actually gotten steadily worse, and the local police department is struggling to cope. Even more alarming is the baffling and often bizarre nature of these crimes. Merchandise of every size and description, from cell phones to stereo systems... automobiles to private jets, have all been disappearing from store shelves and warehouses at an alarming rate. Even the victims of muggings and beatings themselves rarely glimpse the perpetrators, and the attacks are always unprovoked. Many don't know they've been victimised until it's too late.

In fact, police have yet to come up with a credible eyewitness. Only a few vague reports of masked rapists and hooded teenagers at the scenes have been filed. But whoever is behind these crimes, one thing is certain. These are much more than just a series of random incidents.

An invisible gang at work? Due to the random nature of these crimes, they cannot be predicted. Where will the criminals strike next? And who can stop them?

Unfortunately, the police are the only ones available to combat this silent crime wave. But perhaps the most disturbing silence is that coming from City Hall...

It was around midnight in Wood Oak City.

The light of the moon reflected brightly in the glass of a lush, high-rise apartment complex - making it appear palatial, regal somehow. Laying on a sumptuous designer sofa in the inner sanctum of a penthouse suite, Pablo Marcano García was furiously drunk, and buzzing on smack. He was dressed in a denim jacket and jeans, looking

completely out of place in the expensive suite with its pastel colours, window walls, and new-wave furniture tortured into weird shapes. Sam Cooke music crooned from five hundred dollar speakers somewhere out of sight.

On the table next to the sofa was an open bottle of pills, and next to that, a mirror dusted with cocaine. García roused himself, grimaced at the vile taste of the vodka he'd been drinking, and smeared some powder on his gums. As he did so, his eyes lolled back in their sockets. He was completely whacked out of his mind.

He stood, stumbled across the room, pausing to glance at a photograph on the wall:

Two men. Soldiers. Both young, about ten or so years between them. Rough-hewn, arms around each other. García recognised the men well, but had never actually met them. He snorted, too drunk and stoned to think about it any longer. He stumbled on, throwing open the glass doors, then stepped out on a large balcony overlooking the city.

The panoramic splendour of Wood Oak City at night was breathtaking. As he stood against the sea of lights and technology, listening to the constant roar of traffic far below, García, even in his state, was overwhelmed by its beauty. He blinked the thought aside, taking a deep breath of the crisp night air, then gazed at the balcony railing beside him. There was an M9A1 bazooka leaning against a potted plant, and several 2.36-inch rocket grenades.

García grinned and picked up the weapon, swinging the metallic tube over his shoulder, loading and arming it in one swift motion. Then he stepped forward and leaned over the balcony railing, trying to get a better view. It was ten stories

down to the parking lot. He squinted through the weapon's sights, holding it out over the edge.

"Red car," he muttered, squeezing the weapon's trigger without a moment's hesitation. The rocket-propelled grenade whooshed away from him, plunging down toward the parking lot at incredible speed, and *Boom!* - a red Chevy turned into a ball of flame less than two seconds later.

"Green car," García said, adjusting his aim slightly. A green Dodge. *Boom!* Impact city, and another fireball. The air was pierced by the shrieking alarms sounding from nearby vehicles. He chuckled, feeling an empowering sense of excitement and pleasure.

"Blue car."

Again. *Boom!* Glass shattered, debris sprayed, fire roared. A blue BMW this time around. García loved this game, and his expression was slightly crazed as he peered through the thick cloud of black smoke that billowed toward him, obscuring the view of his handiwork.

He coughed violently, then went back inside. When the police arrived, he would be long gone. This was just too easy.

Four tough-looking dock workers were camped out under the pier, warming themselves around a small bonfire, laughing loudly. Christmas decorations dangled above them from the underside of the pier, and empty beer cans littered the sand around them. Tied to one of the pilings was a young blond girl, no older than nineteen or twenty, being tormented by the dock workers. They had stripped her to her underwear and now flicked lighted matches at her, shook their beers and sprayed her in

the face. These guys were not rocket scientists, but they knew how to frighten a girl who had been foolish enough to go for a run, alone, at this time of night. She cowered, tugging the rope, fearing for her life, and what else they might have planned for her.

The dock workers found the whole situation hilarious. One of them turned, laughing, then frowned suddenly.

As a shadowy figure walked calmly up to the fire from somewhere out of sight.

Long, blond hair.

Cigarette dangling from lower lip.

Shirt-tails hanging loosely below the waist.

There was nothing threatening in the stranger's manner as he plopped down beside the men, smiling. He was tall, broad-chested, with a muscular physique that put the dock workers immediately on their guard.

"Name's Axel," the stranger said. "Happy holidays. Mind if I join you?"

"Yes," the first man said, sounding annoyed. They all wore yellow hi-visibility jackets, sporting some punkish hairstyle, employees of the Signal Dockworks company.

"Yeah, fuck off," one of the others said. "Can't you see this is a private party?"

Axel smiled at him innocently, then glanced briefly at the young woman who observed the exchange in a petrified silence. Absently, he reached into the paper sack he carried under one arm and produced a spanking new bottle of Jack Daniels, possibly the finest drink mankind has yet produced.

"I need help drinking this," Axel said. "Cool?"

The dock workers exchanged glances. One of them frowned. “You a homo?” His name was Mavin.

Axel smirked. “Do I look like a homo to you?”

The first punk, identified by his name badge as ‘Scarab’, took a step forward. “You got long hair. Homos got long hair.” A third man, Ice, stood up then and said, “I hate homos,” giving a roar of disapproval.

Axel shook his head and laughed casually. “Boy, you guys are terrific. You make me laugh, you just do.” At which point, appropriately enough, the fourth punk shook a beer and sprayed it in the young girl’s face. She tried to pull away, whimpering with fear, but couldn’t move under her restraints. After a moment she lay still, sobbing.

Axel leaned forward. “This your bitch? You have good taste.” He gazed at her, caught eye contact for a moment, then turned to look at each of the four dock workers. “Guys, you know what? I don’t think she wants you to spray beer in her face. I think she hates it.”

A pause. Uncomfortable. Then -

“Oh, really...?” Scarab said, between clenched teeth. “Well, mister, why don’t you ask her what she likes?”

The others snickered.

Axel simply nodded. “Okay.” He leaned toward the girl. “What is it that you want, honey?”

Bound, gagged and terrified, the girl could give little more response than a pathetic sounding whimper which trailed into a moan.

“Okay,” Axel nodded. “What...? You want... oh. Oh, hell no, I couldn’t do *that*... No, you little nut.”

The dock workers were more puzzled than ever now, as Axel turned to them, chuckling, and said, “Get this: She wants me to beat the shit out of you guys.”

Everything seemed to stop. A cloud passed over the assembled faces and a pin-dropping silence ensued. Axel, completely heedless, once again leaned toward the girl. “What’s that...? The one... in the middle... ‘is a stupid fat duck’... What...?” He frowned, listening again. “Oh... Oh! A stupid fat fuck! Right.” He looked up at the dock workers, shaking his head. “Boy, this bitch is pissed.”

The one in the middle, Mavin, grabbed Axel by the collar and hoisted him roughly to his feet, hissing a curse. He towered several inches above Axel, and stared venomously down into the smaller man’s blue eyes, which seemed neutral, like a snake’s.

“Buddy, you’re shortening your life span.” He flicked open a mean-looking switchblade, pointing it toward Axel.

Without another word, Axel launched a fist into his face, knocking him back, drawing blood. He stepped back, adopting a neutral fighting stance, his blue eyes wide. Meanwhile the other dock workers began to circle. Axel turned to the girl, his eyes never leaving his grinning attackers. “What’s that? You want me to take the knife away... and break his elbow...?”

Circling...

Axel watched them, his breathing slow and even. “But that would be excruciatingly painful...”

Something was building up inside Axel. The other men could perhaps sense it, their smiles faltering a bit. They began to crouch, combat-ready, their eyes blazing now.

“And if I separated the fat one’s shoulder,” Axel continued, “he’d probably scream.”

Suddenly, Ice sprang forward, roaring.

Big mistake.

Axel pummelled him to the ground, then made swift work of his three buddies, executing a series of impressive martial arts combos. A moment later, the beach was littered with their writhing forms, and Axel finally did what he had originally intended to do: he untied the girl, setting her free.

“Who are you?” she managed, still terrified.

Axel grinned, and scooped out his wallet. He opened it out and showed her a police badge. “Axel Stone. I’m an officer of the law.” Casually, he lit a cigarette, then frowned. “You hurt? They rape you?”

She shook her head dejectedly, averting his gaze.

He seemed relieved. “Okay, honey. Go on. Get outta here.” He began to walk away.

Shocked, the girl remained close to him, following him. “I... I mean what...”

“No, no,” Axel said. “Don’t follow me. I’m an asshole. Go away. Go back to your parents, they’re probably worried about you.”

Axel watched as she finally gave in and walked away in the opposite direction, slowly at first, gradually picking up speed until she was sprinting away into the distance against the palm-lined skyline.

Axel shook his head. Just what the hell had happened to this place?

Oak trees cast long shadows over the Hunter residence, and toys, lots of them, were littered across the lawn. A Big Wheel, a G.I. Joe figure, a skateboard. Christmas lights were strung across the eaves, and in the driveway, an antique station wagon was parked unevenly.

Detective Adam Hunter was seated at his desk in the study, pruning a Seiju Elm bonsai tree. He groaned, muttering in mock indignation as he struggled with the tiny branches, putting all of his concentration into the task. His gun, a .38 Police Special, dangled in its holster from the back of his chair. Beside it, his badge, gleaming in the light, identified him as Wood Oak PD Robbery/Homicide. Adam was tough: An old-fashioned fighter who wore his past like a scar. Piercing eyes; cynical. Yet despite this, he was so engrossed with pruning his bonsai tree he failed to notice as the door to the study opened and a set of slender, female hands placed a birthday cake directly in front of him.

Jodie Kelly was his long-time girlfriend. Pretty, a real head turner. The kind of gal who took your breath away at first glance. The cake was a real beauty, too.

“Make a wish, Adam,” Jodie said.

Standing behind her in the doorway, Sammy, his ten-year-old, precocious younger brother said, “Yeah, go for it, bro.”

Adam smiled. “Go for it, huh...? Okay, I’ll go for it.” He blew out the candles. Applause. His gaze lingered on the cake. Or rather, the message scrawled atop it in icing:

HAPPY 30TH BIRTHDAY ADAM.

Now that really made him feel old, even though he wasn't. He chuckled to himself, and then the presents arrived.

Detective Sergeant Axel Stone's apartment building was a run-down, derelict place on the edge of the city, surrounded by barb wire fencing erected by the landlord to keep out local thugs. The Wood Oak forest was nearby, stretching out from beneath a lattice-work of high-tension power lines. Rusted railroad tracks wandered into the distance. The garden was dead, sprouting weeds. It wasn't much, but the rent was cheap and nobody asked any questions - just the way Axel liked it.

The ground was trembling, like an earthquake, rattling the power poles, as without warning, an express train blasted past at seventy miles an hour.

Axel Stone had a tired, chiselled face, etched with line and shadow, and the sound of the speeding train did not rouse him from a deep and restful sleep. He was not a morning person. Suddenly, the clock radio on his bedside cupboard blared to life:

"Silver Belllls... It's Christmas tiiiiime in the City..."

Axel snapped awake instantly. Alert. Tense. Face bathed in sweat. He sat up and shut off the radio, cursing himself for staying up so late the night before. He lit a cigarette, inhaled, then coughed and hacked. Another train throbbed by outside, rattling his skull...

And it was just a typical morning for Detective Adam Hunter.

Jodie was burning eggs in the kitchen, while Sammy sat in front of the television, playing video games. Adam was dressing for work, fixing his tie, scurrying to and fro, racing to get ready, a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth.

Amid all the chaos, the phone rang. Jodie swore and dropped the eggs, then answered it.

“I think you’re going to want cereal for breakfast,” Adam said to Sammy absently.

“As usual,” Sammy said, and flicked him a knowing smile.

Jodie hung up the telephone. “Honey, you know a man named Robert Murphy? Don’t step in the egg.”

“Where’s my thinking?” Adam said. “I should’ve checked the floor for egg. Robert Murphy?” He frowned. That was a name he hadn’t heard since his academy days. “Jesus, Robert Murphy. What’s he want?”

“The office called,” she told him. “He’s been trying to reach you for three days now.”

Adam blinked. “I haven’t talked to Murphy in... shit, twelve years? No, wait a minute, that would make me thirty years old. That can’t be right.” He grinned.

Jodie smiled. “You’re not getting older, honey. You’re getting better. More experienced.” She winked at him.

He nodded, taking deep breaths, then headed for the door. “Forget the eggs, Jodie. I’ll eat later.”

“Whatever.” She turned to look at him then. “Honey?”

Adam stopped, avoiding her gaze.

“How come I never heard of Robert Murphy?”

“I never talked about him.”

“Oh.”

Deciding not to elaborate further, he crossed the entrance hall and went out the front door, flicking off the Christmas lights as he went.

Axel got dressed. He had deep scars on his back, the kind you get from knives. He ran a hand through his limp blond hair once his shirt was on, then went and popped three aspirin pills from a bottle, opting to chew them rather than bother with water. He ate a sandwich from the refrigerator, standing in the middle of his apartment.

He looked at the floor. *What a lonely fucking guy*, he thought, then strapped on his gun. A .9 millimeter Beretta. He threw on a jacket, downed a shot of whiskey, and then headed for the door, wondering what kind of horrors the world would throw at him today.

Adam entered the police firing range, shedding his coat and unholstering his .38 with practised ease. The targets ahead were human silhouettes with numbered kill zones. He stepped to the red line, shifted and stretched, then cracked his neck and braced himself.

His eyes focused on his target with lightning swiftness. *Bam!* The sound was deafening in the closed room. A neat round hole appeared in the middle of the target: a perfect shot. Adam smiled, and holstered his gun.

“Happy birthday to me,” he sang softly to himself.

Sergeant Axel Stone was driving. He looked like shit, like he hadn't slept. He certainly hadn't shaved. Hell, he probably looked better than he felt right now.

The dispatch radio squawked. He turned down the Trent Reznor music from the car radio and heard the dispatcher's gruff voice: *“All units in the vicinity and Fourteen X-Ray Thirty-One, shooting in progress at Beach District, Third and Fifteenth. Three victims down, PA en route. Fourteen X-ray Thirty-One, handle code three.”*

Axel gritted his teeth, hit the gas pedal and peeled out.

Over by the Century Apartments parking lot, the sky threatened rain. Cars buzzed by as Wood Oak City slowly awakened. A section of the parking lot was cordoned off by yellow streamers which read: POLICE LINE - DO NOT CROSS, and the area was buzzing with activity. Police, ambulances, fire trucks...

A black and white police patrol car pulled up, admitting two beat cops and a young hooker. Her name was Nora, and she was not happy about all this.

“Can I stay in the car?” Nora asked.

“No,” said the cop in the front passenger seat. His name was Boddicker.

“Aw, cut me a break,” she moaned. “I told you already: she was waiting for me in the red Chevy - ”

“*That* red Chevy...?” Boddicker pointed to the mangled, burned-out shell of what remained of a car, steaming in the morning air.

Nora roared. “Yes, of course that fucking red Chevy. She was waiting for me, and then she got blown up. I puked in a trash can, and ran off before the psycho could aim the bazooka at me. Can I go now?”

Boddicker shook his head. “No. Not ‘til you talk to the Sarge.”

“Terrific,” Nora said. “Where the hell is he?”

As if responding to her question, Sergeant Adam Hunter drove up and got out. As he did so, a beat cop, Bellamy, toed past.

“Happy thirtieth, Adam.”

“Fuck you,” he murmured, then crossed to the two cops and Nora.

“Hey, Sarge,” the driver, Ferrer, said.

“Morning, Ferrer,” Adam nodded. “Get some rain, looks like. Hey, Nora. Nice threads.”

Nora forced a smile. “Hey, Sergeant Hunter. Tell these bozos to lay off.”

Adam grinned. “You. Bozos. Lay off.”

Boddicker ignored the banter. “We had another random crime last night. Somebody let loose with an RPG, blew up some cars, killed somebody. Nora here was in the vicinity, saw the whole goddamn thing.”

“You got a statement?” Adam asked. “Send her home.”

“Thanks Adam,” Nora breathed. “I’m beat, you know how it is.”

“Sure,” he pointed to her outfit. “All dressed up and no-one to blow.”

She grimaced. “You’re hilarious.”

They watched her leave, then Ferrer escorted Adam across the parking lot. “Nice wholesome girl,” he said, talking about Nora. “She got a new job, you know.”

Adam raised his eyebrows doubtfully. “What’s that?”

“County ceiling inspector,” Ferrer smirked. “So, thirty years old, huh? Finally reaching middle age then?”

“Eat me,” Adam said.

They stopped next to the burned-out Chevy. Inside, the grisly remains of an incinerated human corpse were visible. Adam grimaced.

“Name is Amanda Murphy,” Ferrer told him. “Age sixteen, prostitute, one arrest, no convictions. Born - ”

“What was the name?” Adam interrupted.

“Murphy. Amanda Murphy. You know her...?”

Adam was stunned. He spoke very slowly. “I... I knew her dad.”

Ferrer blinked. “Jesus.” There was an awkward pause. “Vehicle is registered to her. She was sitting inside when the car exploded.”

Adam swallowed dryly. “Find out who bought it for her. Her sugar daddy.”

“Take some looking into,” Ferrer complained.

“So look,” Adam told him.

In the penthouse suite of the apartment complex, Adam Hunter stared at the photograph hanging on the wall, depicting two soldiers on a tour of duty in Iraq. He recognised both of them; one of them was George Xetheus, the politician

currently running for Mayor's office in Wood Oak City, younger and trimmer. The other was Shiva, now a notorious criminal who had spent most of the past several years in a state penitentiary - thanks to the efforts of Robert Murphy, a good cop who was also Adam's superior officer at that time.

He picked up his cell phone. "Yeah, it's Hunter. Tell the captain I need the number for Robert Murphy. What...? Yeah, the man who's been trying to contact me for three days. His daughter just became the latest victim of the silent crime wave."

About a mile out of the city, the endless green hills and wastelands were bisected by a ribbon of highway. A road gang cleared brush by the side of the road: twenty-five men in prison fatigues sweating through their mid-afternoon labour. Three guards flanked the working prisoners... Mountie hats, shotguns, sidearms, sunglasses - they looked like they meant it.

On the horizon, a battered pickup truck appeared, approaching on the highway. As it got within a few dozen yards of the road gang it suddenly coughed, shuddered, and stalled. A big Blackfoot Indian named Abadede got out and started cursing, kicking at the vehicle. Then he began walking toward the road gang.

The Head Guard was called Brady. He smiled at the oncoming man, poking a prisoner beside him. "Wonder what reservation they let him off of..."

The prisoner, Shiva, looked up, and grinned at Brady. "Yeah, there goes the neighbourhood."

Brady laughed as Abadede closed in on him.

“Say, buddy,” Abadede said, his voice gravelly and deep. “My engine’s seriously overheating and it’s almost two miles before the next station... could I get some water out of your cooler?”

Shiva leaned on his hoe, speaking as Abadede passed him. “Maybe you shoulda stole a better truck, Tonto.”

Abadede fumed. “You got a real big mouth, convict.”

Brady stepped in. “It’s okay, chief. He’s just joking...”

“How about that water...” Abadede started.

“Firewater, Tonto?” Shiva snorted, interrupting him. “Is that what you...”

Abadede whirled, swinging at Shiva. Both men rolled to the ground.

“Hey!” Brady roared, surprised. “Jesus Christ!”

Seeing the commotion, the other guards charged toward them. As they struggled, Abadede slipped a pistol into Shiva’s hand.

“That’s a state prisoner, asshole!” Brady said. “Back off...” He pulled Shiva away from Abadede just as one of the other officers arrived. Shiva suddenly whipped out the pistol, shooting Brady in the head at point-blank range. Blood sprayed.

Before the other guards could react, Abadede came out with his own pistol, capping the second guard. A third guard, still forty yards away and in mid-draw, howled as Shiva started firing toward him. He turned and ran for the prison bus.

Shiva smiled as he fired, letting off two more rounds, but the range was too great for the

small pistol. The other prisoners watched for a moment, then scattered off in different directions.

“Come on!” Shiva barked.

He and Abadede ran to the pickup, climbed in, and a moment later it roared away.

Inside the prison bus, the third guard was making a frantic call on the police radio. “APO six-five-seven, Unit Twenty-Five to APO.”

The radio responded. “*Go ahead, Unit Twenty-Five.*”

“Escape in progress. Two officers shot off rail crossing Thirty-One. Prisoners escaping. Two men, one six-four, two-hundred-fifty pounds, dark, an Indian, the other, Shiva, five-ten...”

Further down the highway, several miles from the escape, a big semi was parked by the side of the road; back doors to the closed trailer open. A station wagon was parked across the road. The pickup appeared, approached the semi, slowed down and drove up the ramp into the van. Shiva and Abadede jumped out, shoving the ramp up inside the truck and closing the big doors. Then, they went and climbed inside the station wagon and roared off back in the direction of the road gang.

Abadede took off his hat, revealing a hardened face covered with tribal markings, then donned a large pair of sunglasses. “Get ready to duck,” he said.

Shiva dove for the floor. Three police cars went by, sirens blaring, lights flashing. They passed the road gang. Shiva reappeared, smiling.

“You know something?” Shiva said. “I’m having a real good time.”

The station wagon blasted down the highway, becoming a small dot on the landscape as it headed toward Wood Oak City.

Axel Stone and three Christmas Tree Lot employees were gathered around the liftgate of a large truck bearing a load of festive trees. The truck was effectively shielding them from the view of the unsuspecting customers picking out trees in the lot.

The employees were, in fact, drug dealers. They looked around nervously in all directions as Axel tasted a sample of their wares.

“That’s good heroin,” Axel said, grimacing at the bitter taste between his teeth.

“You better fuckin’ believe it,” said the first dealer. His name was Donovan. The look in his eyes was concealed by a pair of large, dark glasses.

“Okay,” Axel nodded. “Let’s do it. How much?”

The second guy, a short man with orange dye in his hair calling himself ‘Galsia’, leaned forward. “How much for how much?”

“For all of it,” Axel said, his gaze darting between them.

“You want it all?” asked a third guy, Gunther.

“Yeah.” Axel glanced at the trees. “And maybe a nice big six-footer to put it under.”

“The tree you can have for nuthin’,” Donovan said. “But the shit is gonna run you a hundred.”

Axel let out a soft whistle at the amount. “That much, huh?” He dug into his pocket. “Okay. Let’s see what I got.”

He pulled out a roll of money and began to count it out in twenties and small bills. “Twenty, forty, sixty...”

The drug dealers exchanged dumbfounded expressions. “Hey, man. Hey!” Donovan had to raise his voice.

Axel frowned. “Wait, wait ... shutup. I'm losin' count. Where was I? Oh, yeah... Eight, ninety, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven...” He started digging into his pocket for loose change.

Donovan snorted at this. “Forget it, dumbshit.”

“C'mon,” Axel moaned. “I'm almost there. Gimme a minute to -”

“One hundred thousand, you stupid fuck!” Donovan roared. “One hundred *thousand!*”

Axel was floored. He couldn't believe his ears. “Oh, Jesus ... I can't afford that. Not on my salary.” He took a deep breath. “Look... let's do this instead...” Then he pulled out his wallet. “I take your complete stash, okay? I take it all. For free. And you assholes go to jail.” As he spoke, he flipped open his wallet and showed his police badge. The drug dealers at first looked startled, then disbelieving.

Axel raised his eyebrows. “I could read you your rights, but ... nah. You guys know what your rights are.”

Donovan sneered. “Fuck you, man. That badge ain't real. And *you* ain't real.”

Galsia burst out laughing. “But you're sure as hell one crazy fuck!”

Axel's eyes began to blaze with rage. His nostrils flared. Like a maniac, he lunged at Galsia, pummelling him with a flurry of quick punches, followed by a knee to the face. He ended the routine

by pulling a nine-millimeter Beretta from behind his back and pressing it against Galsia's neck.

"That's a real badge. I'm a real cop," Axel hissed, "and this is a real gun." He turned to Donovan and Gunther, his teeth barred. "Face down on the ground. Arms and legs out. Do it now!"

The other two began to follow orders, but Axel could see a troublesome flicker in their eyes. He span around, and saw a fourth dealer, Surger, creeping up behind him, armed with a shotgun. A split second later, the shotgun exploded, and Axel ducked, allowing Galsia to take the full force of the blast in the face. His head imploded with a shower of gore and he collapsed to the ground.

Axel rolled in the sawdust coating the concrete floor, his face spattered with blood, firing his Beretta. Surger took a bullet between the eyes, killed instantly.

Gunther now had an automatic rifle in his hand, swinging it in Axel's direction and firing without hesitation. Sawdust and pine needles flew into the air, but Axel was able to dive out of the way and return fire, blowing Gunther away.

Only Donovan was left now, but Axel couldn't find him. His eyes darted in all directions, feeding off the adrenaline surging within him, like a predator stalking its prey. Where was he?

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Donovan grabbed Axel from behind and pressed a revolver to the back of his head, taking Axel's Beretta from him and tucking it into his belt. Then, suddenly, five narcotics officers came running from their stakeout positions around the lot. As they approached and saw that Axel was being held with a gun pointed to his head, they stopped short.

Donovan grunted through flared nostrils, and began to move with Axel toward a van parked nearby.

Axel shouted at the narcotics officers. “Shoot him! Shoot him!”

“Shut up,” Donovan hissed.

Axel grimaced. “Fuck you. *Shoot him!*”

The other officers were frozen with indecision. Frustrated, helpless, immobilised.

Axel saw the van looming up. If this punk got him to the van it meant defeat, disgrace. It meant victory for the bad guys, and Axel would rather die than be the instrument of a drug dealer’s escape. He roared with anger, the veins popping out in his neck.

Donovan was getting nervous and panicky, his gun hand trembling, the barrel of the gun jiggling against the back of Axel’s head.

“Do it, asshole,” Axel mocked. “Pull the trigger. *Do it.*”

“Shut the fuck up!” Donovan blurted.

They moved closer to the van. The narcotics officers had their guns poised for action, but didn’t dare use them. Donovan called over to them, “Guns down! Guns down!”

Axel shouted over him. “Shoot him! Kill him! Come on, guys! Do it, for Christ’s sake! Waste him!”

Donovan was so freaked out and tense now that his grip of Axel slipped momentarily. Axel saw his opening and wasted no time. He span and kicked the man heavily in the groin, then sent a fist into his arm, dislocating it and sending the gun flying. In the same motion, he grabbed his Beretta from Donovan’s belt and shoved the barrel into his face.

Axel's entire body quaked with rage. His finger began to squeeze back on the trigger... He wanted to kill the guy so bad he could almost taste it... and yet, he didn't do it.

The other officers arrived and stepped between Axel and Donovan, then Axel turned away, breathing hard. He tucked the Beretta into his belt, noticing the blood that had sprayed all over the ground during the violent encounter.

It gave him pause. For a moment he just stared at the blood, not moving, with a terrified look in his eyes.

In the Metro Squad Room, the Wood Oak City Police Department had never looked so busy. Phones rang with increasing numbers of random crimes to report, computer keyboards clattered as reports were drawn up, and police officers exchanged desperate conversation. It looked like a circus. This 'silent crime wave' was putting the place under so much pressure; the staff were barely able to cope.

Captain of Detectives Jack Wyndam moved through the room like an after-breakfast juggernaut. Behind him, a young woman rushed to keep up. Her name was Linda - the police psychologist, no less.

"I want Axel Stone pulled from duty," she told the Captain.

Wyndam glanced at her. "Um... no."

She was taken aback. "No. No? Captain, he walked into the line of fire."

"Very brave individual, don't you think?"

She shook her head. "This is utter bullshit."

"Oh, is it?" Wyndam said, pissed off. "Forgive me."

“Axel Stone is a cop with a death wish,” Linda said.

Wyndam shot her an incredulous look as they rounded a corner and came to the door of his office.

“You can quote me,” she continued. “It happens to be my professional opinion.”

Wyndam opened the office door slightly, then looked at her. “Um... good opinion. See you tomorrow, doctor.”

“Captain...”

“Look, doc, you’re way off. Way off. Want to know what I think? I think Axel is pulling for a psycho pension.”

She frowned. “Oh, do you?”

Wyndam nodded. “Yeah. I’m sure you’re aware the department offers a disability stress pension...”

“Of course I’m aware.”

“Except we don’t offer it to everybody, only cops who seem to suffer from...”

“From abnormal stress, yes, I know. Or suicidal tendencies. You think Axel is playing a game?”

Wyndam shrugged. “Sure. He wants the cash. I’ve seen it a hundred times. He wouldn’t be the first corrupt cop in this precinct. He’ll come around. Trust me.”

Linda frowned, licking her lips. She lowered her voice. “Sir, with all due respect, I think that’s a dangerous attitude to take. May I remind you that his mother was recently killed in a car accident? His father died in a house fire when he...”

“I know all about Axel Stone,” Wyndam told her. “He’s a tough bastard. Besides, he still has a sister doesn’t he?”

“He’s on the edge,” Linda said. “He may be psychotic.”

Wyndam snorted. “Bunch of psycho-babble. Look, the Chief has sent an officer from Internal Affairs down here, and I have a meeting in five minutes. In case you hadn’t noticed, this precinct is being investigated for serious allegations of corruption. I’m a little busy right now, so if you’ll excuse me...”

Linda ignored him. “I think you’re making a mistake by leaving him in the field. He’s suicidal.”

“End of discussion,” Wyndam insisted. “Please, doc. I need to get this meeting started.”

That night, rain swept in off the Atlantic coast. Cold. Drenching. Axel Stone walked slowly toward his apartment building, head down. The rain beat hard against his face, but he didn’t seem to notice. It had been a long day.

He went inside, soaking wet, and switched on the lights. He switched on the television and sat down heavily, a bottle of whiskey in one hand. On the screen, Jack Skellington was staring into a portal to Christmas Land. Axel opened a drawer beside him, and took out a bottle of sleeping pills. For a moment he rolled the bottle in his fingers, then slowly and thoughtfully unscrewed the safety cap, and downed a couple of the pills with a swig of whiskey.

He grimaced and coughed, then lit a cigarette.

Outside, the rain beat down on the window, continuing to hammer the lonely little pit which Axel Stone called home.

The rain came down in a torrent, and the City Hall building was cloaked in a low fog. It consisted of a central pavilion with two projecting wings, reached by a long flight of marble steps. Inside, Mayor Stevenson walked to George Xetheus' office to speak with him in person.

George Xetheus was sitting in an expensive armchair, puffing a Di Nobili cigar. Xetheus kept a box of them in his desk, along with several packs of Havanas. He was a respected politician here in Wood Oak City, tipped on becoming Mayor himself at the next election; a man who had built a reputation as somebody whom everybody could come to for help, and never were they disappointed. He made no empty promises, nor the craven excuse that his hands were tied by more powerful forces in the world than himself.

Stevenson opened the folder that held his notes. "George, the press is all over this. Shiva has escaped, and they're asking questions about your prior involvement with him." He saw Xetheus grimace, and went on hastily. "It doesn't look good, especially on the eve of your election to Mayor's office."

Xetheus shook his head. "Shiva's escape had nothing to do with *me*, I assure you. So I served with him in Iraq, so what? That was a long time ago now."

"You know what the press are like, George. They love a good scandal."

Xetheus puffed on his cigar. "And you, Mr. Stevenson, what do you think?"

Stevenson, who had been Mayor for four years now, composed himself to be absolutely

honest. “The press will believe anything we tell them. Sir.”

George Xetheus smiled. “See that they do.”

Adam Hunter sat at his desk, lost in thought. Behind him was Frank Feroccio, Class Three Detective.

“See, you’re behind the times, Adam,” Feroccio was saying. “Guys these days aren’t tough, they’re sensitive people. They show emotions around women and shit like that. I think I’m a modern guy.”

Adam turned. “How you figure?”

“Last night, I cried in bed,” Feroccio said, “so how’s that?”

Adam smirked. “Were you with a woman?”

“No, I was alone, why the fuck you think I was crying?”

“Sounds like a modern guy to me.”

Another detective entered the room, rail-thin, nose like a beak. His name was Aiken. Behind him in the door frame, a fat cop passed by down the hall, walking backwards, followed by four more cops singing the world’s worst rendition of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” It sounded like pigs mating.

Aiken walked straight up to Adam and cleared his throat. “Got some news on the Murphy case, Adam.”

“That was quick,” Adam remarked.

“Yeah, well,” Aiken said. He took a deep breath. “That psycho guy who Murphy helped put in jail a few years back, uh... Shiva... I think his name is...”

“Shiva. Right.”

“He escaped custody yesterday. Call it a coincidence or not, but it could be linked to this whole thing.”

Adam frowned, wondering what it all meant. “Brilliant.”

“Right, right,” Aiken said. “So have you got into contact with Murphy himself yet?”

Adam looked at him blankly for a moment, realising he had underestimated the urgency of the situation. “No, not yet, I...”

At that moment, Axel Stone entered the squad room, shuffling from foot to foot, looking lost. He lit a cigarette, ignoring the ‘No Smoking’ signs plastered around the walls.

Adam got up, and slung on his jacket. “I guess I’d better contact Murphy right away,” he said, and turned to go. Then he noticed Axel, and frowned, eyeballing him suspiciously.

Axel was unshaven, and his blond hair was limp and dirty. He wore a grimy white shirt, and wandered from desk to desk, smoking, stopping near a desk with a holstered gun set down on top of it.

“Wait,” Aiken said. “I’m not through yet. I’m supposed to tell you something.”

“What?”

“Captain says you’re breaking in a new partner on this case.”

Adam was distracted. “I don’t work partners.”

“You do now,” Aiken told him matter-of-factly. “CIT transfer, some burnout they want you to keep on a leash.”

“Oh, perfect,” Adam moaned. “Can I trade in my life for a new one?”

At which point, across the room, Axel removed the holstered gun and hefted it curiously. Suddenly, all hell broke loose.

“Gun!” Adam yelled, and bolted like a cheetah.

Cops dived for cover, a secretary shrieked, and Adam went ploughing through the squad room like an express train, blowing people out of the way. Cops grabbed for their holsters. Axel, meanwhile, looked around frantically, not realising the guy with the gun was, of course, himself.

Adam took a flying leap, sailing across the desk, going for a kick to Axel’s head. And Axel, in the blink of an eye, simply ducked and flipped Adam neatly over one shoulder. There was a hideous crash of breaking glass and overturned furniture.

Aiken, meanwhile, screamed to Feroccio: “What the shit is going on?”

Feroccio sighed, and shook his head. “Adam just met his new partner.”

After what seemed like hours, the bag was finally pulled off his head. It was dark inside the room, pitch black. Somewhere in the blackness, a soft click sounded as a gun was cocked. The barrel gleamed faintly in the dim light. A man's voice barked:

“There are three guns on you.”

Gonzalez swallowed dryly. “Easy. Take it easy...”

“Do not panic, Mr. Gonzalez. I apologise for all this secrecy but you understand how necessary it is to protect ourselves...”

The lights came on, dazzling. Gonzalez covered his eyes. When his vision readjusted, he saw three men, seated in chairs, wearing shoulder holsters. The leader, a big Asian guy, spoke again.

“If you'll follow me, please.”

“Who the hell are you?” Gonzalez moaned.

“That's hardly important,” the Asian man answered. “If you like, you may call me Mr. Shiva.”

“Swell.”

They moved toward a door in the rear wall.

“I trust you're having a pleasant holiday season?” Shiva asked.

Gonzalez looked at him. “Yeah. It's a fucking joy, thank you.”

The door opened into a dimly-lit office, lavishly decorated with red carpets and a large desk made from antique wood. Behind the desk sat a large, rugged man with eyes like chips of stone.

Gonzalez recognised him well. It was the politician guy, George Xetheus, the man he'd come to see.

"Yes, Shiva?" Xetheus said, barely looking up from a pile of paperwork. "Ah, Mr. Gonzalez. Please, have a seat."

Shiva stood off to one side. Gonzalez sat, and muttered under his breath, "Where'd you get him? Psychos 'R' Us?"

Xetheus snorted. "Hardly."

Gonzalez pointed to one of the other men. "I like the sunglasses. Very Hollywood."

"Mr. Antonio is unfortunately missing an eye," Xetheus told him. "For anonymity's sake, he chooses to forego wearing an eye patch."

"Swell," Gonzalez said, nodding. "Blind people with guns. This is a class act. Maybe we can run over to the hospital and pick up a couple amputees. Bargain rates after six."

Xetheus wasn't smiling. "I don't find you funny."

"I don't find this goddamn setup funny," Gonzalez said. "You're using mercenaries, for Christ's sake. Tell me I'm wrong."

"No," Xetheus shrugged. "You're not wrong."

"And I'm supposed to trust these bozos?"

"My people are loyal, Mr. Gonzalez," Xetheus told him. "They are loyal to me."

"Bullshit."

Xetheus took a deep breath. "Antonio. Hold out your hand."

The man named Antonio stepped up to Xetheus and extended his arm without hesitating.

"Do you smoke, Mr. Gonzalez?" Xetheus asked him.

"Yeah."

“Give me your lighter.”

Gonzalez frowned, cautiously handing over a silver cigarette lighter to the sinister politician, who promptly pulled an old G. Gordon Liddy manoeuvre: he held the flame right under Antonio’s hand. Searing it. Gonzalez looked on, a trifle pale. As for Antonio, he made no sound at all. He simply stood there, trance-like.

“You wish to do business with my Syndicate, yes?” Xetheus whispered.

“Jesus...” Gonzalez gasped.

“Mr. Antonio is in a great deal of pain. You wish to make a purchase, yes?”

Gonzalez blinked. “I... yes. Sure. Jesus.”

Xetheus nodded, handing the lighter back to him. “Very well. The bulk of the heroin will arrive Friday night. We will make delivery at that time. Please have the money ready, and no tricks. If you try to cross us, I’ll have Antonio cut out your eyes.”

“Okay, okay,” Gonzalez said, shitting himself. He got up to leave. “What should I call you, anyway? Mr. Xetheus?”

The man smiled. “Mr. X will suffice. Merry Christmas.”

Axel Stone and Adam Hunter cruised through downtown Wood Oak City in an unmarked police car. Axel drove, while Adam scowled. There was an awkward silence.

“Turn right,” Adam said. He took a deep breath. “So. They tell me you’re a good cop.”

Axel flashed him a glance, then turned back to the road. He shrugged. “I try.”

“Yes, I know,” Adam said. “Just thought I’d remind you.”

There was another awkward silence.

“Can I check out your piece?” Adam asked, and reached across to get Axel’s gun - at which point Axel’s hand shot out - and stopped him cold.

“Bad manners, man,” Axel said. He removed the gun from the holster himself, whilst steering the car with his knees. He dropped the chambered bullet, slipped out the magazine, then handed the gun to Adam. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

Adam hefted the weapon, turning it over in his hand. A Beretta .9 millimeter. Smooth, well-oiled, accurised. Adam frowned. “Beretta M9,” he said. “That’s some serious shit.”

Axel nodded. “Military switched from Colt to Beretta in 1985. It’s a better piece. Wide ejection port, no feed jams, no stovepipes.”

“What’s it take?” Adam asked.

“Fifteen in the mag, one up the pipe. You carry a wheel gun?”

“.38 Special.”

Axel whistled. “That’s seriously old fashioned, buddy. Lots of old-timers carry that.”

Adam shot him a look, then replaced the gun. “I’m not *that* old,” he muttered. “Just a few years older than you...” Then he cleared his throat, changing the subject. “File says you’re having problems.”

“File don’t lie,” Axel said. “Look, friend, let’s cut the shit. We both know why I’m here. Everyone thinks I’m suicidal, in which case I’m fucked and no-one wants to work with me. Or they think I’m faking to draw a psycho pension, in which case I’m fucked and no-one wants to work with me. Basically, I’m fucked.”

Adam nodded. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“I don’t want to work with you, either.”

Axel sighed a half-laugh. “Then don’t.”

“Ain’t got no choice,” Adam said. “Damn. We’re both fucked.”

“Terrific.”

As they spoke, Axel pulled to a stop in front of a large building, the Pine Pot Community Police Division Headquarters, about a mile outside their own jurisdiction.

Adam sighed. “God hates me, that’s what it is.”

“Hate him back,” Axel said, and lit a cigarette. “Works for me.”

They got out the car and went inside the building, and climbed three flights of steps to Lieutenant Robert Murphy’s office. Everything about it looked starched and perfect. In the background, dozens of police officers shuttled between desks, compiling reports and taking calls.

Robert Murphy paced back and forth in front of his own desk, looking like shit, as Adam brought him up to speed on the latest events. The death of Amanda Murphy. Shiva’s escape. Then Murphy stopped in front of the window overlooking the parking lot outside, turning to address Axel and Adam, who were seated in front of him.

“She was murdered?” he said, unable to keep the horror out of his voice. “Jesus Christ. Why wasn’t I told about this? Jesus, I can’t take...” He stood and stared out of the window, trying to calm his breathing, a broken man.

Adam shifted uncomfortably. “Murphy, why have you been trying to contact me over the past few days? What’s going on?”

Murphy seemed very far away. “Contact you...? Oh. Yeah. That’s right. Look, I started

hearing these rumours through the local street gangs... something was going down... something to do with this... 'silent' crime wave. The overlords behind the whole thing were planning to break Shiva out of jail. I knew it was gonna happen, I just didn't know when, and... I've been receiving death threats, Adam. Seems they haven't forgotten who put Shiva behind bars in the first place." He paused, welling up with emotion. "I wanted you to find her for me, Adam. Take her out of..."

Adam's eyes narrowed. "Out of what?"

Murphy sighed heavily. "Out of harm's way. Since her mother died, Amanda and I never exactly saw eye to eye. She was a hooker, for Christ's sake, but we still talked. She did movies, Adam. Naked movies. And she frequently told me about this... 'Syndicate'... which has been growing in power since the crime wave began." He looked at them, his eyes intense and full of pain. "My own superiors have denied me from pursuing the case any further here in Pine Pot, but I have a name. Nothing much, but it could be something for you to go on. Abadede. That's it."

"Abadede?" Axel repeated.

Murphy nodded. "I want a promise, Adam. You owe me, you know you do."

Adam nodded. "Yes. I know that."

Murphy leaned forward, an intense and serious expression on his aging features. "When you find the man behind all this, this Syndicate Overlord... I want you to kill him. If it's more than one, I want you to kill all of them. Make them squirm first, take your time... and fucking kill them."

Adam frowned. "I'm a police officer, Murphy. Just like you."

Murphy gritted his teeth. “Forget the law. It’s easy to do. You owe me.”

There was a pause. Then Adam said, “We have to go now.” He and Axel headed for the door.

“I know you can, Adam,” Murphy said, not looking up. “You can kill them. You can do it.”

Adam and Axel exchanged silent glances.

“And if you need backup, if you *ever* need backup,” Murphy turned to face them, sweating. “I’m just a phone call away. I will do what I can, with whatever resources, whatever *weapons* I can get hold of. Off the record, of course.”

Adam sighed, and followed Axel through the exit without giving Murphy an answer. The door shut behind them.

Outside, Axel and Adam headed for the car. Axel took out a pack of cigarettes. “Guy’s a crackpot, right?” he said.

Adam grimaced. “I don’t know. I’ve known Murphy for a long time, since my academy days. I trust him.” Then he frowned. “You gonna smoke in the car?”

“Thinking about it,” Axel said.

“Terrific.” Adam put the top down.

Axel grinned, took out a cigarette and started to put it in his mouth. Suddenly, he stopped. “Whoops. Shit.” He replaced it in the pack and took another.

Adam looked at him. “What was wrong with that one?”

Axel pointed to the tip of the replaced cigarette. It looked about fifty years old, and had a tiny red mark circling the filter. “This one is the last cigarette I’ll ever smoke. Trick I learned from my

dad. I smoke all I want, but when I smoke this one... I'm through."

"Brilliant," Adam said, unimpressed. "Get in the car."

"Want me to drive?"

"You're suicidal, remember?"

"Anyone who drives in Wood Oak City is suicidal."

They got in. Adam heaved a sigh and stared bleakly out the window. "This city has turned to shit," he said. "What the hell happened?"

A moment later, Axel spoke, "He said you owed him. What did he mean?"

Adam swallowed dryly. "He was my first superior officer. He saved my life once. Took a bullet in the lung."

"That was nice of him," Axel remarked.

"I thought so."

They drove off.

The radio squawked. Adam turned it up. The dispatcher's voice came through loud and clear. "*All units and seven eight twenty-one, possible jumper at the corner of Central and Tunnelway, seven eight twenty-one handle code two.*"

Adam keyed the hand mike with practised ease. "Five King Fifty en route."

Axel smiled. "This is great. I love this job."

"Stow it," was Adam's blunt reply.

The building was ten stories high. On the ledge, a lone man was poised high above the street. Beneath him, a crowd had gathered. A police car. A searchlight. A crowd of office workers, rubber-necking to beat the band. One or two kids were yelling, “Jump, jump.”

Adam’s car glided to the curb. The doors burst open and the two partners emerged. As they did so, a patrol cop approached them.

“Hey, Sarge,” the cop said. “You wanna handle this?”

“Where’s the psychologist?” Adam asked.

The patrol cop shrugged. “Sitting in traffic, last I heard.”

“Swell,” Adam said, looking up. “Who’s the guy?”

“Salesman name of Julio,” the cop told him. “Left the office party, went upstairs and walked out on the ledge.”

“Think he’ll go?”

“Seems serious enough. Who knows?”

Axel cleared his throat. Adam turned.

“I can handle this,” Axel said.

Adam frowned. “You qualified to talk to jumpers?”

“I’ve done it before,” Axel said.

Adam seemed reluctant, then nodded. “Okay. You’re elected.”

Axel turned to go.

“Hey,” Adam said. “No guns. No kung fu. Just... bring him in.”

Axel grinned. "Sure. Bring him in."

"Right."

Axel moved off toward the building. Adam looked after him, wondering if he had just made a horrible mistake...

Axel appeared on the roof. There, about five yards away, was the jumper. Agitated, and breathing hard. Below was ten stories of open space. The wind whipped around them. Axel nodded to the jumper.

"Go away," the man blurted.

Axel ignored him. "My name is Axel Stone."

"Fuck off."

"I can't do that," Axel said, shaking his head. "What's your name?"

The man looked pissed. "Look, I know all the psychology bullshit, it won't work."

"I'm not a psychologist," Axel said.

"Yeah? What are you?"

"Homicide cop."

The man chuckled. "Dude, you're early. Hang on a couple more minutes, you can go to work."

"At least tell me your name," Axel insisted.

"Look, I gotta fill out the little piece of paper. Okay?"

"Julio," he swallowed. "Julio Blum."

Axel nodded. "Thanks. 'Preciate it." Then, "That J, O...?"

"J. U. L. I. O.," Julio corrected him. "Now get outta here."

Axel leaned out even farther, perched on the ledge, remaining absolutely calm. “Why are you doing this?”

“None of your goddamn business,” Julio barked.

“Fair enough,” Axel said. “I’m coming out. Take it easy.” He stood, stepped out onto the narrow ledge, seemingly unconcerned.

“Don’t come near me!” Julio roared.

“Shhh. Easy. I’m just going to talk.”

Julio braced himself. “Touch me and I’ll jump.”

“I understand,” Axel said.

On the ground below, Adam Hunter couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His partner was taking an insane risk.

Up above, Axel paused. Around him the wind blew treacherously. “You’re not the first guy to try this you know. Everybody’s got problems.”

Julio sneered. “You don’t know shit. You don’t know the kind of pressure I’m under. What they’re expecting me to *do*...”

Axel’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

Julio licked his lips, turning away. “*Them*, of course. The fucking Syndicate. Who else?”

Axel took a step closer. “Syndicate, huh? That’s the second time I’ve heard that word today.”

“Don’t touch me,” Julio said. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“I know that. Not like you’re murdering anyone.”

Julio shook his head. “Not if the Syndicate had their way. If I don’t carry out my instructions, they’ll kill *me*.”

“Who are they?” Axel probed.

Julio shook his head again. “Nobody knows who they are. It’s all secrets. The instructions are passed down from somebody called Mr. X. That’s all I know.” He recoiled, realising that Axel was edging closer to him.

“Mr. X, huh?” Axel said. “What a cliché.”

Julio squirmed. “Dammit, keep away. Don’t try nothing.”

Axel took another step closer. Looked around at the sea of traffic far below. “God, this is really scary. I’m scared.”

“Me too,” Julio said.

Axel looked at him. “You wanna smoke?” He pulled out his cigarettes. “Let’s smoke, okay?”

“Sure.”

Axel offered him a smoke. Julio reached for it, and Axel snapped a handcuff on his wrist, then snapped the other end onto his own wrist.

“Hey,” Julio said.

“Sorry,” Axel grinned. “See this key?” He held up the key to the cuffs, then flung it out into space. “We’re together on this. You can jump if you want, but you take me with you. That makes you a murderer, which pretty much is exactly what you wanted to avoid.”

“You bastard,” Julio said.

“You’ll be killing a cop, to boot,” Axel told him. “I’m going inside. What say you come with me?” he turned, starting to ease along the ledge.

Julio swallowed hard. “Fuck you. I’m jumping.”

And suddenly Axel turned on him, eyes like steel. “You wanna jump...? You really want to...?” He smiled, and stepped to the ledge. “Fine. Let’s do it.”

“Hey, what the fuck...” Julio started.

“You asked for it,” Axel said.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

Without warning, Axel jerked them both off the ledge. Far below, the crowd gasped.

“Geronimoooooooo!” Axel howled, as down they plunged, all ten stories - tumbling and falling - Julio shrieking like a lunatic - and suddenly *Bam!* They landed in a fireman’s net, coming to rest, safe and unharmed. Axel rolled over with a sour look on his face as cops surrounded them.

Julio was a trifle upset. “Get him away from me! Cut me loose! Crazy fucker tried to kill me! Did you see that? He tried to kill me!” And so on, screaming and ranting, as a uniformed cop cut Axel free with a set of clippers.

Axel stood shakily, then stepped away from the net. He looked up and saw Adam Hunter, who was visibly upset.

Outraged.

Adam grabbed Axel, slamming him against the wall. Tried to grab his collar. Axel’s hand shot out, lightning fast, stopping Adam’s hand cold. They stared into each other’s eyes.

“Don’t... touch me,” Axel hissed.

Adam wasn’t backing down. “What the fuck did you just do?”

“I controlled the jump,” Axel said. “You wanted him down. He’s down.”

“C’mere.” Adam yanked Axel around the corner, away from the other cops. “Okay, turkey, no bullshit. Do you want to kill yourself?”

“For Christ’s sake, Adam...”

“Shut up. Just yes or no, do you want to die? Huh? Yes or no?”

Axel licked his lips. “I got the job done.”

“You’re not answering the question!” Adam said.

Axel’s nostrils flared. “What do you wanna hear, man? You wanna hear that I got a bottle of pills in my apartment? I do. Every day I wake up, I look for a reason not to take them all. Doing the job, that’s... that’s the reason.”

Adam looked at him, and nodded. A moment later, he said: “You want to die.”

“I’m not afraid of it,” Axel conceded.

Adam unholstered his gun. “Here. Pills are too slow. Use a gun. Use my gun. Go ahead, pal.”

Axel blinked, and looked at the gun.

“Be my guest,” Adam hissed, offering the gun to Axel. “Go ahead, if you’re serious.”

Axel smiled, took the gun without missing a beat. He put it to his head and *click* - the hammer was cocked. Adam and Axel stared each other down. Tense. Reading each other. “You shouldn’t tempt me, Adam,”

Adam’s eyes narrowed. “Put it in your mouth. Bullet goes in your ear, might not kill you.”

Meanwhile, in the background, pedestrians were diving for cover. Adam and Axel were oblivious. Axel put the gun under his chin.

“Under the chin’s just as good,” he said.

They stared at each other. Axel’s finger began to tighten on the trigger, turning white with pressure. At the last second, Adam jammed his thumb in front of the hammer, and *click*.

Jesus!

The hammer thudded against his thumb.

Adam grabbed the gun, and stared at Axel, wild-eyed. “Jesus. You’re not trying to draw a psycho pension. You’re really crazy.”

Axel smiled coldly. “So now you know.”

Adam grimaced. “Yeah. Now I know.”

Back at the precinct, Adam stood at a pay phone, listening to Linda McCarthy, the Police Psychologist.

“Sergeant Hunter, you’re asking me if he’s stable and I’m telling you no,” she was saying. *“We’re talking about a man who carves notches in his gun barrel. One for each kill. He blew a man to pieces yesterday. Is this helping?”*

Adam nodded. “Terrific. So you’re saying I should worry?”

“Are you kidding?” Linda said. *“The guy’s a time bomb. When he goes off... stand back.”*

Adam gritted his teeth. “Thank you, Doctor. You’ve been very helpful.” He hung up the receiver, then rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I can’t be dealing with this right now.”

A moment later, Axel came down the corridor. Adam saw him, and fumed with anger. “I turned thirty the other day,” he said. “I’m no spring chicken anymore. I’ve been a cop for twelve years, and I’m looking for a promotion - I’ve got a good woman, engaged to be married. I’m raising my ten year-old brother. But I can kiss all that goodbye, ‘cause my new partner’s got a death wish! My fuckin’ life is over!”

“Adam...” Axel started.

“Shut up!” Adam roared, avoiding his gaze. “Why you talkin’ to me? I’m not here anymore! I’m gone. I’m dead. You’re gonna see to that. You wanna die, and you’re gonna fuckin’ take me with you!”

There was a tense silence. Adam was gnashing his teeth. Axel looked at him with a very

serious expression. “Happy birthday, Adam. I mean that sincerely.”

Adam blinked, taken aback by the genuine sound of affection in his partner’s voice. “W...What?”

“I just hope we stay alive long enough for me to buy you a present,” Axel said with a straight face. There was a playful glint in his eye that Adam didn’t miss, and he laughed out loud in spite of himself. It broke the tension, and Axel knew it.

Adam couldn’t help but smile. “Come on, partner. We’ve got work to do.”

They walked down the corridor toward the elevators at the end of a large hall, stopping at a desk to sign some paperwork. As they stood there, a woman came through the doors at the opposite end of the hall, plain-clothed, holding a file in one hand.

“Check this out,” Axel muttered. “I wouldn’t mind taking down her particulars.”

Adam glanced. The woman was in her mid-to-late twenties, had a pretty face, long dark hair. A mole on her left cheek. “Stop joking,” he said. “She’s a cop.”

Axel looked at him. “She’s probably on the take, too.”

Adam snorted. “What do you take me for? Come on.”

“The whole force is bent,” Axel said.

“Look, she may be wearing a skirt, but we’re all brothers,” Adam told him. “You know what I mean.”

The woman came and stood beside them, handing some paperwork to the desk clerk.

Axel cleared his throat. “How’s it going?”

She looked at him. “Fine.” There was an appealing softness in the tone of her voice.

“Who are you?” Adam asked, curious.

“Fly me,” the woman said. “I’m your friendly Portuguese airline.”

“She’s Internal Affairs, Adam,” Axel said.

The woman frowned. “How’d you know?”

He smiled innocently. “I took the liberty of looking at your file folder. It was showing.”

“Blaze Fielding,” she said, extending a hand, shaking both of theirs. “And you’re Sergeants Hunter and Stone, I presume?”

Axel nodded. “What’s infernal repairs want with our precinct?”

“We’re taking over, thanks,” Blaze said.

“Why?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” she said, “there have been some serious allegations of corruption. Not just here, but all over the Department.”

“What kind of corruption?” Axel asked.

She shook her head. “Nobody has to tell you anything, Sergeant. This is all on a need-to-know basis, and I’m going to see the Captain.”

“How convenient,” Axel said. “That’s where we’re going.”

Captain Wyndam sat at his desk, introducing a tall suited man who stood behind him. “This is Herman Fielding, Chief of Intelligence. I see you’ve already met his daughter, Blaze.”

Adam nodded. “Pleasure to meet you both.” He looked at Wyndam. “Did you read the report?”

Wyndam nodded. “The Murphy case has been transferred to Internal Affairs.” A pause, then, “You’re off the case.”

Axel blinked. “What? Why?”

“That’s classified,” Blaze said.

“Wait a minute,” Adam said. “Murphy is an old friend of mine. He specifically asked *me* to pursue this case, and gave us the intelligence in confidence. He trusts me, captain.”

“I know,” Wyndam said. “I read the report.”

“Our paths have unfortunately crossed here,” Blaze told them. “All cases involving the Syndicate are being transferred to the Office of Professional Responsibility, by request of the Chief of Police.”

“I said captain,” Adam said, giving her an icy glance. “I’m talking to the captain.”

Herman Fielding leaned forward. “There’s too much corruption in this Department to have normal cops dealing with this case. We believe the silent crime wave may have infiltrated the Force, perhaps at the highest level. Internal Affairs are the only...”

Wyndam interrupted him. “Look, Axel and Adam are good cops. Maybe these guys *can* contribute something to this case. Like the man said, he has a personal obligation.”

“From what I’ve seen of their records, the only thing they do contribute is mayhem and chaos,” Herman said.

“No,” Axel said. “I’m chaos, and he’s mayhem.”

Adam looked at him. “We’re a double act.”

“You’re off the case,” Blaze said, not moving. “And that’s final.”

“Fine.” Axel got to his feet, looking pissed off. “We can find this Abadede by ourselves. Come on, Adam. Let’s go.”

“Captain!” Blaze started to protest.

“Axel! Adam!” Wyndam roared. “Get your asses back here!”

They turned back to him.

His gaze was defiant, bouncing from Herman, to Blaze, then to them. He nodded. “The case is yours. Find this ‘Abadede’, and question him. Good luck.”

Adam smiled. “Thanks captain. You really are a beautiful man.”

They left the room, shutting the door behind them.

Blaze Fielding took a deep breath. “You just exceeded your authority, captain.”

“That’s not the way I see it,” Wyndam told her.

She pursed her lips. “I think it’s the way the Chief will see it.”

“You just take it up with him,” Wyndam said. “Catch up with him - you’re going to have to get him between lunches.”

“Where we going?” Axel asked.

“Stadium Arena,” Adam told him. “Feroccio found us a lead on this ‘Abadede’ character.”

Axel nodded. “The underground wrestling circuit? Nice.”

“Remember, this guy isn’t a suspect yet,” Adam said. “We’re gonna question him; not damage him.”

Axel raised his hands, as if to say, I’ll be on my best behaviour. Adam swung the car onto Bo Blvd, heading for Wood Oak Stadium. It was a huge structure with an outer skin of aluminium louvers with interior lighting that switched colour depending on which team was playing at home. Chrome. Glass. Carved wood. The wrestling circuit, however, operated underground at night, literally *beneath* the stadium - when the lights were off - illegal, unsanctioned, and unlicensed recreational violence known as backyard wrestling. It was the premiere showcase of deathmatch wrestling, and despite the best efforts of the Wood Oak City Police Department over recent months, had continued to operate freely.

Adam parked the car and they got out, approaching the main gate. Axel tossed out a cigarette. Suddenly, there was an electric *hum*, and the gate glided softly open. A red Honda scooter emerged, a dashing blonde behind the wheel. She roared off down the street.

Axel and Adam exchanged glances, then silently moved through the gate before it had a chance to close again.

Inside the Arena, Abadede was pulverising another contestant. He hurled the smaller man into the ropes, sending him careening back to the middle of the ring. Abadede grabbed him, chucking him into the stands.

The crowd went nuts. Abadede roared with rage, beating his own chest with his fists. A heckler stood up in his seat.

“Hey, Abadede!” he shouted. “You big fake! You suck!”

Abadede’s eyes zeroed on the heckler. He clenched his fists, growling, then leapt from the ring. The heckler’s eyes went wide as Abadede bore down on him, grabbing him by the throat, snapping his neck and killing him in one swift move. With a snort, Abadede grabbed his folding chair and started to make his way back to the ring, mumbling as the man’s body was carried away. “Don’t fuck with Abadede the Indian.”

He dragged the chair toward the ring, and found his opponent trying to crawl away. The battered little man looked up just as Abadede reared back and *smashed* him across the face with the chair. There was a muffled crunch, a gurgled scream, then silence.

“That’s it, folks,” the announcer’s voice boomed over a hidden loudspeaker. “He’s out.” The crowd howled with approval. “Are you ready for more?”

As if they needed asking.

The crowd roared for more, the sound was deafening.

Abadede climbed back into the ring, sat on a stool in his corner. A bikini clad ring maiden was

quick to sponge him off, give him water, and massage him.

The ring announcer barked into his microphone: “I said, are we ready for more?!”

The crowd was chanting, “More! More! More!” Somewhere in the mass of sweaty, roaring people, Axel Stone and Adam Hunter pushed their way through, taking a couple of empty seats a few rows from the front.

By now, Abadede had had enough pampering. He rose, flexed, whipping the crowd into a frenzy.

“Abadede’s ready!” he boomed.

Two pendulously-breasted girls strutted around the ring holding a banner that read “Abadede ROCKS!”

The announcer said: “Introducing our next challenger!” The curtain opened, spotlights searched through the crowd, swinging to the top of the ramp where a six-foot muscle man was partially hidden in the darkness. “The terrifying... the deadly... Max Thunder!”

The lights blazed on the man, clad in homemade sweatpants with a lightning bolt design across both legs. He looked confident as he cautiously made his way toward the ring, ignoring the merciless heckles, the eggs being thrown at him as he went, the arms grabbing his muscles. He crawled into the ring, looking around, then focused his gaze on Abadede.

“You’re mine,” Abadede roared, standing center-ring.

Max Thunder charged, but Abadede swatted him down with little effort, grabbing his leg in the same move. For a moment Max was being thrashed

about, then thrown against the ropes. He fell to the ground.

“Owwww,” he moaned.

A shadow fell over his face, He looked up, saw Abadede flying at him, prostrate, with a flying elbow. Max’s eyes went wide. He flipped his feet up, just in time to place them on Abadede’s chest, kicking him in the opposite direction. Wasting no time, Max barrel-rolled toward him, hefted up his body and crashed the larger man’s torso across one bent knee. There was a dull *crack* of bone.

Abadede slumped to the mat, knocked cold within just a few seconds. The crowd freaked out. Cameras flashed.

“Max! Max! Max!”

Max Thunder looked around the arena, raising his arms, triumphant.

Axel gave a playful cheer from where he sat, then turned to Adam and said, “Ahhh... nothing like a good blood sport, huh?”

Adam wasn’t smiling.

Abadede was sitting out back, having his wounds seen to by a ‘doctor’, when Axel and Adam approached from the direction of the stalls.

“Evening, Abadede,” Axel said casually. “Tough luck back there in the ring. We have a few questions for you.”

Abadede sneered. “Who the hell are you?”

Adam retrieved his wallet and showed his badge. “Wood Oak City Police.”

“You got a warrant?” Abadede said. “You guys won’t get shit from me.”

Axel shook his head. “Nope. But we can get one at the tip of a hat. Listen, we just wanna ask you some questions. Do you know of a Mr. Murphy?”

“I told you,” Abadede said. “You won’t get shit outta me without a warrant.”

Axel took a step toward him. “It’s just a simple question man, then we’ll leave you alone. Tell us about Murphy.”

“Fuckin’ pig!” Abadede roared, pissed off, swatting his doctor aside and knocking him halfway across the room. “I don’t know no Robert Murphy!”

“Ah,” Axel said, unflinching. “See, I never told you his name was Robert...”

Adam smiled. “You better start talking, smart aleck. Tell us about Shiva. Who ordered his prison break?”

Abadede got to his feet. At six feet seven inches, he towered over the two cops, and he was easily twice their muscle mass. “Get outta here,” he said, and spat blood. “My patience is wearing thin. And when you come back with that warrant, I’ll be long gone.”

“Hey, Axel. Are you sure this is a good idea?” Adam whispered. “We need that warrant...”

They were outside the administrative offices, upstairs at the Arena.

Axel’s face peered cautiously through a plate glass window. He whistled softly. “Take a look.”

Adam stepped to the window and looked in. On the other side was enough cocaine to service the third tier at the baseball stadium far above their heads. A blonde, bikini-clad wonder sat on a couch, happily snorting. She looked up, saw Adam and

waved hilariously, making come-hither gestures. Adam scowled, and turned to Axel.

“I’m thinking probable cause,” Axel said. “And we can forget about that warrant now.”

“Jesus,” Adam blinked. “Maybe I should call for backup.”

“What am I?” Axel asked. “Chopped liver?”

Adam looked at him and sighed. “No killing.”

Axel nodded. “No killing.” He grinned cheesily.

They approached the frosted glass door, and drew their guns. “Nice and easy,” Adam muttered. He took a deep breath, then kicked open the door.

“Police!” he yelled. “Hold it right there.”

Somewhere in the shadows of the room, a man picked up a shotgun and triggered a blast, blowing out the glass next to Adam. Adam dived, rolled, came up in a combat crouch. *Bam!* The shotgun guy took it in the shoulder and spun round, his gun clattering to the ground. A moment later he was writhing on the ground, clutching his shoulder in agony.

Adam looked at Axel. “See how easy that was? Boom. Stay alive. Now we take the gun away...” he walked over and did so, “... and we question him. Know why we can question him? Because I got him in the shoulder. I didn’t blow him up or jump off a building with him.”

“No fair,” Axel remarked. “The building guy lived.”

“Whatever,” Adam said. “The point is, no killing.”

“No killing.”

“Right. Piece of cake. I’m very happy. Read the man his rights. I’ll be over here being happy.”

Unfortunately, as Adam spoke, he did not see the man on the ground had a hideaway gun tucked into his waistband. As Adam talked, oblivious, the guy took out the gun with his good arm and aimed dead center at Adam's back. Axel, however, noticed, and sprang into action. Before the guy could fire, Axel's foot flashed out like a pile driver.

Crack!

The guy flew backward and crashed into the wall.

Adam stared, and realised that Axel had just saved his life. "Shit. Thanks," he puffed.

Two hours later, crime scene cops scurried back and forth. Flashing lights. Cameras. Adam made his way to the car, Axel beside him. As they reached the car, Adam stopped.

"You saved my life back there," he said. "Thank you."

"I bet that hurt to say," Axel said.

"You have no idea."

"Abadede got away, right?" Axel asked, looking up at the outside of the Stadium glistening in the light of the moon.

"Yeah," Adam sighed. "Hopefully, one of the other punks will be able to tell us something."

Axel nodded, visibly disappointed.

Adam looked at him. "So, you hungry?"

It was just after eight thirty when the two detectives went through the front door of Adam's house, shedding their jackets. Young Sammy appeared, nursing a Popsicle.

“Hi Adam,” he said. “Is that a crook?”

Adam shook his head, smiling. “No, Sammy. This is Axel, my partner. Axel, my brother Sammy.”

Axel nodded. “Pleasure.”

“Tell Axel what you think of crooks, Sammy,” Adam said.

Sammy grimaced. “Scum. They’re scum.”

“Kid’s no dummy,” Axel said.

They went to the kitchen. Jodie Kelly was cooking.

“Hi, honey,” Adam said, looking in the oven. He turned to Axel. “We’re having something brown. A largish brown object...”

Jodie smirked. “It’s roast.”

“Dammit, I wanted to guess,” Adam joked. “Honey, this is Axel, my new partner. He’ll be joining us tonight, okay?”

“Sure,” Jodie said. “Roast okay with you, Axel?”

“Fine.”

“How about brown, roast-like substance?” Adam said.

“Adam, you’re being an asshole,” Jodie said, and kissed his ear. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Got it,” Adam said. “Drink, Axel?”

Axel nodded. “Bourbon, if you have it.”

Adam left. Axel stood awkwardly as Jodie removed the roast from the oven.

“My wife could burn water,” Axel said.

“You’re married?” Jodie asked.

“I was,” Axel told her. “She’s dead now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No problem.” He reached for a stray piece of roast. Jodie slapped his hand.

“Don’t pick!” she insisted.

Axel smiled, and it was a genuine smile.

In the living room, Sammy was sitting in front of the television, watching “A Charlie Brown Christmas” and colouring a picture with a big box of felt pens. He stopped and frowned, then looked up at Axel Stone, who was peeking his head around the corner, watching with rapt fascination. Axel chuckled and pointed to the screen.

“This is good,” Axel said. “I like this.”

Sammy looked at him strangely.

Soon, dinner was ready, and everybody gathered around the table to eat. It was incredibly homey and domestic-looking. For Axel, who ate ravenously, it was the first taste of warmth in many a long year.

“Thanks for the hospitality,” he said around mouthfuls.

Adam nodded, and smiled at Jodie. “You’re welcome. Besides, it’s the least I could do for the man who saved my life today.”

Jodie raised her eyebrows. “He did?”

“Long story,” Adam said.

“Right.” She had learned not to probe him any further when it came to police matters.

After dinner, Axel thanked them again for the meal. “It was delicious,” he said.

“Thanks,” Adam told him.

“Really, I enjoyed it.”

“Bullshit,” Adam grinned. “But thanks anyway.”

There was a pause. Axel stood there. Then: “You don’t trust me at all, do you?”

Adam took a deep breath. “Tell you what. Make it through tomorrow without killing anybody. Especially me. Or yourself. Then I’ll start trusting you.”

“Fair enough.”

Axel walked toward his truck, then stopped. “I do it real good, you know.”

Adam frowned. “Do what?”

“Kill people,” Axel said. “Only thing I ever did good. When I was nineteen, I did a guy in New York from a thousand yards out. Rifle shot in the wind. Huh. Only thing I was ever good at.” He blinked, then, “Well, see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah,” Adam said. “See you then.”

Axel drove away. Adam watched him, then turned. On the way back inside, he flicked on the Christmas lights.

PART TWO
BREAKING POINT

Blaze Fielding stood in the interrogation room, hands on hips, facing the two-way mirror. Her hair was tied back and she wore a clean, beige business suit with her ID badge clipped to the breast pocket. Behind her, a punk named Mc-K sat in the only chair, his elbows leaning on the steel table. Thanks to him and the other people that had been arrested at Wood Oak Stadium, they were finally getting some concrete info on the Syndicate.

“It goes all the way back to the war in Afghanistan,” Mc-K said, sweating.

Blaze turned, and looked at him. “I’m listening.”

Mc-K swallowed dryly. “I ended up working for a group called Air America. C.I.A. front, secretly ran the entire war out of Pakistan. I was part of a special unit called Shadow Company. Mercs. Trained killers. When the Taliban started bringing in heroin to finance their activities, Shadow Company went in and burned it all down. We killed everybody. But we also... formed a plan.”

“Keep talking,” Blaze said.

“Couple of years ago, Shadow Company got together again. The war was over, obviously, but we still had a list of sources. In Asia.”

“And...?”

He took a deep breath. “And we’ve been bringing it in ever since.”

Blaze frowned. “Bringing what in?”

Mc-K looked at her. “Think real hard.”

“Heroin,” she said.

He nodded. “Two shipments a week. Run by ex-C.I.A. Soldiers, mercs. No one really knows, except those at the top.”

“You son of a bitch,” Blaze said.

Mc-K did not reply. There was a pause, then: “Things grew from there. Slowly, we began to call ourselves the ‘Syndicate’, and ‘Mr. X’ was chosen to lead us. Now, we pretty much run this city, and our influence is growing every day... Huh.”

Blaze gritted her teeth.

“It’s big business, missy. Makes millions...”

She shook her head. “Not any more. I’m gonna burn it down. I’m gonna find this Mr. X, and bring him to justice.”

“You can’t,” Mc-K told her. “He’s too big, too well protected. These guys are trained killers.”

“Tell me about the next shipment then,” she pressed.

“No.” He looked away. “Not a chance.”

Blaze grabbed her piece from its shoulder holster and slammed it down on the table, rattling his senses. “Tell me!” she yelled.

Mc-K blinked, sweat pouring off his brow.

She lowered her gaze. “Tell me now.”

Later, Blaze stood in Captain Wyndam’s office, along with Axel Stone and Adam Hunter. Axel was in constant motion. Getting up, sitting down, looking out the window. All the time smoking like a fiend - despite the sign displayed prominently on Wyndam’s desk that read, THANKYOU FOR NOT SMOKING. A cloud of

smoke hung over Axel's head like his own private inversion layer.

"I just got off the phone with Chief O'Hara," Wyndam said, his expression grim and strained. "It's bad news. He's not happy about this case still being open, even to the IA. He wants it shut down completely, effective immediately, and all files pertaining to it shredded. He wouldn't explain why."

Blaze Fielding frowned. "I don't understand, captain. How can he say that? We're getting close to busting open this Syndicate. I can feel it."

Adam nodded. "I agree with Blaze. I can't see where the Chief is coming from here. Why close the case now?"

"Makes no sense," Axel said.

Adam took a breath. "In fact, I wanted to ask your permission, sir, to set up a special attack unit. Confront this Syndicate head on..."

Blaze nodded. "It was my idea, actually. If we're dealing with ex-soldiers and mercs, we're going to have to take special measures."

"A special attack unit?" Wyndam frowned. "I can't authorise that."

"Despite how I feel about *these* guys," Blaze said, and looked at Axel and Adam, "they seriously impressed me with the work they did yesterday at the underground wrestling circuit. I want to work with them more closely from now on..."

Wyndam was shaking his head. "No, no. I'm sorry. I just can't allow that."

"What?" Axel cut in, unable to believe what he was hearing. "You can't be serious, captain."

"Look," he told them. "I agree with you. But I could lose my job over this. My hands are tied."

The case *must* be closed... Chief O'Hara asked me to see to it personally."

Axel muttered a curse under his breath.

"I want to help you," Wyndam continued, lowering his voice. "Don't get me wrong. I really do. Something about this whole thing stinks, and I want to see this Syndicate brought to justice as much as you do. Off the record, I think the Chief himself may be corrupt."

Blaze swallowed dryly. "It would explain a few things."

"I want you to keep digging, keep going," Wyndam continued. "But be careful, and use discretion. Officially, this case is closed. You understand what I'm saying."

Adam Hunter nodded. "Captain, I could kiss you."

Blaze smiled. "Thankyou, captain."

Axel looked at her. "Swell. So what's our next move, Miss Fielding?"

"We have a lead," Blaze told him. "The Syndicate is expecting a large shipment of heroin from Afghanistan to come through Wood Oak City Airport later on this afternoon. Some of their top players are supposedly taking delivery. We need to intercept it."

"Heroin, huh? Swell."

They got up to leave.

Wyndam watched them go, wondering if he was making a big mistake. "I'll do what I can from here. Good luck," he said, and meant it.

In a remote area of Wood Oak City airport, a United 747 barrelled down the runway. It lifted off and passed overhead with a deafening roar. Axel

Stone looked up at the underbelly of the jet. It was so low he could count the rivets. His hair was matted, a grease-stained baseball cap pulled down low to keep the sun out of his eyes. He raised a brown paper bag to his lips, taking a swig out of a bottle.

Elsewhere, a Mercedes Limo pulled up to a Gulfstream Jet. The Gulfstream's engines were revving in preparation to take off.

Axel staggered drunkenly through the weeds and tall grass that fringed this remote section of the airport, singing softly, "Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell... rock."

Behind him, a Delta 727 touched down. Wheels slammed against the runway, brakes squealed, jet engines screamed in reverse thrust.

Four men emerged from the Mercedes: Antonio, Talk, Altet, and Souther. Talk popped open the trunk and several suitcases were quickly unloaded and placed on the tarmac beside the Mercedes. Altet's eyes darted furtively behind his black-out shades. Talk shut the Mercedes trunk lid. Antonio picked up two of the suitcases and took a step toward the Gulfstream - then stopped abruptly.

Why? Because Axel Stone, drunk, was weaving toward them.

Axel rolled his eyes, taking another hit from the bottle in the brown paper sack. He licked his lips, stumbling, trying to regain his balance, advancing toward the men.

The four men exchanged a look, then Antonio moved forward to intercept Axel.

"Hey, buddy," he said in a thick South African accent. "Where you going?"

"Anybody seen a dog?" Axel blurted, his speech slurred. "Lookin' for my dog. Ran off and

got lost. Maybe you seen him? A brown dog? Four legs... one tail. Face like this - ” he contorted his face into a weird expression.

Antonio frowned. “Come on, pal. No dog around here.” He clamped his hand down firmly on Axel’s shoulder. Axel swayed from side to side and gave Antonio a bleary-eyed look.

“I just gotta find that dog,” Axel said. “Know what I mean? He’s a good dog.”

Antonio span Axel around, pointing him in the opposite direction and giving him a shove. “Go sleep it off somewhere.”

Axel took several wobbly steps, then stopped, bending at the waist, appearing to puke his guts out. Antonio grimaced. And then -

A Ford Bronco roared onto the scene, brakes squealing as it skidded up to the Gulfstream. The four men turned to look, knowing instantly that something had gone very wrong for them.

“The suitcases!” Antonio hissed. “Grab the suitcases!”

In an instant, Axel straightened up and span around - eyes clear and alive, wider than hell - nostrils flaring, arm extended, gripping his nine millimetre Beretta which flashed in the midday sun. One very dangerous, and very sober cop.

“Police!” he screamed. “Freeze! Hands on the car! Legs spread apart! Now!”

An unmarked police Sedan skidded up from another direction. Adam Hunter leapt out with his pistol drawn. Axel regarded Adam with an expression that was hardly welcoming.

“You’re *late!*” he said. “I had to do my lost dog routine *and* my puke routine!”

Adam frowned. “You didn’t give me the signal!”

“I gave you the signal!” Axel said. “Jingle bell rock!”

“The signal was Jingle bell *roll!*”

Axel stuck a hand under his shirt with a disgusted expression and yanked out the wire he’d been wearing. Behind him, three cops jumped from the Ford Bronco with pistols drawn, wearing distinctive satin jackets with “Wood Oak Drug Enforcement” lettered on the back. Blaze Fielding was amongst them. They rushed toward the flummoxed Syndicate men, but then something happened they didn’t count on...

The Gulfstream pilot appeared in the cabin doorway brandishing an Uzi submachine gun. A rapid burst of fire scattered the cops. They dove behind the Bronco for cover.

“Oh, shit!” Adam howled.

Now things happened fast -

Axel rolled beneath the Gulfstream, behind the landing gear.

Adam dropped behind his Sedan, firing off several rounds.

Antonio grabbed a suitcase, running up the boarding steps and disappearing into the Gulfstream.

The other Syndicate men produced weapons from beneath their coats and blasted their way back to the Mercedes.

Blaze and the other drug cops were pinned down by Uzi gunfire. Adam tried to nail the pilot, but only succeeded in drawing his fire. The pilot sprayed the Uzi in Adam’s direction, forcing him to duck behind his Sedan as bullets ripped through the car’s hood and grill.

Axel crouched low under the Gulfstream’s fuselage, working his way toward the front. The

revving engines were hot and noisy. Now, he was directly beneath the boarding staircase. The spent shell casings from the Uzi submachine gun chattering overhead were dancing on the tarmac all around him. He gritted his teeth and grabbed ahold of the staircase, making his move with the agility of a cat, swinging out from beneath the airplane, and pulling himself upward. He came face to face with the startled pilot, Beretta out and fire exploding from its muzzle at point blank range.

The pilot was blasted backwards into the Gulfstream, the Uzi spraying bullets through the roof of the fuselage as he fell.

Inside the cockpit, Antonio panicked. He didn't know how to fly a plane, but he wanted to get the hell away... so he pushed forward on the throttle just enough to put the plane into motion.

Outside, Axel was on the staircase when the plane began to taxi forward. The staircase tore away from the Gulfstream's fuselage, spilling him to the ground.

"Oooooohhhh!" he cried, rolling out of harm's way - the landing gear coming within inches of crushing him. But now he had to contend with the searing heat being expelled from the Turbofan Jet Engine as it passed over him. As it did so, the leading edge of the Gulfstream's wing sheered off the roof of the Ford Bronco as it passed by.

Meanwhile, the Mercedes squealed away in a cloud of exhaust smoke. But in their hurry to escape with their lives, the Syndicate men had forgotten about the two suitcases resting on the tarmac. The Mercedes plowed into them, sending them flying. One of them opened, and bundles of U.S. currency spilled out.

Axel got to his feet. Adam rushed up to him. The Gulfstream was rolling off in one direction, and the Mercedes had driven off in the other. Axel pointed at the Gulfstream. "That one is mine!" he yelled. "You take the Benz!" He didn't even wait for Adam's reply, he just ran off after the Gulfstream.

Adam, Blaze and the other cops jumped into the decapitated Bronco and sped away. The Mercedes limo raced across the perimeter of the landing field, with the Bronco chasing after it.

Axel chased the moving Gulfstream on foot - running like a gazelle. He caught up to it, leapt onto the wing from behind and held on tight. Then, gathering his strength, he worked his way over the wing toward the opening in the fuselage where the door used to be.

The Bronco overtook the Mercedes. Now they were side-by-side; gunfire was exchanged out the windows of the two vehicles. The Mercedes attempted some wild evasive turns, but the Bronco stuck to it like glue.

Axel was on the wing of the Gulfstream now. He tried to swing into the doorway, but his foot slipped, and he almost fell beneath the moving plane. He held tight with both hands, losing his Beretta - it slipped from his belt and bounced on the ground. "Shit..." he muttered, and pulled himself up into the airplane.

Inside the cockpit, it was close quarters - very cramped. Antonio swirled to face Axel, and fired his gun, missing. Axel yanked him out of the cockpit. The fight was on.

The Mercedes cut diagonally across the runway, heading toward the terminal area, the Bronco right on its tail. They reached the airport

apron - where the planes docked and there was considerable ground service traffic...

A baggage train crossed the Mercedes' path. There was no time to avoid it, and *crash!* The Mercedes rammed it, splitting it apart, travelling directly through it. Luggage scattered everywhere. The Bronco followed, destroying the luggage even further, dragging articles of clothing from its bumper.

Suddenly, a Boeing 727 that was being backed away from the gate loomed up in front of the Mercedes. The Mercedes braked, skidding in a pool of oil, slewing sideways out of control and straight towards a fuel truck. Ground service crew members could see it all unfolding and leapt for safety.

Inside the Mercedes, Talk and Altet were frozen with fear. But Souther, in the back seat, kicked open the door and bailed out. A split second later, the car smashed into the fuel truck, disappearing in a huge explosion. *Boom!* Behind it, the Bronco swerved, narrowly avoiding the inferno. Souther rolled across the pavement, got to his feet, and started running.

By now, the Gulfstream was rolling - with no one in control - toward an anchor fence at the airport's perimeter. Inside, Axel and Antonio were beating the shit out of each other. Antonio knew as much about martial arts as Axel did, and both men were being brutally punished.

Souther ran into the baggage depot, shouldering his way past several baggage handlers who tried to stop him, and hopped onto the conveyor belt that carried the luggage into the terminal. Shoving suitcases and parcels aside, he ran up the belt. Moments later, Adam arrived.

“Police officer!” Adam was yelling. “Police officer!” He flashed his badge without ever breaking stride. And when he saw the conveyor belt, he *knew* it was where Souther went. Without hesitating, he leapt onto the belt as well.

Not far ahead of him, Souther slid down the chute onto the baggage carousel, upending himself and several pieces of luggage in the process. Startled passengers reacted to the sight. He headed for the exit door, but an airport security vehicle pulling up to the curb outside caused him to change direction.

Adam slid down the chute onto the carousel, kicking pieces of baggage from his path, vaulting to the floor. Looking around frantically, he spotted Souther running ahead. Adam didn’t stop, chasing him down a terminal corridor. By now fatigue was beginning to set in. He was running on rubber legs, panting and puffing.

Up ahead were several revolving doors. Passengers from arriving flights were using these doors to enter the Baggage Claim area. Souther waited for the doors to clear of people, then slipped in. What he didn’t realise though, was that the doors only turned in one direction. When pushed the wrong way they locked and an alarm sounded, and that was exactly what happened. Within seconds, he was trapped - stuck inside the revolving door. He couldn’t believe it.

Adam rushed toward him.

Panicking, Souther unsheathed what looked like metal claws on both hands, and raised them toward Adam, preparing to fight.

Adam swung up his gun, and at the same moment, Blaze Fielding and the other two cops arrived. Their weapons exploded, forcing innocent

bystanders to scream and duck for cover. The revolving door was shattered, and Souther's bullet riddled body pirouetted through the broken glass.

Exhausted, Adam and Blaze exchanged a look as they holstered their handguns.

"Show's over," Adam said.

Blaze nodded wearily. "I just hope Axel's okay..."

Elsewhere, the Gulfstream jet tore through the anchor fence surrounding the airport, sliding down the embankment toward a main Highway road. Axel and Antonio were thrown forward as the plane dropped - tumbling head over heels down the center aisle. The jet trailed a giant cloud of dust as it rolled onto the Highway. Brakes squealed. Horns honked. Traffic screeched to a halt, resulting in a violent chain reaction of rear-end collisions. *Crash! Crash! Crash!*

The Gulfstream continued across the highway, toward a bluff that overlooked the beach and the ocean below - a sheer drop that would mean certain death for Axel and Antonio inside the plane.

Axel glanced through the windshield, and saw the bluff approaching. The hell with Antonio, he had to stop the plane - and that's just what he did, pulling back hard on the brake levers. During this, Antonio seized his chance and leapt out of the plane onto the highway below.

There was a groaning roar of stressed metal, and the Gulfstream skidded to a stop with its nose wheel dangling over the cliff.

"Yeeeeeeessssshhh!" Axel roared.

Antonio ran along the highway. Traffic had come to a complete stop for miles. People climbed

from their cars to gawk at the spectacle, so it wasn't very hard for Antonio to steal one of these cars, make a U-turn, and escape.

Axel appeared in the doorway holding Antonio's suitcase. A crowd of spectators pushed forward to get a look at him. Then, the Ford Bronco roared up followed by two highway patrol cars, their sirens screaming, bubble lights flashing.

Sensing Adam and Blaze's authority, the crowd parted, clearing a path for them. Axel hopped down from the Gulfstream. Adam and Blaze marched up to him. Axel looked pretty beaten up and very pissed off.

"What happened?" Blaze puffed.

"What happened?" Axel said. "I stopped the plane, that's what happened!"

"Where's your guy?" Adam asked.

Axel blinked. "What about *your* guys? How many collars did you make?"

Adam gritted his teeth. "No collars. Three bodies. But at least they didn't get away."

Axel frowned. "Get off my back. I captured a plane filled with heroin and a suitcase full of money... and it's still before lunch."

There was a moment of silence. "Speaking of lunch," Adam said, "isn't there a hot dog stand a few miles down the beach from here?" They started pushing through the crowd. Blaze followed.

Somewhere out of sight, a car radio played loudly: "*A Newsradio traffic tipster informs us that there's a stalled jet plane tying up traffic on Beach Highway in the area of Wood Oak City Airport. So if you're headed in that direction, look for an alternate route or expect to be stuck in traffic for most of the day.*"

Blaze Fielding couldn't help but laugh. "We're gonna be in so much trouble for this, you guys."

Axel put an arm around her. "Stick around," he said. "We haven't even started yet."

Antonio rode up in the private elevator. His arm was in a sling, his face bruised and swollen. The elevator opened directly into Mr. X's office, which was tastefully, and expensively, furnished with antiques and blood-red oriental carpet. Antonio entered the office, which at first glance seemed empty. Then, he noticed the Syndicate Overlord - seated not at his desk, but at a small table where he was eating his lunch.

"Antonio," X said between mouthfuls. "Come in. Sit down over here." He indicated the chair across the table from him. As Antonio walked forward, he realised that he was walking on a sheet of plastic that had been laid over the carpet.

"Don't mind the plastic," X told him. "I'm having some painting done. Sit down."

Antonio sat. Mr. X was enjoying a thick steak for lunch. He sliced off a piece and slid it into his mouth, chewing with earnest. Antonio waited nervously for him to speak, not moving.

"So tell me, Antonio," X said. "What went wrong? The police were waiting. We lost a considerable amount of money, not to mention the airplane, and the merchandise."

Antonio swallowed. "I don't know, Mr. X. I worked out every detail myself. I left nothing to chance."

"I see." X took a deep breath. "Just bad luck, huh?" He calmly cut another piece of steak and popped it into his mouth.

"I think it was inevitable," Antonio said. "After the cops arrested our people from Wood Oak

Stadium, they could've easily been tipped off. Besides, importing the heroin in small shipments like this is much too slow and much too dangerous. We should do it annually, in one enormous shipment..."

X didn't reply to the suggestion. In fact, he changed the subject completely. "How's the arm? You all right?" He smiled. "Live to fight another day?"

Antonio seemed to relax, reassured by X's expression of concern. "Yes, sir. I'm fine. Thank you."

"Sometimes things simply do not turn out as we plan them." X smiled. "This steak, for example. 'Cajun' style. Look, it's all black. Do *you* like it that way, Antonio?"

He blinked. "Well, I... don't know."

X leaned toward him. "Here. I want you to taste this and tell me what you think." He sliced off a piece of steak for Antonio, speared it with his fork and offered it to him. As Antonio leaned forward to take the piece of meat in his mouth, there was a muffled *Phhhitt!* - and Antonio was propelled backwards in his chair, a bullet in his forehead.

Shiva appeared, having entered from the bathroom, holding a silenced pistol in his hand. There was a hint of madness in his icy-blue eyes and a perpetual smirk playing upon his lips. He looked down at Antonio's body. Blood was pumping from the head wound onto the plastic sheet.

"You give new meaning to the word 'dropcloth', Mr. X," he said. He removed the Rolex watch from Antonio's wrist before wrapping up the body in the plastic.

X watched him. “Certain policemen in this city have become an intolerable nuisance,” he said.

Shiva nodded. “I was saying the same thing just the other day. Maybe you should have another word with Chief O’Hara. Maybe he didn’t get the message the first time around. Say, can I keep this?”

X voiced no objection as Shiva slipped the watch onto his own wrist. “The Chief of Police is an incompetent piece of shit,” he said bluntly. “I explained things to him simply enough. It would seem he can’t even keep his own people in check - that’s the problem here. How do you propose we handle these... renegade cops?”

Shiva’s eyes twinkled. “Ready to declare war?”

“Not if we don’t have to.”

“Then let’s fire a warning shot across their bow,” Shiva suggested. “Hope they get the message.”

Mr. X removed a photograph from a folder. “Have a look.”

Shiva took the photo. It was a picture of a black man in plain clothes. “Who’s this?”

“He’s the cop in charge of these renegades,” X said. “Detective Sergeant Adam Hunter.”

Shiva practically licked his lips. “Oh, this is going to be *lovely*.”

Axel and Blaze cruised along in his battered pickup truck. It was night, and the streets were nearly deserted.

“How old are you?” Axel asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

Blaze looked at him. “Twenty-seven.”

“Bullshit.”

She frowned. “Why, do I look younger? I get that a lot.”

“The younger the better,” was his mischievous reply.

She smiled, almost shyly. “Where exactly are you taking me, Axel?”

“I told you,” he said. “I want you to come home and watch television with me.”

Adam Hunter’s house was dark and quiet at this hour. Adam couldn’t sleep, so he fixed himself a sandwich in the kitchen. Rickles the cat purred, rubbing against his leg.

“Hey,” Adam blurted, and kicked the cat aside. As he did so, he noticed a package on the counter, and frowned. It was a poster tube, made from cardboard with plastic end caps, and its label read: ADAM HUNTER: POLICE EVIDENCE. He took the package and went into the living room and opened it. Inside was a rolled up poster, a scaled up publicity shot of local mayoral candidate George Xetheus in a starched green suit, with a large slogan across the top in large red lettering: “GEORGE XETHEUS FOR MAYOR!”. And beneath, slightly smaller, “GEORGE XETHEUS GETS IT DONE.”

Inside Axel’s apartment, Blaze Fielding sat watching TV - really enjoying an episode of the Three Stooges. Axel stood apart from her; he wasn’t watching the TV, he was watching *her* watching TV, a melancholy expression on his face. His eyes shifted to a photo of his wife. He picked it up and viewed it sadly.

Blaze turned to him. “You’re not having a very good time, are you?”

Axel put down the photo. “You don’t know that,” he said sweetly. “Maybe this is how I look when I’m having a good time. Maybe I’m having the best time of my life.”

After a moment, she said, “Are you?”

He didn’t answer.

Blaze smirked. “I know... sing me something.”

Axel frowned. “I don’t sing.”

“Come on. Sing me a song.”

“I don’t know any songs.”

“Not even a Christmas song? Everybody knows a Christmas song.”

Axel shrugged and made a half-hearted attempt. “Something through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh...”

Blaze smiled. “Good. That’s good.” She helped him out. “Over the hills we go, laughing all the way.”

“Something something ring, making something bright...”

“Oh, what fun it is to ride...”

“To grandmas’s house tonight!”

They knew they’d got it wrong, but they were pleased with themselves just the same, exploding in a fit of laughter. Blaze hugged Axel impulsively, feeling drawn to him.

Axel looked uncomfortable. He’d love to show her some platonic affection, but he knew that was impossible. He gently unwrapped her arms from around his neck. “I’d better take you home now,” he said.

Adam sat in front of the TV. On his lap was the poster, unfurled. He glanced down, saw the smiling publicity photo of George Xetheus, then looked up at the television. A repeat broadcast was being aired. On the screen, George Xetheus was giving a speech at a mayoral candidate rally at City Hall.

“I’m George Xetheus,” he said. “I’m running for Mayor of Wood Oak City. A great city is measured by the quality of the lives of the people who live in it. Now is the time for leadership grown out of taking on the city’s toughest challenges and winning. That’s what I’m doing. That’s what I’ll continue to do as Mayor. Vote for me. You know it’s the right choice. I will fight the gang infestation of our communities. I will end the terror in our neighbourhoods...”

Adam continued to watch. There was a sad, faraway look on his face.

Another hour later, Adam went to bed. He climbed in silently next to his sleeping girlfriend, then lied awake for a while, staring up at the ceiling. The rain beat down on the window, throwing odd shadows across his face.

He drifted off to sleep.

Sunlight streamed through the windows.

Adam stirred groggily, forcing open his eyes. Staring at him in the face was Axel Stone’s scruffy, early morning face. Adam frowned.

“...Axel...?”

“Good morning, Adam,” the man beamed. “I’ve been doing a little thinking.”

Adam just stared at him. “Do you know what time it is...?”

Axel raised his eyebrows. “Day time?”

Adam grimaced. “I’ll get dressed.”

In the kitchen, Jodie Kelly was singing something bluesy, fixing coffee. At the table Blaze Fielding was drinking tea. Adam sat down next to her, looking across at Sammy who was nursing a glass of milk. Axel took off his shoulder holster, and with meticulous care draped it delicately over the back of his chair, sitting beside Sammy.

“You’re seriously using ketchup?” Axel asked.

“Yeah,” was Adam’s blunt reply.

“On eggs,” Axel frowned.

“Yeah.” Adam paused, and a playful smile came over his features. “Who made the ketchup?”

“Heinz...” Axel observed.

“Who made the eggs?”

“Ah,” Axel looked over at Jodie. Across the room, she snorted. “You two are so hilarious I could bust. So Blaze honey, how are these guys to work with?”

Blaze smiled. “I’m keeping them in check.”

Adam leaned forward. “Did Axel take you back to his apartment last night?”

“Cut it out, Adam,” Axel said, looking away. “Nothing happened.”

“Yeah,” Blaze told him. “Nothing happened. We had a laugh, but I was home by eleven. Nothing to get too excited about.”

Adam nodded. “Okay, okay. Listen, guys, I had something come through in the mail yesterday. A poster of George Xetheus, from an anonymous

sender. I think somebody is trying to tell us something...”

Blaze perked up. “George Xetheus. That’s the guy running for Mayor’s office this year right?”

Axel nodded.

“Right,” Adam said. “But what’s the significance? Why the hell would somebody send me a picture of him?”

Blaze took a deep breath. Her mind filled with a thousand questions. “I’m not sure,” she said. “But something tells me we should keep a closer eye on this George Xetheus over the coming days.”

Later, Axel and Adam stood on line at the outdoor firing range. Around them the echoing *boom* of gunshots filled the morning air. They struggled to be heard over the tumult.

“I’m thinking this George Xetheus is somehow linked to the Syndicate,” Adam said.

“Right,” Axel said. “It doesn’t take a genius to work out his second initial is ‘X’. As in ‘Mr. X’.”

Adam nodded. “Okay. So let’s assume Mr. Xetheus is the Syndicate Overlord. How are we gonna proceed?”

Axel licked his lips. “We need to tread carefully here. Xetheus is a powerful man. Blaze is doing some research over at the Internal Affairs Bureau. Maybe she can find some incriminating evidence we can use.”

Adam smiled. “You like her, don’t you?”

Axel looked at him. “Sure. She’s terrific. But I can’t... She reminds me of Shelley.”

“Your wife?”

“Yeah...”

Adam sighed. “I’m sorry, man. About what happened to her. Damn shame.”

“Yeah,” Axel said, his expression grim. He stepped up to the line, drew his Beretta, and fired off a full clip. Three-shot rhythms, two in the chest, one in the head, two in the chest, one in the head. When he was done, he removed the magazine lovingly and snapped in a new one.

“You sleep with that thing under your pillow?” Adam said.

“I would if I slept,” Axel told him.

“Here, stand back.” Adam stepped to the red line, and drew his weapon with lightning swiftness. *Bang!* The report was deafening. The target grew a neat third eye, perfect shot, dead center. Adam grinned, holstering his gun. “Hey-hey. Would’ja look at that.”

Axel shrugged, drew and fired. He wasn’t even looking. Nonetheless, he put a Magnum round right through the hole made by Adam’s .38, making it .60 inches wider.

Adam scowled. “Yeah, yeah. Eat me.” Then his cell phone started vibrating in his pocket. He cursed, and answered it. “Yeah. Right. Shit. Okay.” He clipped the thing shut and looked at Axel. “Let’s go. There’s a maniac on the streets. Possible Syndicate connection.”

“I’ll drive,” Axel said.

The unmarked cop car gunned through light midday traffic, cherry top flashing, sliding through a turn. Axel Stone was driving, Adam Hunter riding shotgun. After a couple more blocks it made another turn, screeched to a stop, and both Axel and Adam were both stunned by what they saw.

“Oh, shit...” Adam muttered.

At first glance, it was like Hell. A dozen fires lit the street. In the center of it all, about two blocks away, walking away from them, squirting a flamethrower with one hand and firing an AK-47 with the other, was a human tank - named Bongo - wearing level-3 full body armour and a facemask. He napalmed another car, not stopping.

“Fuck me,” Axel said.

“What’re we gonna do?”

“Run him over.” Axel floored it, aiming the car at the psychopath.

Adam swallowed dryly. “What if he turns and shoots us with that friggin’ assault rifle?”

“Maybe he won’t,” Axel said. “He hasn’t yet.”

“Right. But what if he does?”

Axel sighed. “Try being positive for once, Adam.”

Adam glanced at him. “Unlike you, my life matters to me.”

“You got another way to stop him?”

“No. Okay, you’re right, we’re cops. I hope he doesn’t turn.”

“*Will* him not to turn.”

Adam snorted. “Will him?”

Axel nodded. “*Will* him. Yeah. C’mon... don’t turn... don’t turn... C’mon Adam, will him with me.”

“He’s turning,” Adam observed. “Oh, shit.”

The car skidded sideways as Axel threw the wheel over. Bongo opened up on them, bullets shredding the vehicle. Axel and Adam bailed out and took cover behind it, fire all around them.

“Did you have to turn so my side faced him?” Adam blurted, exasperated.

Axel grinned. "There's no right turn here."

The shooting stopped. Axel and Adam popped up firing, but their slugs bounced off the guy's body armour. They dropped back.

"We're in trouble," Adam said.

"It's your fault, Adam," Axel told him.

"My fault? How's it my fault?"

"You didn't *will* him."

Adam rolled his eyes, and peeked a look. Bongo was walking toward them, letting off more bullets, torching a kiosk.

"Okay. I'll draw his fire," Axel said. "You run for cover."

Adam shook his head. "No, no, no. I'll draw the fire, and *you* run for cover."

"I got less to lose," Axel said, "so you do the running."

"You're younger," Adam said. "You're in love."

"Shut up," Axel barked. "Are you kidding, Adam? I got lots less to lose. I'm going first."

"Axel..."

"Get ready to run, Adam. Ready? On two."

"Wait..."

"One, two!"

Adam bolted from behind the car. Bongo turned, giving Axel a chance to stand and shoot. Five, six shots. His aim couldn't have been better - the bullet from his gun tore off the stem of Bongo's flamethrower tank, releasing napalm in a high-pressure, burning jet that rocketed him off the ground and through the air toward a nearby gas station. He impacted a fuel pump, igniting the fuel. In a violent flash of heat and light, the station exploded. At the same time a tanker truck offloading gas was blown upward out of sight.

Stunned, Axel and Adam watched the inferno for a few seconds, before something above caught their eye. They looked up.

“Shit!” Adam howled.

They started running. A moment later, the tanker dropped from the sky behind them, a few tons of metal falling at ten metres a second. They looked back, saw it explode in another fireball.

Axel puffed, his body surging with adrenaline. “Never a dull moment, huh, Adam?”

Adam frowned. “Not since I met you.” Then, about ten yards behind them on the sidewalk, a pay phone started ringing. Adam gave Axel a funny look as he went to answer it. “Um. Hello?”

“*Sergeant Hunter,*” said the voice on the line, electronically flanged. “*I hope we have your attention now.*”

Adam’s nostrils flared. “Who the hell is this?”

There was a muffled silence, then, “*Got to hand it to you, Sergeant. Your girlfriend - Jodie, is it? She looks really good naked.*”

The phone went dead.

Adam looked pale, starting to panic. “Oh, my God,” he muttered. “No. No, no, no.”

Adam's car screeched to the curb outside his house, hopped the sidewalk and jolted to a stop. A second later, the two cops were out and running in a dead heat toward the front door. Adam flung the door open and stopped. On the carpet beneath the mail slot was a tiny envelope with SEASONS GREETINGS emblazoned across the front. A note was attached with a paper clip.

Adam looked at it. One side read, "DETECTIVE ADAM HUNTER". On the other side was a message in block capitals: "YOUR GIRLFRIEND LOOKS REALLY PRETTY NAKED." Adam tore open the envelope, afraid to breathe. Inside was a Polaroid snapshot: Jodie, naked and terrified, her hands and legs bound behind her with rope and a gag strapped to her mouth.

Adam was devastated. He dropped the snapshot as if it were a live snake, backed away, stumbled into the wall. He shook his head. "Bastards... bastards..."

Axel looked on, stunned. The telephone rang, and went dead. It rang again. "Adam," Axel said.

Adam looked up, blinking, snapping out of it. Down the hall, his younger brother Sammy moved to answer the phone. "Don't answer that!" Adam roared. He rushed down the hall and scooped up the receiver. "This is Adam Hunter." He listened intently, a look of pure dread on his face, then hang up slowly, staring straight ahead. On the table, a stuffed bear stared back impassively.

Sammy Hunter looked on, terrified.

“They took Jodie,” Adam said. “The Syndicate... bastards took my girl...”

Beside him, Axel’s face contorted into a look of sheer, brutal hatred.

Shiva was on the phone, talking to Adam Hunter. Beside him, Mr. X looked on intently, a big grin splitting his face from ear to ear.

“Goodbye, Mr. Hunter.”

Shiva hung up, and looked at X. “Bingo,” he said. “Now we’ve got them right where we want them.”

X nodded. “Good. I want them taken alive, Shiva. See to it personally...”

Sammy was sitting in his bedroom, crying quietly to himself. Adam entered the room and they looked at each other.

“I was at school,” Sammy said, looking down at his hands. “When I came home, she was gone...”

Adam nodded. “It’s not your fault,” he said, then handed him a VP70. “Take this. Until it’s over, I don’t want you to let it out of your sight.”

Sammy nodded silently and stood up, his eyes filled with tears.

“They’re not going to hurt her,” Adam reassured him. “If I do exactly what they say... they’ll let her go.” He sighed heavily. “She’s coming home.”

Sammy looked up at him. “What about you?”

Adam gritted his teeth. He didn’t answer.

In the living room, Axel had his shirt off, and was carefully removing slivers of glass from his shoulder, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Adam came down the stairs and found him.

“You know they’re going to kill her,” Axel said, speaking in a hushed tone.

Adam looked at him. “Yeah. I know.”

“You want her back, you’ve got to take her away from them.”

“I know.”

Axel nodded. “Good. Then let’s go see the captain. We need that special attack unit, and we need it *now*.”

Captain Wyndam had Axel, Adam and Blaze assembled before him. He didn’t look happy.

“You three have way overstepped the mark,” he said. “There’s no way I can authorise a special attack unit. Not now, not ever. I’m sorry, I really am. But the answer’s a resolute *no*.”

Axel couldn’t hide his expression of rage. “Captain, they’ve taken Adam’s girl. This is a *personal* fight now. We can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

Wyndam looked at him. “Actually, you can. And that’s exactly what you’re gonna do, Sergeant. Thanks to all the destruction you’ve caused out there recently, Chief O’Hara knows all about your investigations - and the fact we went behind his back on this. Seriously, we’re *all* lucky to have a job right now.”

Blaze Fielding frowned. “But sir - just look at the documentation I pulled from the Internal

Affairs bureau. The Chief has been receiving bribery payments from George Xetheus for months. The corruption goes all the way to the top, just as we suspected...”

Wyndam swallowed dryly. “I appreciate that, Blaze. But there’s *nothing* we can do about it now. We have to let this slide, if we want to keep our jobs. Accept it. I won’t lose my job over this...”

In that moment, Adam Hunter felt so very, very tired. He took out his badge, and unceremoniously tossed it onto Wyndam’s desk. “Then *fuck* this job,” he said, and stood up. “I quit.”

There was a pause. Axel studied Adam, and realised he was being serious. He nodded, and did the same thing. “Yeah. Fuck this job. The whole department stinks anyway. From now on, we’re gonna do this *our* way. Blaze, are you with us?”

She blinked, looked at them, and then at Wyndam. Decided. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m with you guys.”

“You walk out of that door,” Wyndam said, “and there’s no way back in.”

Without another word, the three of them left the room, closing the door behind them. As they walked down the corridor toward the exit, Adam said, “What now?”

“Now, we shoot to kill,” Axel told him. “We get as many as we can, and we don’t miss.”

“I won’t miss,” Adam said, scowling.

“We’re going to get bloody on this one,” Axel said. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

Blaze stared at him as they reached the main entrance doors of the precinct and went outside. “How... good... are you?” she asked.

“What?”

She licked her lips. “Are you... only crazy... or are you... as good as you say you are?”

There was a pause. Axel smiled. “No-one can touch me.”

“Good,” Adam said. “Kill every fucking one of them, okay?”

At which point, a light seemed to flicker behind Axel’s eyes - grim determination, anticipation. He looked like a machine revving up. He looked at Adam, then at Blaze. “You guys get half. I’ll kill the other half.”

Blaze nodded. “Just the three of us, going up against an entire Syndicate? We’re probably going to die.”

They got in Adam’s car. Axel’s eyes were wide open. “I didn’t want to live forever, anyway,” he said. “Did you?”

Axel had the lights off in his apartment. He crossed to the window and peered out through the slatted blinds, making sure they hadn’t been followed.

Blaze sat watching the television. On the screen a group of carollers was singing “Tidings of Comfort and Joy”. She looked across at Axel and frowned. “When was the last time you celebrated Christmas, Axel?” she asked.

He swallowed, and looked at her. “Not since Shelley died.”

“Your wife?”

He nodded.

“What happened to her?” Blaze asked.

He averted her gaze. “It was a climbing accident,” he said, “on the summit ridge of the Grünhorn, in the Bernese Alps.” His expression

filled with emotion. “I was cheating on her, Blaze. The night she died... I was with somebody else.”

Blaze didn't know what to say. “I'm sorry. I didn't know that.”

He sighed. “I know.”

“So, that's what made you crawl into the bottle?”

He nodded.

She took a deep breath, and stood up. “A man should be faithful to his wife, Axel Stone. Some men just can't. That's *you*. But you didn't cause the accident, Axel. What you did didn't make it happen.” She put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a sympathetic squeeze.

“You're right, Blaze,” he said. “It just makes it harder to live with.” He looked at the wall calendar. It was December 22, now just over four years since it happened.

Sighing, he went to the closet, opened it, and a cloud of dust billowed out. He reached in, and removed a weathered cardboard box. He took a shot of bourbon, grimaced, then took the box to the center of the room and opened it. Inside was a wicked-looking hunting knife. He held it up near his face, and it positively sparkled in the dim light.

“This baby hasn't seen action for some time,” he muttered, then turned to Blaze and said, “It's time to change that.” He sheathed the weapon over his right-hand thigh, then holstered his Beretta. Pulled on some combat boots. He went to the full-length mirror by the front door and scanned his appearance, breathing in, out... in out. Then he glanced at the photograph of his wife on the wall...

Shelley Stone wore a wedding gown, all white lace and satin ruffles. She was beautiful. By contrast, Axel Stone's face was now craggy,

weathered, covered with combat paint. Surely he was never married to such a gorgeous woman... not this demon...

"Forgive me," he said solemnly to the picture.

There was a knock at the door. Axel span round, lightning quick, drawing his gun. "Who is it?"

"It's me," came Adam's voice.

"Okay. Come in slow."

The door opened and Adam Hunter entered, carrying a briefcase. He glanced briefly at Axel's combat get-up, shrugged, then set the briefcase on the bed and opened it. It was filled with round upon round of ammunition. "Hollow points," Adam said. "Armour piercing."

"Perfect," Blaze said.

Axel nodded eagerly. "You weren't followed?"

"No."

Without another word, Axel began scooping up handfuls of ammo.

Adam hooked a wire in place under his collar. "Testing," he said. "One, two, three..."

"Fine," Axel nodded. "It's twelve-thirty. Let's move."

"Fine with me," Blaze said, holstering twin pistols. Her weapon of choice was the Beretta Model 93R.

"Don't get too close," Adam told them. "They'll spot you, both of you."

Axel hoisted a long-range sniper rifle with infra-red scope. "Thousand yards okay?"

Wood Oak Forest shimmered with heat, the trees bathed in relentless sunlight. A lone car, plowing along a ribbon of highway toward the horizon, looked lost and utterly alone beneath the clear December sky.

Adam Hunter was driving. Relentlessly onward, his face locked in a mask of contained fury. Dust and leaves billowed past the windows in a strong gust of wind. He strained his eyes ahead, focusing through the shimmer of unseasonable heat... noticing, finally, a series of shapes - dim mirages, silhouettes maybe. Men, possibly men.

Syndicate thugs. Standing next to a black Sedan. Adam stiffened and leaned forward, punching the cigarette lighter. As he did, he whispered into his hidden microphone.

“Split.”

It happened in the blink of an eye: the trunk popped open, and out rolled Axel and Blaze. Blaze yanked a rope, and the trunk slammed shut. They both hit the ground rolling and came up, combat-crouched, then raced for the cover of the trees. Axel had the Magnum sniper rifle slung over one shoulder.

Adam rolled to a halt and stepped from the car. Facing him were three armed Syndicate thugs. Adam simply stood there, reading the odds, scanning...

The first man Adam recognised well. It was Abadede. “Hunter?” he roared. “I thought it was you.”

“Yes,” Adam said. “I’m alone.”

“Hands up,” Abadede told him. “Come with us.”

“Show me the girl,” Adam insisted.

Abadede sneered. “She’s not here.”

“Bullshit,” Adam spat. “Let me see her. Then I’ll come quietly.”

Abadede regarded him for a moment, then turned and nodded. A van appeared from behind a thick group of trees and approached them across the tarmac. The doors swung open. Inside, Jodie Kelly was gagged, helpless, looking terrified. Next to her, Shiva held a pistol.

Abadede leaned in. “He wants to see the girl.”

Adam waited, sweating, hands in pockets. Then out came Jodie, followed by Shiva. Abadede held a knife squarely at Jodie’s throat. Adam’s eyes filled with tears, and he felt relieved that she was still alive.

“Simple exchange,” Abadede said. “You come with us, the girl takes a walk.”

“Let her go now,” Adam said between clenched teeth.

“No,” Abadede said. “Take your hands out of your pockets.”

Adam shrugged. “Sure thing, pal.” In his left hand, he clutched a shiny metal grenade. Adam’s grip was the only thing keeping it dead. Abadede swore violently. “This fucker’s alive,” Adam hissed. “Let her go or we all die.”

At that moment, Shiva stepped out of the van, deadly calm. All heads turned to regard him. “Take him,” Shiva said.

“But sir ...” Abadede started.

“He’s bluffing,” Shiva said. “It’s a dud. He wouldn’t risk killing his own girlfriend.”

“Don’t push me,” Adam muttered.

Shiva simply laughed, and turned back to the van. “Take him.”

The car and the surrounding figures were tiny. Axel crouched, the rifle on his shoulder, his eye glued to the scope. The infra-red image showed Jodie Kelly and Abadede. Blaze was behind Axel, watching with binoculars.

Axel's concentration was absolutely perfect. He was like a statue, completely unmoving. He licked a finger and raised it, testing the wind. "Come on... come on..."

Adam and Shiva stared each other down, tensions running high. Adam's hand still clutched the grenade.

Abadede pushed the knife into Jodie's throat. "Put the pin back in, Hunter. Do it."

Adam started to sweat. Shiva began to walk forward, gun extended, cool as ice. Another step. Smiling...

Axel sat dead still, focusing through the sniper scope. "Come on," he muttered. "Move away from the girl..."

Blaze grimaced. "Don't you dare shoot unless you have a clear shot..."

"I'm trying," he said.

Shiva stopped in front of Adam, and cocked his gun. “Drop the fucking grenade.”

Adam licked his lips, his gaze darting between them. “I do and we die.”

“No,” Shiva said. “I don’t think so.” He looked down the sight of the gun and pulled the trigger.

Bam!

The bullet caught Adam in the shoulder. He dropped the grenade, and it rolled. The other Syndicate thugs dove for cover. Abadede took a step back from Jodie.

Bingo.

Axel fired, grunting.

Blaze gasped.

Abadede dropped. Shiva’s head span around. He stared off at the distance and hissed. “Stone...!”

Meanwhile, Adam rolled, came up with his gun in hand. He fired three shots, *Bam! Bam! Bam!* “Jodie!” he roared. “Get to the car!”

Jodie bolted. Meanwhile, Axel was firing again. The black Sedan’s windshield splintered; the car rocked with the impact as the driver was killed instantly. Then, Adam’s grenade chose that moment to explode... *poof*... into a cloud of orange smoke and confetti.

“Dud!” Shiva shouted. “It’s a dud!”

Jodie was running for the Sedan as Shiva swivelled in her direction, raising an Uzi, firing a burst - until a bullet from Axel parted his black hair, sending him diving to the tarmac, the Uzi still

sprouting flame. Jodie flung open the car door, and screamed at the blood-spattered corpse which rolled off the steering wheel. Bullets blasted the car, metal popped and burst. She jumped in without hesitation.

Adam was flat on the tarmac, firing like crazy, shot after shot - as Jodie floored the gas, the Sedan peeling out in a storm of flying dust and dirt, one door open, one of the corpse's legs hanging out. In a second it ploughed into one of the Syndicate thugs and he flew up onto the hood, spinning like a ragdoll. Still conscious, the goon took aim through the windshield, right at her...

“Jodie!” Blaze said.

Axel swivelled, lightning quick. “No...”

The goon on the hood was blown off the car. Jodie screamed, the dead driver sprawled against one of her shoulders, her foot nailed to the gas pedal - as the car leapt like a kicked dog and careened off into the trees.

Axel lined up for another shot. As he did so, he heard a soft *thump* behind him, and Blaze cried out in muffled pain, followed by a *click*. He whirled, fearing the worst.

And there, just as he feared: Blaze lay unconscious at the feet of George Xethus himself, who stood holding an antique Tommy Gun .45, cocked and locked.

“Drop it,” Mr. X said. “You’re not that fast, son.”

Axel blinked.

“Drop the rifle.”

The younger man obeyed.

X grinned with satisfaction, and spoke into a walkie-talkie. “I got Stone, and a female accomplice.”

Adam made a break for it, firing blind, until the ground before him literally exploded with gunfire. The earth was chopped to tatters. Dirt flew. He stopped, puffing for breath, and raised his hands. As the smoke cleared, Shiva approached like a demon through fog. He was flanked by two thugs with Uzis.

“A very nice try,” Shiva chuckled. Then he barked into his walkie-talkie. “Onihime. Get the girl.”

Axel stood, hands over his head, looking desperate. Mr. X studied him thoughtfully.

“Axel Stone,” X said. “Your combat record is the stuff of legend...”

Axel took a deep breath. “So is yours. General George Xetheus, commander of Shadow Company.”

X’s eyes glimmered. “I see we’ve heard of each other.”

“Yeah,” Axel said. “It’ll almost be a shame when I kill you.”

X laughed. “I don’t think so, son.”

“You’re about to have a fun evening,” Shiva said to Adam.

“Go fuck yourself,” Adam sneered.

Shiva slammed him in the head with a karate blow. He fell.

Meanwhile, Jodie was driving to save her life, screaming at the top of her lungs, the needle touching 90 as she struggled to shove the dead man's body into the corner.

Swerving. Screaming. At which point the trees exploded around her. She shrieked. There was a howl of a noise, a veritable eruption of grass, leaves and dirt. And then she saw it - a descending Bell Cobra helicopter.

Jodie swerved to a halt to avoid the droning chopper, which hovered like a behemoth, rotors throbbing, as she stumbled from the car and collapsed in a heap on the grass.

She was lost, alone, her sobs inaudible over the high churning whine of the helicopter.

Time passed, impossible to say how much.

It was night when Axel woke up, naked, feeling like shit. He was manacled hand and foot, chained in a bathtub full of water. Around him was a dingy concrete basement.

"W... What?" he moaned. "Where am I?"

Shiva stepped forward. Behind him was Onihime and Yasha, two female Oriental mercenaries. They were working on a mechanical device of some kind, connecting wires. Axel grunted.

"Well, well," Shiva grinned. "Look who's back from the dead, girls."

Axel struggled against the manacles, slopping water.

“Oh, please save your strength,” Shiva told him. “I believe you’ll need it.”

Axel stopped moving. He scowled at Shiva. “Where’s Blaze?”

Shiva smiled. “Miss Fielding? Oh, I wouldn’t worry about her. I’d worry about yourself right now. You see, you’re just in time for a lot of pain...”

Axel gritted his teeth. “I’m thrilled.”

Shiva leaned toward him. “Oh, you will be. I daresay you’ll be... shocked.”

“Who’re the chicks?”

“Shhh,” Shiva said. “Don’t make them mad with sexist comments like that.”

“My mistake. Who’re the pleasant-looking Oriental psychopaths?”

Shiva chuckled. “Their names are Onihime and Yasha. And they know more about dispensing pain than you can possibly imagine.”

Axel swallowed. “Terrific. Listen, guys, can we get some Mister Bubble in here...”

“Shut up,” Shiva barked. He studied Axel’s face. “My, my, look at all those scars. See, Axel, we have a problem. Since we have Miss Fielding - and Mr. Hunter - we really don’t even need you. But I believe in being thorough.”

Across the room, Onihime threw a switch. A mechanical *humming* filled the room.

“Our problem,” Shiva continued, “and yours, too, is that you know too much. You’ve been digging a little too deep at that miserable police department of yours, despite our best efforts to keep you all under control. It would be unfortunate if we were unable to continue operating in this city without the intervention of do-gooders such as yourself.”

“That would be a shame,” Axel said sarcastically.

“Indeed. So you see, Axel, it is essential that we find out how much the police know. Who else knows about us...”

“Nobody else knows shit,” Axel said.

“I wish I could believe you,” Shiva replied. “Unfortunately, I don’t. So, if you’ll be kind enough to tell us all you know, I will kill you quickly.”

“Such a deal, I should worry.”

“Oh, indeed you should. See, Axel...” Shiva gestured to Yasha, who approached carrying a very ominous device: a sponge, attached to a portable dry-cell battery casing. Shiva frowned at Axel. “Do you vomit?”

Axel blinked. “Sometimes.”

Shiva nodded, and sighed. “Back before prison reform, the staff at Sing Sing invented a rather unusual form of punishment. It’s known as the hummingbird treatment. Are you familiar?”

“Please, no tickling. I hate tickling.”

“The ‘patient’ is chained naked in a bathtub full of water. A bath is then administered using a battery powered sponge. The pain is said to be so excruciating that after twenty minutes most men are either insane or dead.”

Axel was silent.

“I thought you’d like it,” Shiva beamed. “I can, of course, kill you now. Simply tell me what I want to know.”

Axel spat. “Guess we’re in for a long night. ‘Cause I don’t know scratch.”

Shiva nodded. “We’ll find out. Yasha...?”

The Oriental woman moved forward, brandishing the sponge/battery hookup. She dipped it into a bucket of water. Axel was sweating.

“Feel free to scream,” Shiva told him.

Axel swallowed dryly. “Haven’t you guys... heard of yuletide cheer?”

Yasha hit Axel with the sponge. Axel screamed, a high, lunatic scream. He thrashed in the water, splashing Yasha, whipping from side to side as the room spiralled back and forth out of focus. A moment later, Yasha removed the device and Axel fell backward, thumping against the tub, sucking air and moaning.

Shiva chuckled. “My goodness. Now that was fun, wasn’t it?”

Axel looked at him, dripping hate. “I’m going to kill all three of you.”

Shiva laughed out loud. “That’s very funny. Now, about the police...”

“Fuck yourself.”

Yasha dunked the battery, ran it down Axel’s stomach.

He screamed again.

Adam and Blaze found themselves strapped tightly, back-to-back, in a couple of chairs in the center of a dingy room. No windows. Hardwood floors. Their faces were messy: black eyes, swollen jaws. Adam’s shirt was off, exposing the gunshot wound in the flesh of his shoulder. Mr. X stood facing them, flanked by three mercenary thugs. They all wore sidearms.

“Tell me what you know, Miss Fielding,” Mr. X said softly.

She grimaced. “Fuck you.”

X sighed. “I hope you enjoy saying that as much as Gourmand enjoys punishing you for it.”

Gourmand, a fat redneck with no discernible compassion, stepped forward. He reared back, then punched Blaze hard across the face with a fistful of knuckle-dusters. Blood sprayed. Blaze groaned. Behind her, Adam shouted and struggled against his bonds.

Mr. X looked on without blinking.

“That’s it,” Blaze muttered, and spat blood. “If you guys think I’m sending you a Christmas card this year, you’re nuts,”

Gourmand punched her again, hard.

X shook his head. “This is going nowhere. Mr. Gourmand...?”

Gourmand grinned, leaving the room. There was a pause. Adam was sweating, glaring out from swollen eyelids. Mr. X nodded, and smiled.

Axel groaned and collapsed back into the tub with a splash, moaning feebly. Blood dripped from his nose, and saliva drooled from his limp mouth. He looked half-dead, probably because he was just that.

Yasha pulled away the battery sponge and turned to Shiva. “He knows shit,” she said in a native Japanese dialect. “We’re safe.”

Shiva’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

Onihime turned away from the machine she was monitoring and nodded. “Believe me, he’d have told us.”

“Fine,” Shiva said, and snorted. “Big, bad tough-guy my ass.” He paused, considering his options. “I’m going upstairs. Deal with him.”

Yasha frowned. “Deal with him?”

Shiva looked at her, then at Onihime. “Yeah. Fry his nuts. Kill him. Whatever.” With that, he left.

Mr. X leaned over Adam Hunter. “Anytime, Adam. Anytime.” He grinned to himself, chuckling at a private thought. “See, the thing of it is... We know where you live. In fact, Shiva has been known to exterminate entire families, when he gets in... one of his moods. It’s why he went to jail in the first place, as I’m sure you’ll remember. Oh, speaking of which...”

Gourmand re-entered the room. This time he had Jodie Kelly, clad only in her bra and bikini briefs. “Adam,” she whimpered. “Help me.”

Adam went nuts - struggling, wrenching, banging the chair up and down against the floor - but it was no use. He was completely helpless. He snarled with rage. “Bastards! Untie me and I’ll kill every single last one of you!”

Mr. X laughed. “Precisely why we would never think of untying you.”

Gourmand shoved Jodie into the corner, and she landed in an uncomfortable heap. Adam was sweating buckets, his eyes desperate.

X leaned in closer. “If you know something, son, you’d better play ball, ‘cause the stakes just went up...”

Yasha switched on the battery again. In the tub, Axel’s head lolled back and forth, listless, dead. His eyes refused to focus. Yasha showed him the sponge.

“No...” Axel moaned, his voice slurred. “Please...”

“You die now, Sergeant Stone,” Yasha said. Onihime nodded. “Very slowly.”

Axel did not respond. He stared into space. Yasha leaned over the tub, reached in -

- and suddenly Axel's eyes were focused with rage, no longer hazed, and he snapped his hand forward to the end of the chain at lightning speed, grabbing Yasha by the hair. In the blink of an eye, he slammed the woman's head down against the porcelain tub, shattering her nose. She gagged, toppling over into the tub, dropping the battery to the floor. Axel moved like a machine, flipping the chain around Yasha's neck and wrenching it.

"Stop!" Onihime yelled, frozen with panic.

Axel ignored her, maneuvering Yasha's body on top of his, shifting it, reaching into her pant pockets and bringing out a shiny silver key.

At the same time, a length of rope was pulled taut, and Jodie's bound hands were stretched over her head. Gourmand hooked the rope around a peg set into the wall. He grunted, and ripped off her bra. She was helpless.

Adam was out of his mind, struggling to break free.

"Good Lord," Mr. X said, looking at Jodie. "Very well-rounded kind of girl. Yessirreee."

By now, Blaze was conscious again, and struggled against her own bonds. "Stop this. Let her go!" she yelled.

"Goddammit!" Adam roared. "I've told you everything!"

"We'll soon know, won't we?" X grinned.

Gourmand approached Jodie. She squirmed.

"You touch her, you're dead," Adam fumed.

"Oh, son, spare me," X moaned. "It's over, Sergeant. No heroes around to save you..." He

picked up a length of metal piping and tossed it to Gourmand. “Gourmand... she’s yours.”

Jodie screamed. Adam and Blaze shouted, straining. Their chairs thumped up and down, creating an insane staccato rhythm. Mr. X laughed. Jodie shrieked, a harrowing, terrible sound... a scene out of Hell...

And then Axel Stone came in, kicking the door off its hinges. He launched himself at Gourmand without hesitation, swinging an uppercut straight into the man’s jaw, knocking him cold in one powerful move. Gourmand went limp. “*Youuweerrr...*” Meanwhile, X ducked out a side door and escaped while a bunch of other thugs moved in on Axel.

Axel didn’t stop: snapping here, striking there, going crazy with martial arts moves. He was no Chuck Norris, more like a sledgehammer hitting an egg - smashing everyone to the ground. The Syndicate mercs tried to draw their guns, and suddenly their hands were shattered wrecks before their faces caved in. One of them managed to aim his gun at Jodie, almost getting off a shot, but Axel was across the room, sending fists flying, and the man went down, firing useless rounds into the ceiling. Plaster rained.

Axel spun and dived, scooping up the metal piping. He came up beside one of the armed mercs, swinging the piping with hurricane force. There was a sickening impact, and the piping snapped clean in half. Axel span, scanning the room, and suddenly there was no-one left to kill. Using only the element of surprise, he had taken out an entire room in hand-to-hand combat. He stepped in front of Adam and Blaze without missing a beat, and cut them loose with a borrowed knife.

“Work your circulation,” he told them. Then he crossed to Jodie, cutting her free. She collapsed, sobbing into his arms. “Ssshh, there’s no time,” he said. “Come on.” He scooped up handguns, throwing them to Adam and Blaze, and took for himself a pump action shotgun, racking the action.

“Thankyou, Axel,” Blaze said, staring dumbfounded at the body count. “You saved our lives. All three of us.” She gazed at him, a look of genuine affection in her brown eyes.

Axel nodded, averting her gaze. “They’re all dead,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Adam had Jodie in his arms, both of them in tears as they embraced tightly. “Lead the way, partner,” he said, his voice broken and coarse.

PART THREE
THE LAST SOUL

Axel, Adam, Blaze and Jodie were on the run, moving hard and fast. They scrambled down the red-carpeted hallway of a luxurious penthouse suite, with Axel in the lead. As they ran, a Syndicate thug ducked around the corner, saw them, and ducked back. Axel fired through the wall, *Blam!* - and a corpse fell into view. They kept running. Down several flights of stairs, around another corner. Moving, running, rushing headlong toward a sign marked EXIT.

At that moment, Shiva loomed up behind them and tossed something in their direction, ducking back out of sight. It was a live grenade, which hit the floor and clattered.

Axel stopped instantly, knowing the sound. He span, dived, scooped up the grenade and chucked it with all of his might. It bounced downstairs and exploded at the foot of the steps, near the main entrance foyer. Glass smashed, cement flew. There was chaos everywhere.

Outside, Shiva ran to a parked Sedan, jumped in and roared off into the busy streets of Wood Oak City, disregarding the crowd of pedestrians hovering on the sidewalk. The crowd parted like the Red Sea. People were screaming.

Suddenly, the doors of the Tower Building burst open - as Axel, Adam, Blaze and Jodie came skidding out onto the sidewalk in hot pursuit. Adam shoved Jodie back as Shiva fired out the window of

his car, bullets lashing the pavement. The crowd shrieked, and the car screeched away.

A beat cop came running up, and Adam shoved Jodie in his direction. "Get her out of here!" he roared.

"Sarge, what...?" the man said, recognising their faces, but before he could finish his sentence, Adam, Axel and Blaze were running after the car, side by side. They looked like shit - beaten, bloody, and exhausted. Adam was naked from the waist up, firing his pistol down the street, shot after blazing shot, standing shoulder to shoulder with Blaze, who did the same. Axel unloaded with an M-16 on three-shot mode, the muzzle flash blinding, the noise deafening - until pedestrians swarmed suddenly into the line of fire, blocking them.

Adam wouldn't give up. He ran after the car, shouting. "Get out of the way, *move!*" His gun clicked empty, and he tossed it aside, pulling another from his waistband. The car was far away now. He fired four more shots, then collapsed in the street - nearly unconscious. Refusing to give up, he began crawling forward after the car, blood streaming from his gunshot wound and broken nose, going on sheer guts, before finally giving out. He slumped.

"Adam!" Blaze yelled. She knelt beside him as a police car roared up to them, flashers spinning.

"Get an ambulance!" Axel yelled, then took off after Shiva's car on foot. By now, the car was far ahead, racing onto a freeway on-ramp. Axel ran as fast as he could, the sweat pouring off him. He saw the car on the ramp, and changed direction, starting an intercept course. He leapt out into the street - spinning, as a truck blared out of nowhere, brakes squealing, horn shrieking. He somersaulted

over the hood, landed, and kept moving, barrelling across the street now, even faster than before. His feet pounded as he dashed out onto the freeway overpass - where, without stopping, he promptly jumped the guardrail. He dropped through space for a moment... and landed, *thump* - atop the big green freeway sign. He roared, swinging like an acrobat, dangling from the sign almost twenty feet above the ground. Grunting, he levelled the M-16 one-handed, switching it to full auto, waiting for Shiva's car to come screaming through the underpass, doing eighty.

Axel unleashed the gun, and it erupted with cruel fire, strafing the back of the car. Sure enough, both tires blew out, throwing the vehicle into a deadly skid - slewing across the freeway and striking the guardrail at sixty-plus. It slid for a full hundred yards, sending up a shower of sparks. The back tires disintegrated in a trail of burning rubber, and the car grinded to a halt.

Two seconds later, the door opened and Shiva rolled out. Axel fired, gritting his teeth, kicking up a cloud of cement. Shiva returned fire, and big chunks of the freeway sign blew out next to Axel's head, showering him with wooden debris.

Axel lowered the gun, let go of the sign and dropped twenty feet to the pavement. He landed heavily, rolled and came up. A car gave a blast on its horn, swerved around him and crashed into the guardrail. Axel didn't even look. Instead, he began to walk, his eyes burning with rage, akin to some kind of juggernaut.

Up ahead, Shiva turned, saw Axel, and stopped. "Okay, you bastard," he muttered. "Let's see who's better..."

They were separated by perhaps two hundred yards. Shiva snapped his rifle to his shoulder, eyes glued to the scope. Axel swung his own rifle into position, scanning through his own scope. It was a showdown - two men looking for a clear shot, as cars swerved around and between them. The crosshairs swept the freeway, perfect concentration.

Axel.

Shiva.

Suddenly, the shot was there: Shiva sighted in on Axel's position. Only problem was, Axel's rifle was pointed straight at him. They fired at the exact same moment - two shots, two distinct rifle cracks. Axel took it in the shoulder and was blown backward. At the same time, Shiva went down, winged.

They struggled to their feet... when suddenly a car backed up into Axel at thirty miles an hour, broadsiding him and sending him flying.

Shiva rushed up to a stalled car, threw open the door and yanked out the driver. Then he hopped behind the wheel and roared away.

Outside the Tower Building, an ambulance shuddered to a halt and two orderlies hopped out. Uniformed cops were struggling to hold back the crowd. One of the orderlies rushed up. "Where is he, officer?"

One of the cops pointed. "Right over there, buddy." Then he frowned, as he realised nobody was there. Adam and Blaze were gone, nowhere to be seen.

At the same time, down a back alley behind the building, a sleek black Rolls Royce careened around the corner. García was driving, foot glued to the pedal. Mr. X sat in the back seat, sweating. The headlights flashed wildly as the car roared down the alley.

Mr. X stared ahead, and frowned. Adam Hunter and Blaze Fielding were there, fifty yards away, standing in the middle of the street, seemingly come out of nowhere. Surely, there was no reason for Adam Hunter to still be standing, but there he was, pissed, watching the car as it approached. A walking testament to man's ability to bloody himself and keep going. García saw them, snarled, and punched the gas.

Adam and Blaze held their ground, barely able to stand by this point. The car came barreling in, doing fifty. "No way you live," Adam muttered. "No way."

He drew his gun with lightning swiftness.

Bam! The report was deafening. The car's windscreen promptly shattered, and García sprouted a neat third eye - a perfect shot. The car swerved, then Adam and Blaze stepped calmly out of the way. As it careened past, they both watched, expressionless, feeling no emotion at all as it slammed into a telephone pole and rolled over, grinding metal. There was an eruption of glass, and it continued to roll like some great beast, crumpling and folding like an accordion, before coming to rest upside down in a sea of glass...

Mr. X was pinned beneath a crumpled doorframe, struggling to break free, as flames licked upward from the ruptured gas tank... and then he saw something which ruined his whole day. García's corpse, sprawled over the steering column,

had a shiny metal grenade attached to his belt - and flames now danced around the grenade.

X squirmed, strained, yanking for all it was worth. Fingers reaching out for the grenade, flames burning his outstretched hand...

Adam walked like a zombie, helped along by Blaze, away from the car. Suddenly, it blew sky high - a tower of fire, blowing the two of them flat, knocking them ass over teacups. The sound of the explosion echoed down the street, turning night into day for one brief instant. And then -

Then, something truly incredible happened.

It began to snow.

Blaze looked up. "What the hell?"

Sure enough, heroin was sifting down on the night air, tens of millions of dollars' worth. A cloud over the entire street, swirling in the breeze.

Adam got slowly to his feet, checking for broken bones. "You okay?" he said to Blaze.

She nodded, and stood up. "Yeah. Hurt like all hell, but I'll live."

For a while they stood, watching the burning wreck and the blizzard of heroin snow, not saying anything. Just watching.

Then, a hand rested on Adam's shoulder. He turned, and saw Axel Stone standing next to him, cops swarming in the background. The heroin snow continued to fall.

"Well, shit," Adam said.

Axel smiled. "Try not to breathe, you'll see pink elephants."

"Shiva?" Blaze asked.

Axel shook his head. "Got away."

"We... gotta find him," Adam said.

"No dice. First thing we gotta do is get you to a hospital."

Adam shook his head. “Uh-uh. First thing we gotta do is check on my house. I got a bad feeling...” He moved away.

Axel started to follow. He went to toss his cigarette in the gutter and stopped: there was a tiny red mark at the tip of the filter. It was *the* cigarette, the very last one. He stared at it, a sudden glimmer in his eye.

The Christmas lights shed a happy glow over the Hunter Residence. The lawn was still littered with toys. Two uniformed cops were watching over the house, sitting in a police car across the street. One of them munched on a sandwich, while the other one did a crossword puzzle. A car pulled up next to them, and out stepped Shiva.

One of the officers looked at him. “Excuse me, sir, may I see some ID?”

Shiva took an Uzi from beneath his coat, and blew both cops apart without hesitating. He walked forward, gun smoking, crossing the lawn to the front door, and kicked it to splinters.

Adam’s car peeled around the corner, taking out a Salvation Army bucket, which popped like a clay duck. Coins showered every which way.

Adam was driving like a lunatic. Beside him, Axel held a handkerchief to his gunshot wound, while Blaze sat in the back, hoping to God they wouldn’t be too late.

Shiva stalked down the hallway of Adam Hunter's house, stopping in front of Sammy's bedroom door. He kicked it open, and sprayed the interior with gunfire, shredding the mattress, dicing the pillows, trashing everything in sight: Star Wars posters, stuffed animals, an iPod dock. He emptied an entire clip of .9 millimeter slugs - except the bed was empty. There was no one there. Shiva snarled, and turned.

He kicked open another door, triggering destruction. Plaster and wood filled the air in a cloud. He went room to room, searching, growing more and more enraged - because there was no one here to kill. He was blowing the shit out of an empty house. He burst into the only room he hadn't visited, the living room, and found that it too, was empty. There was a note, however, in big letters and taped to the Christmas tree:

DEAR BADGUYS,

NO ONE HERE BUT US EX-COPS.
SORRY.

- THE GOODGUYS

Shiva swore, and ran for the door. As he did so, a police car drove through the front of the house, ploughing into the living room, shearing boards in half, bursting windows, grinding to a halt in a sea of glass. Shiva span, triggering the Uzi, strafing the car, emptying an entire clip at the front windshield, dicing it to smithereens. He waved the gun like a wand, completely extinguishing the car and all life within.

He stopped. There was silence. Floating debris obscured his vision. He lowered the gun, breathing hard, then crossed the room, his boots crunching through broken glass. Taking a deep breath, he yanked on the driver's door and it fell loose with a metal clang.

A cop's nightstick had been jammed against the accelerator pedal. The car was empty.

Shiva turned, startled, and stared across the room. Lo and behold, there was Axel Stone, sitting calmly on the windowsill.

"Ho, ho, ho," Axel mocked, a large grin splitting his face. He raised his gun without blinking and blew the gun out of Shiva's hands.

Shiva span round and dived through the hole in the wall. He landed outside, came up running, but there was Adam Hunter, drawing a gun on him.

"Freeze, Shiva!" Adam roared.

Shiva stopped dead and turned, growling low in his throat. A fire hydrant, sheared off by the runaway car, sprayed water into the night-time air. The wind blew.

Axel Stone stepped out of the house, pointing his weapon like a finger of doom. He strolled toward Shiva, his gun rock steady, and his eyes met Adam's. He spoke, deadly purpose in his voice: "I'll handle it." He stepped up to Shiva, smiled, and then did something very strange: he relaxed his grip on the gun and threw it away. He faced Shiva, raised his arms, and carefully placed them behind his head. When he spoke, his voice dripped menace.

"Come on, ace. Try me."

There was a moment of silence, then Shiva calmly planted himself in front of Axel. Around

them, water showered down in a gentle cloud.
Sirens approached in the near distance.

Axel and Shiva. Two maniacs, their eyes
locked.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Shiva grinned.

Axel and Shiva began to circle, perfect concentration, round and round, never once breaking their focus. They weren't looking at each other's eyes at all; rather, they were watching each other's hands, each man waiting for the other to strike. Axel's fingers twitched and flexed, his wrists making slow, laborious circles. Shiva shifted from leg to leg, floating his balance.

Adam looked on, sweating it out. He wasn't happy with this - he wanted it to end... but he waited just the same.

Shiva's eyes were straining, focusing, scanning for an opening. "Concentrate, Axel," he said. "Don't give me an opening. Wouldn't want to do that."

Axel shifted, and blinked.

Mistake.

Shiva sprang, foot coming out like a shot. Axel jerked back several inches and span around to counter the move, trying a back kick... but to no avail. Shiva was no longer there. He had ducked, and now jumped up to dart a surprise punch to Axel's neck, and another to his abdomen.

Crack! The sound of Axel's rib breaking carried clearly on the night air. He grunted, then thrust forward, inviting a countermove. Shiva countered - and Axel snagged his hand, picture perfect, breaking one of his fingers. Shiva cursed and backed off.

Adam, meanwhile, was raising his gun, pointing it at Shiva. Axel's voice cut like a knife: "No, Adam. No way."

Adam lowered the gun, then stared, fascinated, at this contest between two consummate professionals, in for the kill. It was a dance of the forces. Axel was on fire. He leapt, avoiding a shot to the knee, span, slamming his knuckles into Shiva's nose, busting it. Shiva snarled, dropped - catching Axel's arm over one shoulder. *Crack!* - his arm broke, and he screamed with pain and anger.

Axel roared, throwing three hard punches at Shiva. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* Ribs splintered, and Shiva hissed with pain. Then they backed away from each other again. In pain, they started to circle...

"That's it, Axel," Shiva spat. "Your body wants to go into shock... but you won't let it, will you?"

Axel grimaced. "Give it up. Your breathing's shot..."

"So's your left arm," Shiva observed.

"Life's tough that way," Axel puffed. "Oh, by the way: Fuck you." He launched himself at Shiva.

Shiva threw a punch, scoring a minor point, breaking Axel's collarbone, except Axel didn't care... because he landed one on Shiva's knee, bursting the cap. Shiva shrieked, promptly jack-knifing his fist into Axel's broken arm three times. Axel bellowed, refusing to quit. He slammed his hand into Shiva's broken nose, popping it. Shiva continued hammering the broken arm.

They both screamed, until the pain was simply too intense... nothing human could withstand it, and they fell away, staggering, wrenching to a shaky halt, facing one another in

standoff... Exhausted, limping, hardly able to speak.

Police cars were pulling up now, cops stumbling out, guns clearing their holsters as Adam waved frantically, screaming: “No guns. Let it go! Goddammit, let it go!”

Axel spat blood, staring straight at Shiva, who stared back. Their eyes were glaring.

“Axel,” Adam said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah.”

“Finish the motherfucker.”

Axel smiled, and stood up straight. He looked at Shiva. “Last chance,” he hissed. “Walk away.”

Shiva snorted. “Fuck yourself.”

Axel nodded, and stepped forward. “Fine. Die.”

Shiva sprang, thundering his foot into Axel’s hip, separating the bone at the joint - but Axel didn’t blink. His hand came out, lightning quick, and there was a sick-sounding *crack*.

Shiva fell, dead before he hit the ground. Axel hovered over the corpse, his breathing spastic, saliva and blood dripping from his lips. He took a handkerchief, wiped his hand and said: “Game over. You lose.” At which point, he collapsed like a sack of grain.

Adam ran forward, tears in his eyes, and fell to his knees, cradling Axel in his arms. The assembled cops looked on in thoroughly stunned silence. Axel coughed, and looked up at Adam. Adam looked into his eyes. “Take it easy, man.”

“Right,” Axel croaked. “Easy. You bet...”

“Does it hurt?” Adam asked, frowning.

Axel threw him a look. “What are you, an idiot?”

“Sorry.”

“S’all right. I got good news and bad news.”

Adam blinked. “What’s the good news?”

He grinned. “Good news is, I’m not dead...”

“What’s the bad news?”

Axel grimaced in pain. “Bad news is... I’m still alive.” He chuckled, groaned, then passed out.

Rain fell steadily around them.

Christmas carollers sang outside at the roadside. A big banner screamed MERRY CHRISTMAS to passing cars, beneath an impressive array of Christmas lights and tinsel. Adam Hunter and Axel Stone stood on the sidewalk near an outside bar, huddled against the chill. Axel stood braced on one crutch, his arm in a sling. Their breath plumed out in front of them.

“So,” Adam said.

Axel looked at him. “So.”

“There are worse things than a psych pension.”

“Probably,” Axel shrugged. “I guess we’ll never know.”

Adam nodded. “Maybe I can get a job on a remake of ‘Cobra’.” He sighed. “Guess I won’t be seeing you.”

“Guess not.” Axel took a deep breath. “The Department still stinks. Quitting the force was the best decision we ever made. You know that.”

Adam sighed. “I know.” There was a pause, then: “Axel.”

“Yeah.”

Adam licked his lips. “This... is a bad old world, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Axel said. “Sometimes it really is. You just hang in there.”

“Yeah,” Adam smiled, a genuine expression. “You too, friend.”

“Guess I’ll say goodbye,” Axel said.

“Sure. Come over for dinner sometime.”

“No, thanks.”

“Don’t blame you,” Adam said. “I’m thinking of having Jodie arrested for cruelty to bacon.” He gave Axel a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas, Axel.”

Axel nodded. “Merry Christmas.” He walked off down the street.

Adam watched him go, turned up his collar against the chill, then walked in the opposite direction.

The rain poured down over Wood Oak Cemetery. Axel Stone stood over a lone grave. There were dark hollows under his eyes, and the wind tugged at his hair. The tombstone read:

SHELLEY STONE

BORN: 1986

DIED: 2006

Axel reached beneath his overcoat and removed a bright green Christmas wreath, which he placed atop the grave. He kissed his fingertips, and pressed them to the moist earth. “Merry Christmas,” he said softly.

The rain continued to fall.

A hand knocked softly on the front door of Blaze Fielding's house. The door opened, and there stood Blaze herself, looking gorgeous. Adorable. She looked at the visitor and smiled. It was Axel Stone.

"Hi," Blaze said.

Axel smiled. "Hi." He handed something to her, and she took it. It was the bottle of pills he kept in his apartment. "I won't be needing these anymore," he said.

Blaze nodded. "Okay. That's good. You wanna come in? It's cold out here."

Axel looked at her, and thought it over. Shook his head. "No, that's okay. I just wanted to thank you, really, for taking care of Sammy... while Adam and I dealt with Shiva. Thankyou for everything, Blaze. I won't forget you. You have a merry Christmas now, missy."

She gazed at him, taking a deep breath. "Okay."

Axel turned to go. Blaze stopped him. She hesitated for a moment, then kissed him on the lips. When she pulled away, she said: "They said you were the best."

He blinked.

"They were right," she whispered, and winked at him.

He gave her a wide smile. "No one can touch me." And with that, he began to walk away, into the rain.

Carpenters were hard at work on the Hunter Residence, patching and repairing. The Christmas lights still shined defiantly. A car pulled up, and Axel got out.

Adam Hunter appeared at the front door and looked down at Axel as he approached.

Axel stopped. They stood there in the rain for a moment, looking each other in the eye. “Room for one more?” Axel asked.

Adam frowned. “Sucker, if you think I’m gonna eat the world’s lousiest Christmas turkey all by my lonesome, you’re nuts.”

Axel nodded, and smiled.

“Come on, partner,” Adam smiled, and they entered the house together.

About the Author

MATTHEW J. DRURY first began writing fiction in high school, but it was during his employment with the Royal Mail that he began to work seriously at the craft. He published his first mass-market novel in 2011, the sci-fi epic EDEN². Since 2006 he has been the administrator of the “Streets of Rage Online” website and fan community, and authored the fan-acclaimed “Saga” series, of which ‘Bare Knuckle: Ghost Precinct’ is a Reboot. He currently resides in Sittingbourne, Kent, in the south-east of England. His family includes his wife Marci, their two children Lois Ann and Jackson Shane, and three pet goldfish.

Turmoil in the Streets!

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