



The Devil's Tools

David B. Reid

For all inquiries regarding this novel, including literary agency and publishing,

Please contact **David B. Reid** at:

[contact@drdavidreid.com](mailto:contact@drdavidreid.com)

© 2008, David B. Reid. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the express written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations used in reviews.

This preview book of the novel, *The Cat's Curiosity*, provides only a small sample of the completed work. This book is currently available for publication. For more information or to see

some of David Reid's other work

please visit:

<http://www.drdavidreid.com>

If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

*William Shakespeare*

If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.

*Niccolo Machiavelli*

*This book is dedicated to the students and faculty of Virginia Tech who lost their lives so unexpectedly on a most tragic day when one man lost all faith in himself and humanity.*

Melissa, I thank you for helping me keep my eye on the ball. If it's a home run I have you to thank.

## Prologue

It was cramped quarters for Jake Freeman. The space was no larger than a telephone booth, and the air filling his lungs was dense and musty. He knelt before a door, executioner style. Seeking forgiveness, awaiting his penance. In his mind, he imagined the stainless steel barrel of a .38 Special pressed to the back of his head, trigger cocked, bullet milliseconds from cracking his skull and blowing his brain to bits. His heart pounded at a pace he thought could be enough to kill most men, while his throat tightened, refusing a forced swallow, choking his air supply.

Echoed whispers in the distance reminded him he was not alone, but the presence of others failed to ease his guilty mind. *You enter this world alone and leave it the same way, son;* his father reminded him whenever life became insufferable. The words offered no sense of comfort or security. Then or now.

He gently rocked from side to side, like an acrobat on stilts, hoping to ease the pain piercing his kneecaps. Looking to his left, he considered a hasty exit but it was too late. The privacy panel on the wall before him slid open, revealing a profiled silhouette of a man whose head bent forward as if he was perusing something in his lap. Jake knew what to do. He was familiar with the sacred ritual despite the lapsed time since his last visit to this dark closet where sinners purge the deepest of secrets gnawing at their conscience. Just like riding a bike, he thought. It all comes back.

He unclasped his hands, wiped his wet brow with a shirtsleeve, locked his fingers again and with a heavy sigh spoke words he hadn't uttered in over twenty years: "Bless me Father, for I have sinned . . ."

An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.  
*Mahatma Gandhi*

## Chapter 1 – The Call

*Saturday September 13, 2007 10:40 P.M.*

It has been said that revenge is a dish best served cold. For Detective Jake Freeman the spiral bound notebook resting in his lap was the appetizer preceding the cold meal he was about to be force-fed. The Baltimore County detective had a secret he planned to take to the grave. But the words scrawled in the notebook staring back at him changed that plan. He hesitated, knowing his next phone call could result in his own undoing, yet save the life of a friend. Two people were already dead and nothing could be done to change that. More will likely die soon enough, and failure on his part to take immediate action could cost more lives. Yet not making the call would allow him to live a life in freedom, but one full of lies, deceit, and guilt.

The cryptic handwritten notes of former inmate Zachary James Harrington discovered today at the Western Correctional Institution could not be ignored. He knew he had to act and his friend must be forewarned. Now.

Wiping his sweaty brow with a tissue, he glanced to the cell phone lying on the seat beside. Back to the notebook, he read the nine handwritten lines again, more out of anxiety than necessity. Two lines were very bothersome, as he knew they could change everything. He read them repeatedly for the past hour as he contemplated the words he'd say if he placed the call. He scribbled notes on blank sheets of paper torn from the back of Zachary Harrington's notebook, hoping they'd guide him through the awkward conversation. Finding the prepared scripts unacceptable, he balled them up and tossed them aside. They provided no sense of guidance or security. Six crumpled reminders of his helpless state of desperation.

He snagged his cell phone, flipped it open and pressed ten of the eleven-digit phone number before snapping the lid shut for the second time.

*I can't do this. Maybe this has nothin' to do with Richard. Maybe I'm just makin' things worse.* He heard father's overbearing, rumbling voice. The voice belonging to the man who survived two tours in South Korea and a bullet through his spinal cord, now echoed in his head: *Let sleeping dogs lay, son. What's done is done.*

He thought of his wife, his children, his career. He thought of death. He thought of the one friend he needed to call. Everything looked bleak. He couldn't destroy the notebook; it was too late for that. The secret, if there ever was one was out. There was no shredding it. No hiding it. No ignoring it.

An animal caught in a corner with no way out. That's what I am, he thought. Can't climb up, can't dig down, can't run away. *Trapped.*

Then without conscious planning or intent, an unidentifiable force from within moved him to pick up his phone and place the call. This time all eleven numbers were entered. He waited for the ring and heard a barely audible, *"Hello."*

"Richard, Richard, it's Jake. I'm really sorry to bother you now, but I had to call," he said.

## Chapter 2 – Sleep Interrupted

*Crozet, Virginia –Saturday September 13, 2007 10:45 P.M.*

For the first time in months, Dr. Richard Valesse enjoyed a peaceful night's sleep until the phone rang. Then it all came back to him like an uninvited grim reaper at a children's birthday party. Heart pounding in his chest in response to the adrenalin rush of his fight or flight instincts, Valesse rolled over and clumsily reached for the phone, knocking the alarm clock to the floor. A parched "hello" came out. Confused and disoriented, unable to shake sleep away, he expected to hear a heavy Indian dialect through the receiver.

*"Ello, Dr. Balese? Is dees Dr. Balese? Sir, dees is Dr. Mammhoud. I am berry sorry to bother you sir, but we need you to come to dee hospital. To Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville. Please."*

Thoughts of a patient finally being true to their repeated threats of suicide came to mind as the dense fog from the previous day's work slowly lifted. His mind raced through a number of his most at risk patients for the source of his REM sleep interruption and semiconscious panic.

"Yes this is Dr. Valesse. What seems to be the problem Doctor?"

"Vell sir," the Indian voice continued, "I am berry sorry to tell you over dee phone but it's your wife sir. She's, she's been . . . she's been in a berry bad accident I am berry sorry to tell you. But, vell vee need for you to come to dee hospital right away please, Dr. Balese."

Valesse caught only bits and pieces of what the hurried caller was saying. He heard "accident" and "sorry" but little else. The man's accent was heavy and difficult to comprehend, especially for a brain still trapped in an elevator on the bottom floor of the dream world.

"I'm sorry, but did you say something about my wife?" Valesse questioned hoping he heard him wrong. Awaiting a reply, he turned to see the other side of the bed. Empty. Sheets and covers undisturbed. *Cathy was going to be late studying at the library. She has a Chemistry test Wednesday. She said she'd be home about midnight. She told me she'd see me in the morning. "And Richard, don't forget, we're going to my mother's tomorrow for a cookout. We need to bring potato salad and something to drink. And by the way, I mailed the down-payment for the beach house."*

*NO! This can't be! Oh God no! This is NOT happening!*

"Sir, can you get someone to drive you to dee hospital?"

Stunned and unable to take his eyes off Cathy's side of the bed, Valesse began crying uncontrollably with the sudden realization that his wife would never lay next to him again. The king-size bed, always too spacious for him grew to monstrous proportions. Trying to disconnect from the world momentarily, he dropped the phone to the floor, cracking the alarm clock.

"Richard . . . Richard, it's Jake. I'm really sorry to bother you now, but I had to call," he heard the voice say through the receiver...

As the caller continued, Valesse realized the phone was still pressed to his ear. It hadn't fallen to the floor. It sounded like Jake Freeman. He hadn't heard from Jake for a couple of months and a call at this time of night certainly wasn't to discuss another Orioles' losing season.

"I know it's late Richard, and I'm sorry if I woke you up but –"

“What’s wrong, Jake? Is Hannah okay? Are the kids okay?” he questioned, relieved in a bizarre way, that the news he was about to hear could be no worse than learning his wife was just killed.

“Hannah’s fine Richard. Everybody’s fine. Listen, Richard, I need to talk to you about somethin’ real important. It . . . I’m sorry, but it just couldn’t wait until mornin’ cuz. . . Well, I don’t know what in the hell is happenin’ quite honestly, but I just knew I couldn’t wait too long before callin’ you.”

Valese braced himself for what was surely not good news. He pictured his friend rubbing a finger over his thick eyebrow, a nervous habit that bordered on compulsive hair pulling.

“It’s okay Jake, I wasn’t asleep yet anyway,” he lied hoping to settle his friend and foster more expeditious disclosure of his news. Sitting up, freeing his legs caught under the sheets, Valese realized the digital alarm clock fell to the floor just as it had the night of Dr. Mammhoud’s call five months ago. It displayed an upside-down 10:45.

Glancing around the room, he realized this was the first time he’d been awakened by the phone since the night he lost his wife. He was again impressed with how cognizant he was of all the “firsts” since her passing. First meal alone, first movie, first vacation, first birthday celebration, first everything. Life is truly defined by beginnings and ends, he thought.

“What’s going on Jake? Obviously it’s important or you wouldn’t be calling me at this time of night,” he urged.

“Uh, yeah, it’s important. Listen, Richard, do you remember a guy you treated a few years back maybe durin’ your internship. Some guy named Zachary Harrington?”

“Harrington? Not off the bat, but that was nine years ago, Jake. Why’d he whack somebody?” he questioned between yawns.

“Not exactly, but we think he’s responsible for stirrin’ up some shit around town and it’s pissin’ off the Governor. And you know Governor *Fill-Her-More*,” he said with a sarcastic bite. “He’s been up my ass like a doctor’s latex-covered digit pokin’ an uninvitin’ prostrate.”

“Nice visual, Jake. And it’s prostate by the way. So, what about Governor Filmore?” he asked.

“Prostrate, prostate who gives a shit. Now like I was sayin’, the Governor’s become a real pain in my ass. He’s up for re-election this fall and his numbers on crime aren’t lookin’ so hot. With this Harrington case gettin’ some press, the longer things go unresolved, the worse it’s gonna get for the old man. He wants this one shut down. And now.”

To say Jake had a strong disliking for Governor Filmore was a gross understatement. When Jake was a beat cop working the more heinous streets of Baltimore, Filmore was his captain, and even then he was as corrupt as an infected e-mail attachment. Filmore had his sights on the Governor’s mansion from the get-go and being the son of a state senator certainly didn’t impede his plans. Rumor had it that then Captain Filmore threatened the lives of a few female officers if they thwarted his sexual advances or breathed one word about his power hungry perversions to anyone in Internal Affairs. Not a single formal complaint was ever filed, but Jake always suspected the rumors to be true.

“But that’s not why I’m calling you. I got more important matters to deal with than our Governor. I called you because I think this guy Harrington might have unresolved issues with you.”

“Me? I don’t even remember the kid, what’d I do to him?”

“I’m not really sure, but it looks like he referred to you in a notebook we discovered this afternoon, at Western,” he said, referring to Western Correctional Institution, a state of the art



medium security facility in Cumberland, Maryland. "He was paroled last August after servin' five of ten for assault and battery with intent to maim and we think he's been on some vigilante mission. Somehow it might involve you. Perhaps it already did for all I know. Anyway, as best we can figure, we suspect he's been makin' contact with people in his past and settlin' scores with 'em."

"Okay, but how is it that I'm involved? And what do you mean by perhaps it already did?"

"I'll get to that in a minute, just hold on." His sudden irritation caught Valse off guard.

"Fine, I can play the good doctor and sit back and listen," he said propping pillows against the headboard, in preparation for a lengthy conversation.

"Good. Just keep your trap shut and listen up. Like I was tellin' you, this guy Harrington is out on parole and seems to be breakin' bad wherever he goes. There's been a couple uh break-ins, vandalism, maybe some stalkin' and verbal intimidation. It all looked unrelated at first, but we recently discovered a common denominator of sorts."

"Mr. Harrington, I presume?"

"You presume correctly. We put some uh the puzzle pieces together, came up with this Harrington character and started snoopin' into his past like a mother lookin' for a doobie in her kid's underwear drawer. Turns out most uh the vics knew this guy either in grade school or high school. I caught up with his P.O. Friday afternoon. Guy named Jesse Spradlin, and he tells me Harrington's been a model citizen since they cut him loose. Got a job at a fillin' station and livin' with his grandmother out of some shit-hole trailer park just east uh the city. Spradlin's only meetin' with him on an every other week basis now. Doesn't see the need to be up his ass all the time since he's been such a good citizen. Said he may even drop down to monthly meetins if he continues to keep his nose clean. You believe that shit? Some parole system we got, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess," Valse replied still half-asleep and unconcerned about the status of Maryland's penal system. "What'd he do to get locked up in the first place?"

"I already told you that. Assault and battery. I don't have any specifics on it yet, but it must've been pretty bad for him to get charged as an adult at seventeen."

"True."

"Personally, I think the P.O.'s assessment of this guy's all wrong and he's makin' a big mistake. I plan to look him up myself first thing Monday mornin'."

Plucking dry residue out of the corner of his eye, Valse said, "So why the trip out to Cumberland? You said he'd been out of Western for six months. Did you actually expect to find something out there?"

"It was a spur uh the moment kinda thing. One of our other detectives had some business up there with an inmate he hoped would turn state's evidence on some big drug cartel out of New York. Knowin' Harrington was out there for five years I tagged along hopin' to get a few leads on the case. At first I came up with nothin'. The guy's record out there was squeaky clean. No fights, no disciplinary actions, no red flags. Nothin'. Even worked as the Warden's assistant clerk for a while. Three C.O.'s I interviewed all said good things about him; other than he was a bit odd and had this weird eye that makes him look coo-coo you know?"

Valse imagined Jake motioning circles with his finger around his ear demonstrating the universal sign language for crazy, whacked, psycho, or in this case, coo-coo.

"Indeed I do, Jake. Just yesterday I diagnosed my third case of coo-coo this month."

"Alright, fuck you smart ass. You know what I mean. He's odd lookin' that's all I'm sayin'."

"I got it. Sorry. I'm just a little punchy at the moment."

"So anyway, as I was sayin' we get ready to leave Western and one of the deputy wardens catches me at the gate and tells me that Harrington left this notebook that no one could make any sense of. The warden's office clerk found it there a few months ago. At first I thought, who gives a shit about some freakin' notebook, then it hits me. I asked him what did he mean he couldn't make no sense out of it. It was a fuckin' notebook for Christ's sake. What's not to make sense of? I asked him if they still had it and he answered in the affirmative; said they kept it right where Harrington left it: on top of the filin' cabinet in the clerk's office. So I had him to go get it. While I was waitin' for him to get back, I went in to take a leak and when I came out Detective Jaworski, the guy I tagged along with, was lookin' through it then handed it over to me. Sure enough as I thumbed through it I could see how it was kinda puzzlin' for 'em. I still can't make much out of it. It looked like an inventory of office supplies, but there was a bunch of check marks goin' down some of the pages that didn't make no sense, but obviously meant something to him. And the last section had somethin' written in it that was different from the rest of it. That's what kinda made me and Jaworski wonder just what the hell this book was all about. That's why I'm callin' you now, Richard."

"And exactly why's that Jake? He have my name in there on some sort of hit list?" Valese asked, concern growing in his voice.

"Well, not exactly. It's like a list of things to do. Stuff like, yard work, prune trees and some other shit which at this point don't mean a damn thing to us. And it also -"

Breaking his promise not to interrupt, Valese grew impatient. "So the boy has plans Jake, good for him. But once again what the hell does this have to do with me?"

"It also said, 'follow-up with Dr. V.'"

Valese hesitated then asked, "And you think he's referring to me?"

"Maybe," he said with slight conviction.

"Come on Jake, don't you think there are other Dr. V's out there besides me? I think you're reaching on this one. I mean I appreciate the heads up and all, but I really don't think this has anything to do with me. Besides, I wasn't a doctor when I was at Springdale. I was still an intern. Are you sure there isn't something else on your mind you want to talk about?"

"No, Doc there's nothin' else on my mind. And stop playin' shrink with me. I'm sure this guy knew you were *gonna* be a doctor. But that's besides the point."

"Okay, so is that it? Is this why you woke me up tonight? Because some convict had follow-up with Dr. V. written in his notebook?"

Jake paused. The pressure in the can of worms he was about to open was building. His life depended upon the implications of the one line in the notebook he had yet to share with his friend. It was the one line, apparently written by Zachary Harrington that could ultimately prohibit Jake from taking his secret to the grave. He closed his eyes, tightened his grip on the phone and said, "No Richard that's not all. Right below Dr. V it said 'pretty pony.'"

Thinking he heard him wrong, Valese said, "I'm sorry Jake, what was that? What did you just say?"

He cleared the lump in his throat. "It fuckin' said *pretty pony*, Richard."

Despite the 250-mile distance, Valese could almost feel the spittle from Jake's mouth spray his face. Silence. Neither man spoke a word. Through the handset, Valese heard his friend breath as he found himself staring intently at the bedroom floor. Jake awaited a reply, knowing they were finally on the same page.

*Pretty pony.*

### Chapter 3 – Field Experiments

*Sebastian, Florida – Summer, 1988*

Amie Harrington's childhood dreams of a career in nursing faded years ago like a line drawing on a shaken etch-a-sketch. Her closest encounter with nursing school was mastering hospital corners on the beds at the Econo Lodge on Eastern Boulevard. Also erased from her future: a complacent husband who would drain no more than a six-pack of cheap beer each night, and a rented single-wide on a Kentucky bluegrass lot highlighted with brilliant petunias and plastic deer pretending to graze in the front yard.

Looking nothing like her mother, a gaunt, bone-protruding ectomorph, Amie secretly wondered if she was adopted. Fighting a weight problem was a lifelong battle for Amie Harrington, and the high-carb diet was obviously winning as evidenced by her rounded physique and second chin, minus the dimple like the one above it. Skin-molding tops and painted-on jeans added insult to injury, repulsing some would-be suitors while enticing creepy perverts who usually happened to be older unhappily married men who read her non-verbal attire as "willing and able."

Her crapshoot life was riddled with bad breaks that laid the foundation for a pessimistic demeanor and coping skills that relied upon avoidance and projection of blame onto others for her problems. Her semen-donating father, a perpetrator-turned-victim of a road rage incident after flipping off an impatient tailgater, left the land of the living moments after his car was run off the road, down an embankment and into an unyielding telephone pole. Amie was three at the time.

On her seventh birthday, an F3 tornado touched down and blasted through the Breezy Palms Mobile Home and Trailer Park, in Sebastian, Florida, permanently relocating and subsequently demolishing her mother's 1964 Parka doublewide while scattering her toys and treasured belongings across a five-mile radius. Her unharmed bicycle—her lone birthday gift that summer—was discovered in a wooded lot five miles away. It became the prized possession of eight-year-old Jennifer Stevens. *Finder's keepers*. Her first sexual encounter occurred two-weeks later, thanks to the incestuous guidance of her Uncle Willy who was kind enough to put she and her mother up until they found other living quarters. Pregnant at 15, quitting school two months after learning of her pending parenthood, her fate was sealed. Abortion was never an option, at least not for June Harrington. After all, the rusted back end of her '74 Buick Skylark was held in place by wrinkled bumper stickers that told others to Choose Life, Find Christ, and never forget that Jesus Died For Our Sins.

"You're gonna have this baby," June Harrington demanded. "No ifs, ands, or buts about it young lady."

To this day, Amie Harrington vividly recalls her mother's tirade when she finally fessed up about her pregnancy: "Your sins shall not fall upon this child. If it wasn't God's will, you wouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place. Killing this baby is wrong. And two wrongs

don't make a right Amie Louise Harrington, so the first thing we're gonna do is get you to Preacher Parsons so you can get good with God again."

The Preacher didn't help Amie or anyone else for that matter get good with God. Not knowing what else to do, a frightened Amie Harrington played along with what she thought looked more like an abbreviated exorcism than a cleansing ritual, convincing her mother and the preacher that her brain was sufficiently washed and God was once again with her.

Zachary "Zee" James Harrington born seven months later, left the secure, sterile hospital after 72 of the safest hours of his life, and was taken to a first floor two-bedroom apartment where nearby home owners were suddenly recognizing rapidly depreciating property values.

This was Zee's home for the first four years of his life. His longest stay in one place by far, not including time served at the big house. A wandering left eyeball, or as his pediatrician properly called it strabismus, was an unfortunate birth defect, that made its appearance just before his first birthday. The behind the times pediatrician however, misinformed Amie that Zachary's condition was untreatable, and being ignorant to parenthood in general, she failed to seek a second opinion. He never received the surgery that would have not only corrected his eye, but saved him from years of playground taunting and teasing.

Unfortunately, his grandmother's counsel only made matters worse for those who received it. June Harrington, a twice born-again Christian (couldn't get it right the first time), told her daughter Zee's deviant eye was "the sign of the devil" and a curse cast upon him because of her promiscuous sexual escapades. Greater-than-though Grandma, of course, had no answers for the "cure" to Satan's handiwork other than to ensure little Zachy "lives the way of Christ and walks with the Lord."

Amie wasn't convinced the Jesus lifestyle, including frequent tuning in of the Christian Broadcast Network, did much to create a healthy psyche for her delusional mother, so she kept her goofy-eyed boy away from the rigid fundamentalist and left well enough alone. It took her another three years before she was able to afford an apartment of her own, and with a minimum wage job at the local Dollar Store, and the help of the good tax-paying citizens of Florida, she finally freed herself from the self-righteous grips of her mother.

She and five-year-old Zachary would do just fine, *thank you very much*, she informed her mother just before the door slammed in her face reinforcing a message to never call upon June Harrington for a place to live. And she didn't.

#

Eventually, torturing small animals became as natural to Zee Harrington as climbing trees and riding bikes was for other children. Zee never harmed a hair on any of his furry friends, preferring instead to inflict damage upon lesser evolved creatures.

Burning ants with a magnifying glass on a hot summer day was an early developmental pastime for Zee, and although initially quite entertaining, grew boring over time, lacking the destructive stimulation he craved. Soon enough, larger and more challenging unwilling subjects replaced the ant colonies.

One afternoon, as he wandered aimlessly around the courtyard of the Montebello Apartment complex, he came up with a splendid idea as a cricket came hopping by. Like most humans, the little night-noise maker lacked prospective insight into its destiny. Otherwise, it would have steered clear of the junior executioner trouncing through its territory. For Zee, this critter would be far more enjoyable to burn alive than a cluster of scrambling ants. But keeping it immobile through the torment proved to be an initial though not unsolvable challenge for the young sadist.

After finding a small piece of cardboard to serve as a level playing surface, and a small paper clip to secure the critter, it was only a matter of minutes before he was in business.

Walking back to his cardboard operating table, cricket in hand, he took quick notice of his mother sitting on a park bench, quietly immersed in a bawdy romance novel, selected less for its content than the cover depicting a lonely damsel, much like herself, yearning for Evan, the Fabio-looking character standing off in the distance, shirt open to his navel revealing chiseled pecs feathered with flowing blond hair. In June's primitive mind, little Zee's afternoon interactions with nature were a reflection of what a good mother she was since her child was outside exploring nature instead of wasting away in front of the boob tube or some mind warping video game. Screw Barney and all the freaky Muppet Monsters on Sesame Street. Her Zee was gonna be a better learner than any of those kids being baby-sat by cable TV. (Never underestimate a mother's intuition).

It was a bright sunny day in Sebastian, Florida. Just perfect for a cricket cookout, he thought. Spearheading the insect through its exoskeleton abdomen went much smoother than he expected. His pre-surgical preparations were already paying off. As the cricket writhed for freedom, Zee's heart pounded with excitement. Watching his struggling victim, a warm and soothing pins and needles sensation grew from the top of his scalp, slowly spread over his face like a thin veil, then drained down both arms into his fingertips and ever so gradually culminated into a blissful crescendo in his private parts. It was a sensation like none he experienced before, and one he eagerly anticipated and enjoyed every time he inflicted pain upon another living creature.

Amie's nose remained in her book, eyes darting back and forth and down the page, thoroughly consumed with Evan's longing desires for an awaiting Jasmine standing alone on her beach front deck overlooking the rolling white-caps of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, a little cricket nervously awaited its destiny in the untrained hands of a five-year-old. Amie continued with her Harlequin novel pausing now and again to take an occasional drag on her cigarette and take a peek at Zee . . . *Evan approached from behind, pulled her against him, without uttering a word. She sensed his desires, which she welcomed like a parched lawn did a late afternoon rain shower. Not wanting him to believe her to be an easy acquisition, she resisted slightly* ( . . . "There, there little guy, this won't hurt a bit," Zee said aloud. "Just sit still, everything will be okay, I promise."). *He gently brushed his chin against the nape of her neck sending yearning chills down her body, making it all the more difficult for her to resist his advances* ( . . . magnifying glass in hand, perfectly angled as one spry leg stretched out to greet it as if knowing there was nothing to do but move matters forward). *Jasmine felt his manhood growing against her, now sending clear messages of his intentions as he pressed firmly against the small of her back* ( . . . the cricket writhed as warm sensations filled Zee's groin). *Evan's strong hands gently massaged her shoulders, then inched lower, caressing the outsides of her bare arms as his fingers softly brushed the sides her breasts and then gradually settled on her hips. Knowing where this would end, there were no intentions of rejection on Jasmine's part. His hands continued down her soft pink dress, which clung to her every curve revealing her own libidinal intentions. She arched her back in response to his gentle touch, transmitting her own unspoken message. He sensed no hint of panties, stimulating him further, now pulling her closer against his firm erection* ( . . . "no, no, not yet, hang in there, it's almost over," Zee cried out as the creature stiffened). *Dress uplifted, last obstacle now removed, Evan entered her from behind, slow and easy at first; she leaned forward grasping the railing of the deck, hoping no one could hear her sighs of passion that accompanied his rhythmic thrusts. It was over within minutes,*

*leaving her satisfied and relieved. With his muscular forearms wrapped around her, offering protection and security, his chin resting upon her shoulder, he softly kissed her cheek ( . . . the warming sensation faded from Zee's genitals as he realized it was over. Cricket now still and lifeless. He blew on it to be certain it was dead, seeing if it would move of its accord. The deed was done).*

By the time he fried off four legs and toasted its little brainless head, Amie called him to go in for a mid-afternoon nap, more for her sake than his. She took one last drag, flicked the ash and snuffed the stub on the park bench leaving a dime-sized smudge; evidence for future benchwarmers that another inconsiderate smoker had been there. Without a care in the world, Zee stood when called, pocketed his magnifying glass and made a conscious effort to remember to acquire an ample supply of paperclips the next time he ventured outside with his mother.

## Chapter 4 – Pretty Ponies and Mounted Deer Heads

Crozet, Virginia –Saturday September 13, 2007 10:55 P.M.

The vanity tags on Cathy Valesé's car read "PRTYPNY".

Hearing Jake Freeman mention "pretty pony" this evening was another first since his wife's death. They also happened to be the first words stammering out of Cathy Valesé's mouth after catching her breath when he surprised her on her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday with a cherry red 2002 Mustang convertible.

"Oh my God . . . Richard. It's beautiful. What a *pretty pony!*" she declared unable to restrain her excitement. She didn't know if she should hug her husband first or hop into the driver's seat. She chose the hug, but was too thrilled about her new toy to hang onto him for too long.

She put over 11,000 miles on that car, and religiously washed and waxed it by hand every-other weekend attempting to maintain that glaring, fresh off the lot look that was destined to fade or suffer a scratch before too long. But that car, amazingly enough, never had so much as a nick, ding, or blemish until the morning it was totaled in the bizarre accident that took her life on Barracks Road.

*Bad tire*, the insurance adjuster told Valesé. *Blame Blackwell Tire Company. Like an aneurysm waiting to burst in a brain, it was gonna happen someday*, he said. *Don't see this sorta thing with the Blackhawk FY5. Not like them SUV's we seen a while back. Sure hope this isn't another one of them Ford-Blackwell problems*, he told him.

As if proofreading his own obituary, Valesé scrutinized every word of the adjuster's report. Called his attorney before finishing the last sentence of an ass-covering, blame someone else, five-page diatribe. Two days after the funeral he initiated a lawsuit against Blackwell at his attorney's insistence. Pointing fingers, a primitive response to interpersonal conflict, is readily mastered at a young age, (observe any argument escalating on a playground). Even for adults it provides an opportunity to spew anger at someone else for our own bad choices and misfortunes. It helps on an emotional level if the target can be narrowed to one specific individual, but from a financial perspective, casting blame upon a Fortune 500 company is always preferred.

After giving his attorney the green light, Valesé sat in his noiseless living room, staring at a blank television screen, imagining some dirtball named Harold inspecting the tires at the Blackwell plant in Boonetown, Tennessee. There he was, habitually pulling his pants over his ass since his bulging gut forbid secure placement of his navy blue denims around his hips. His donned ball cap, worn backward leaving that half-moon cut-out over his forehead, read "Support Your Local Hookers". The words were flanked by images of decorative fishing lures and hooks. His lower lip distended from fresh dip looked as if it had been invaded by an ant colony orchestrating the construction of a new hill. The empty coke bottle in his hand served as a convenient spittoon. Valesé's mind then pictured a bird's eye view of tires rolling down the assembly line resembling a gigantic Krispy Kreme store specializing in chocolate donuts. Suddenly he pictured the damaged tire slipping past Harold's inattentive eyes as he tells Jasper

Hern about the eight-pointer he bagged yesterday morning. Jasper points to the deformed tire alerting Harold to the potential problem. *Fuck that* Harold retorts, failing to contemplate that his lazy ass will cause the death of a 35-year-old pre-med student. His nowhere near nearsighted eyes return to the conveyor belt, tires still rolling by, as he imagines the head of his freshly killed trophy mounted and proudly displayed above his fireplace staring back at him with dead, empty eyes. Eyes much like those Valse imagined were affixed in Harold's own sockets.

The lawsuit would take months, if not years to settle, and he didn't need reminding that all the money in the world wouldn't bring his wife back. But focused efforts on research about the damn Blackhawk FY50 would help sublimate his anger and rage. It would definitely be at the top of his list of recommendations for any patient caught in similar circumstances, so he willingly swallowed a dose of his own medicine. No small task for most mental health healers who advise their psychotropically medicated patients to limit, if not abstain from alcohol consumption, yet wash away their own over-analytic day with a little Xanax nightcap and a Grey Goose chaser.

Jake faked a cough on the other end of the phone as a subtle reminder that he was waiting for Valse's input. The digital clock on the top of the chest-of-drawers next to the walk-in closet read 10:55. The floral comforter that his wife insisted didn't look gay failed to live up to its name and was now bunched at the foot of his bed. Not being one to sit still during intense phone conversations, Valse took Jake's new cell phone number and told him he'd call him back on the cordless. He placed the phone back on the cradle, picked up the alarm clock and returned it to the night stand. After donning a pair of inside-out gray Adidas running shorts, he stumbled down the hallway, flipped the light switch in the kitchen, snagged the cordless phone and entered Jake's number.

No answer. He checked the number a second time then punched the eleven-digit sequence. Eight rings. No answer. No voicemail. The failed connection irritated Valse much like the times his patients paged him during a not so critical crisis only to have his immediate call back met with a busy signal or a "She ain't here right now" response. Valse knew this wasn't typical Jake.

He dropped the phone on the kitchen table, blanketed with junk mail acquired over the past two months. A few unopened packages, unread June and July issues of *Runner's World*, brochures begging him to refinance his recently refinanced mortgage, and some professional journals telling any would-be snooper that the doctor living here was a psychologist who works with cops, covered the table top where he shared most breakfasts and coffee talks with his wife. Most of this should-be discarded mail was addressed to Cathy making it all the more difficult to just toss in the trash can like the trash it really was.

Knowing sleep would elude him for the remainder of the morning, he reached for the coffee pot, half-full from day old java, poured all of it into a plastic 7-Eleven cup, leaving enough room for French vanilla creamer, two teaspoons of sugar and a handful of ice cubes. He stirred the contents, sat at the kitchen table and considered opening the packages.

Willing the phone to ring, his efforts fell on deaf airwave. More silence. Growing more impatient by the minute, he hit redial on the phone, producing more rings, but no answer. He considered turning on the television in the adjacent family room, but was in no mood to watch edited movies on TBN or infomercials about herbal potions guaranteed to make a man stay harder longer. Benny Hinn might provide some mild entertainment with his empty promises of



salvation to desperate souls unable to settle into a peaceful night's slumber. When you've seen one miraculous hand-healing stunt you've seen them all.

He took a swig of iced-coffee, a bit too sweet for his palate but it started to clear the cobwebs. As he waited, passing time rather inefficiently, his bladder and bowels set off alarms that his creamed caffeine concoction was taking its toll on his body. Immediate relief was in order.

Knowing his luck these days was nothing but bad luck, he took the phone with him. Just as he got everything in order to allow nature to take its course, the phone rang.

## Chapter 5 – The Writing Is On the Wall

*Baltimore, Maryland – October 1993*

Zee and his mother moved to Baltimore County the summer before he entered the fifth grade. This was his seventh school in six years; so making friends was an un-mastered skill for Zee Harrington. Moving from town to town seemed to be Amie Harrington's solution to getting away from alcoholic, women-hating men who in her diluted mind initially presented as good prospects. *I promise Zee, this one won't be anything like the others cuz he has a good job, and a lives in a real nice place and treats me real good*, she would tell him.

Zee never knew his father. As a matter of fact, his mother never knew his father; other than that he was willing to pay \$60 for a backseat blowjob and a slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am fuck. Indeed, the writing was on the wall for Zachary James Harrington. And it wasn't pretty.

Like many antisocial children, Zachary Harrington didn't go by the name bestowed upon him at birth. When nicknames become adopted identities, whether christened by others or personally selected, they are usually preceded by an interesting history and most don't mind telling the tale of their origination. Zachary James Harrington would tell interested listeners that "Zee" was self-anointed because he thought it was cool. What he refused to discuss, however, was the nickname bestowed upon him by his classmates, which while clever, was not at all favored by Zee. Unfortunately for him, it was theirs—not his—that stuck. After being discovered behind the school dumpster by fellow sixth graders Kevin Smith and Jamie Hunter, slicing and dicing an innocent frog with a dull pocketknife, he was forever dubbed "Craze" Harrington.

Rheana Jeffers, true to histrionic form, embellished the incident that day by adding that she saw Zee chomping on the poor critter's severed leg like it was a drumstick disconnected from a Thanksgiving turkey. His backyard surgical stint, intended to relieve pent up tension and suppressed anger, backfired in a major way, paradoxically exacerbating a mental illness that predestined him to a life confined within the walls of a loony bin or the state pen.

Someone must have notified Mr. Smothers and perhaps even debriefed the bloated principal about the frog dissection. He was standing outside his office waiting for Zee like an executioner eagerly anticipating an afternoon beheading. This would be Zee's 12th visit to the principal's office in less than eight weeks. It would likely result in his fifth suspension of the year. The first three suspensions, all served in school, were for fighting, pulling the fire alarm, and affixing saran wrap to one of the girls' toilet seats. He regretted that he didn't orchestrate this last prank in a way that allowed for personal peeping of the embarrassing event. Witnessing Julia Gershing slip and fall in her own puddle of piss the day after she called him a "one-eyed purple penis-eater" would have been worth every in-school-suspension or other sadistic punishment Principal Smothers deemed fitting of the misdemeanor.

Leaning against the doorway to his office, hands folded over an extended gut that made him look like he was eight months into an uncomfortable pregnancy, Mr. Smothers sighed as Zee

walked past the receptionist's desk. Predictably, he stated the obvious, but not before a habitual grunt that sounded like he was straining to move his bowels.

"*Hmmph*. So Mr. Harrington, I see you've gotten yourself into a little trouble again, heh?"

While not his first choice of responses, Zee maintained composure and fabricated a sense of respect, most likely because his teacher, Mrs. Cole who escorted him on the long walk to Smothers' office, was still standing next to him with a compassionate arm draped around his shoulder.

"Yes sir," he managed to squeak out. "But I can explain everything. It's not the way it looks."

"Never is boy. And I just can't wait to hear all the gory details. *Hmmph*. Now get on in there and sit down," he demanded, pointing a tubby finger at a snot-green chair in his office. As Zee walked by, trying not to bump the principal's distended gut, Smothers nodded, then smiled at Mrs. Cole and mouthed a "thank you" as he politely excused her.

Mr. Smothers' office lacked adequate ventilation. A potpourri of sour body odor, flatulence and mildew hung in the air. An executive desk sat in the far corner of the dreary room, reminiscent of a spider perched on the outskirts of a freshly weaved web. Planting himself on the hot-seat, Zee noticed for the first time the balding upholstery on the arms of the chair: physical evidence left behind by nervous pupils awaiting their punishment. To his right was a window that overlooked the front parking lot, now crowded with mid-sized vehicles, family vans, and a few SUV's owned most likely by teachers whose spouses earned more than their measly \$28,000 state-commissioned salary.

Mr. Smothers closed the office door, waddled around his desk with an air of confidence that comes only from demoralizing elementary school children, and poured himself into his rickety wooden chair leaving no space between his massive thighs and the arms of the chair now supporting his girth. He then spent the first five minutes lecturing Zee about juvenile delinquency while relishing the opportunity to play soothsayer for the boy.

"So maybe a trip to the local pen to see your future's what in order here? Maybe a little overnight stay there huh? What'd you think?"

Hearing very little of what the principal said, Zee replied, "What'd you say? Stay where?"

"*Hmmph*. What the hell's wrong with you boy? Your ears plugged? I said the pen. And not one you write with either. I'm talking about the penitentiary. You know prison, the Big House. *Hmmph*. Your future home most likely," he said breathlessly.

Desperate to make his case, Zee spoke up, his fingers now digging into the chair's padding, "I wasn't hurting that frog on purpose, it was already hurt. Its leg was smashed and I was trying to help it. I—"

Like most adults not giving a rat's ass about what any conduct disordered kid had to say, Smothers abruptly cut him off. "Oh don't give me any of that horseshit boy. I know damn well what you were doing. You were torturing that poor animal so you could get your rocks off. *Hmmph*. You're a sick little jerk-off who probably likes to kill helpless animals, watch things burn, and piss in public aren't you?"

Zee adamantly denied each of the accusations all the while knowing the first was accurate and secretly wondering if the last two might someday be true. He never really burned anything before, at least not for fun, and never had an inclination to urinate in public.

“Your days are numbered at my school, boy. Matter of fact, I think your time at my school is done,” he declared. Mr. Smothers then pressed a button on his intercom phone and spoke into the device. “*Mmmm*. Mrs. Mackey, could you please get Ms. Harrington down here pronto. She needs to pick up her son one last time.”

“Yes sir, right away,” the voice responded.

“But –” Zee started then was swiftly silenced.

“Don’t but me boy. *Hmmph*. And wipe that smirk off your face before I do it for you. Cutting up frogs, rigging toilet seats. You’re a general nuisance, Mr. Harrington.” Then, with the empathy of lobotomized mental patient, blurted out, “I bet you freak people out with that eye of yours don’t you. Can’t tell what the hell you’re looking at. That’s just got to weird people out.”

Zee was a stocky youngster who stood about one head size below most of his classmates. Like his deviant eye, his left ear jutted out from his head like it had been tugged one too many times. The eye-ear combo gave the impression that the left side of his head was being pulled by some imperceptible magnet. Smothers continued to berate him as he sat there in the chair, rubbing the armrests, silently staring into his lap. He felt nothing. Thoughts raced through his head, yet he remained disconnected from all emotions.

Smothers leaned in as Zee glanced up and watched him take a swig of coffee. On the front of the mug was a silly cartoon character with a caption beneath that read: *Bowlers Do It In Alleys*. Zee suppressed a laugh, thinking bowling really was a fat person’s sport.

“Tell me something boy,” he continued, plopping the mug on the desk. “Have you always been a little troublemaker or am I just honored to have you around here trying to *fuck* up my school? Cuz I got news for you boy, you will not *fuck* with me, or my school. *Hmmph*. One way or another I will make that crystal clear to you.”

Zee knew not to respond. The cursing caught him by surprise but knew it was nothing he could do anything about.

“You gonna answer my question or just sit their like a little, cockeyed, retarded mute.

No answer. More lap stares.

“Okay then, don’t say anything. *Hmmph*. Plead the fifth. That will always be in your best interest by the way. And when your mother gets here, clean out your locker and leave your books with my secretary. *Hmmph*. First thing Monday you’re to report to Mr. Sandridge at Choices. And let’s just hope you seriously consider the lessons imparted from today’s little lecture. In some ways though, *hmmph* I kind of hope you’re just another dumb-ass who lets it all go in one ear and out the other like all the other wastes of space screwballs at Choices.”

Choices was an alternative school which had a very low student-teacher ratio, regimented structure, point system for earning privileges, and behavioral expectations which when not met were dealt with swiftly and severely. Zee didn’t know it at the time, but his ability to thrive at Choices was predictive of how he would function at Western Correctional Institution years later. Within two months, Zee made adequate progress at Choices, and Mr. Sandridge, a firm believer in mainstream education, sent the boy back to FSK elementary where he resumed weekly meetings with the school counselor and after-school tutoring. Smothers was correct, Zee Harrington fit in just fine at Choices. His problems at FSK elementary however had only just begun.

## Chapter 6 – Round Up

“Your timing is impeccable,” Valse answered, slight echo giving away his location.

“Evenin’ dump eh?” he said.

“You are without question an ace detective, Detective. But knowing you’ve seen and heard worse, and not being particularly proud at this moment in my life, I’m not hanging up this time. But more importantly, where the hell have you been?”

“Let’s just say I was takin’ care of bidness myself while catchin’ up on yesterday’s news.” While no different than most men guilty of reading on the throne, Valse concurred with women’s general perspective that it was an odd behavioral combination. Perhaps it was adaptive and serves as the only time a man, especially when sharing living space with a woman, will ever be assured his privacy. Or maybe it simply boils down to the fact that men are pigs who can readily sit in a stuffy room stewing in the rancor of their own waste while reading *Sports Illustrated* or the latest installment of *Playboy*.

“For thirty minutes?”

“Yeah for thirty minutes, what about it?” Jake retorted.

“I don’t get you Jake; you call me at 10:30, wake me up, tell me you think some psycho might be coming after me, maybe even killed my wife, then you disappear for thirty minutes and leave me hanging. And now you tell me you were reading yesterday’s news while taking a dump? What the hell gives, Jake?”

Jake’s tone softened. “You said you were awake. But you’re right, Richard. I’m sorry I woke you up. After I called and knew you were okay, I wasn’t too worried no more. I knew the info I had wasn’t real solid, and I was really just callin’ to make sure you were okay. I should’ve taken care of my bowel and bladder before callin’ but I got a little impatient that’s all. I just lost track uh time.”

Valse sighed. Not wanting to waste time arguing over simple matters, he let it go.

“Okay fine. So now that we’ve relieved ourselves, tell me what in the hell is going on.” He left the bathroom and paced without plan or purpose other than to remain in constant motion and allow Jake Freeman the opportunity to bring him up to speed with the Zachary Harrington case.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I know, but keep in mind this case was just dumped on my desk about a week ago. No one is dead yet as far as we know, but like I told you, there’s the pretty pony note and some harassment and destruction of property that’s been happenin’ over the last nine months or so. At first it all appeared to be random crap, then Detective Sprouse who was workin’ one of the cases realized most uh the vics had some connection with each other. They either went to the same schools or lived in the Middle River area. Figurin’ the perp might be a local, he cross-referenced students’ names from the high school yearbooks with the criminal records database. Low and behold Mr. Harrington’s name appeared. Actually, he was one of six. Sprouse inherited the case, quickly ruled out four of the six and then locked onto Harrington.”

“So what’s his story?”

“No one’s talked to him yet. He’s been difficult to hunt down and like I told you, I’m hopin’ to catch up with him Monday mornin’.”

“All right.”

“Local elementary schools were of no help since they hid behind some privacy bullshit and wouldn’t give Sprouse dick, but the yearbooks turned out to be all he needed. Timing on these incidents is right for Harrington too. They started sometime in October of last year and he was released from Western on August 16<sup>th</sup>. And like I was sayin’ after this one got dumped on me, I went up to Western. When I got that notebook and read the list, I realized we had ourselves a case here.”

“So what exactly has he done?”

Jake cleared his throat. “Well, first event best as we can figure was reported sometime around Halloween last year. A twenty-two-year-old woman, Rheana somethin’. I forget her last name. Anyway, she calls the Baltimore P.D. one afternoon, frantic, scared shitless. Said somebody’s been stalkin’ her for the past two days. First day, she’s walkin’ out of her office at 5 P.M. at State Farm in Towson and finds a cassette layin’ on the driver’s seat. She said she left her window cracked, so somebody just slipped the cassette on in and dropped it on the seat. First thing she noticed were the words ‘Play Me’. That’s all it said. Nothin’ else. Just ‘Play Me’. Her initial thought was that her boyfriend had finally gotten the picture in his thick little head that she was needin’ more romance in her life. You know maybe a few sappy love songs to warm her heart, get her all hot and bothered and let him work his way into her panties,” he said laughing at his own juvenile humor. “Ah such is young love, huh Richard?”

Valese, unamused, hurried him. “Come on Jake get on with it.”

“Okay, okay, sorry. So anyway, she puts the cassette into her player and while she’s drivin’ home, instead of juicy Barry White tunes, she hears this high-pitched helium voice, you know like when kids suck on birthday balloons and start talkin’ like the Chipmunks? The sound quality’s kinda poor, like it had been taped over a few times. But you can still understand the voice okay. Anyway, this guy reminds her that she forgot her tennis shoes and that he was sorry she couldn’t go for a walk at lunch that day with Sally. He tells her he thinks she may have left her shoes in the kitchen next to the trashcan. Then he goes on to tell her that she needs to call Dillon who’s this 12-year-old kid down the street who mows her lawn. He says her lawn is in desperate need of a haircut. By this time, she’s ballin’ her eyes out and shakin’ like a puppy that’s about to get a whippin’ for pissin’ all over the new carpet. She wasn’t one mile from her office when she decides to turn around and go back to work. So she gets back to her office, and get this . . . she plays the tape for everybody there, and as soon as her boss hears this whacko expressin’ his sympathy about the shoes, he tells her to call the cops. Nice guy, huh? Wouldn’t even make the call himself. Quite honestly, that made me suspicious of him at first, but he’s not our guy.”

Valese heard Jake take what sounded like the last gulp of a drink before continuing. “Well, after listenin’ a little more, it becomes quite obvious that this guy’s been watchin’ her for some time, maybe even snoopin’ in her home. He hasn’t made direct contact with her as far as we know, but he keeps sendin’ these cassettes to her. Sometimes they last only a couple uh minutes and sometimes they go on for over a half-hour. Not once has he threatened her. We got some uniforms posted around her house and near State Farm but no one’s spotted anybody even remotely suspicious. I got all the tapes here. You’ve just gotta hear ‘em.”

“Yeah, I’d like to listen to them,” Valese said, forgetting for a moment that his friend called to give him some kind of forewarning. “So what’s her connection with Harrington?”

“Francis Scott Key Elementary. They went to different high schools but once Harrington’s name came up in connection with three vics who were connected to him through Stemmer’s Run High, Sprouse went back and asked this Rheana lady if she ever went to elementary or middle school with a kid named Zachary Harrington.”

“And?”

“She knew him. Very well as a matter of fact. Said he was a real strange kid. No one liked him. He was in her fifth grade class and was always gettin’ into trouble. No one knew him that well cuz he had just moved here that year.”

“So what’s his beef with her?” Valese asked.

“She hasn’t a clue. She claims she never spoke to the guy. Didn’t think he even knew she existed. She said he always looked like he was in another world and oblivious to everything goin’ on around him.”

“Maybe not,” Valese said.

“What d’ya mean?”

“Well, maybe she’s the one that’s clueless. Maybe she did do something to piss him off and *she*’s forgotten about it. But obviously *he* hasn’t. If of course he’s the one doing this.”

“Maybe. Hopefully we’ll find that out before we discover her body parts scattered all over the county or floatin’ in Middle River.”

“True. I suppose there weren’t any prints on the tapes.”

“Nope. Wiped clean. Had ‘em all checked for prints, hair fibers and skin too, but nothin’ showed up. Whoever he is, he’s pretty cautious.”

“Maybe he watches CSI.” Valese said. Jake let that one go by without comment. “I’m not hearing any Jack the Ripper shit here, Jake. So what else you think this kid did?”

“Well, mostly minor things that may or may not be related. Juvenile shit like flattened tires, trash dumpin’s in yards. One guy called in sayin’ his wudder was being poisoned. Said he couldn’t drink no wudder or take a bath. Turned out to be a paranoid schizo with a mental health record that dates back to conception. Then there was Mrs. Harriet Slavige. That one’s by far my favorite . . . About three months ago, we received a call from a 62-year-old woman reportin’ her lawn had been vandalized. Said she woke up one mornin’ and while sittin’ on her back patio and noticed her grass in the distance didn’t look quite right. She got up, walked toward the edge of her property line and noticed some areas of what looked like dead grass wormin’ through her yard. Thought it was diseased at first then she realized the brown areas spelled out ‘Fuck You’ twenty times.”

“How’d that get there?” Valese asked, still pacing.

“You ever spray your weeds with Round-up only to find out about a week later that your tank had a leak in it when your lawn starts takin’ the appearance of a jigsaw puzzle?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Well, that’s what it looks like if you ever do. You can trace the very steps you took around your property days before as thin trails of dead grass start showin’ up. Round-up kills anything green.”

“So somebody used Round-up to spell fuck you twenty times on her lawn?”

“Try a hundred times,” he clarified.

Valese nearly spit out his last sip of iced-coffee. “One-hundred times?” he echoed. “Who counted?”

“No one counted. They were numbered. First day she noticed there were twenty. Next day twenty more showed up and by day five, there was one hundred printed and cursive fuck yous all over her two-acre piece a property. Too bad she didn't have more trees, huh?”

“No kidding. So what's up with all that?”

“Well, Mrs. Slavige was actually the one who put it all together for us. She was the Language-Arts teacher at Stemmer's Run High for twenty-two years. She said she was well known for makin' students write a hundred sentences on the chalkboard when they misbehaved or failed to complete their schoolwork. They called her Slavige the Savage.”

“Nice. So one of her students returned to her personal chalkboard to teach her a lesson? But why wasn't this guy caught? Didn't she call it in right away?”

“Sure she did. Called first thing that mornin' when she discovered the mess. But Round-Up usually takes about three to four days to start workin'. He probably wrote the last one the day before the first set a fuck yous appeared,” he explained. “Might have even done it in broad daylight since Slavige's closest neighbor is a half-mile down the road.”

“Damn. Well I hope he killed a few of her weeds in the process.”

Jake laughed. “One could only hope. As far as we know, that's all he did. She hasn't reported nothin' else out uh the ordinary so we're hopin' that this pay back's complete. Kinda like the lady with the cassettes.”

“Hey, didn't you say yard work was on that list?” Valese inquired.

“Yup. Again, more reasons to suspect Mr. Harrington. And like I was sayin' earlier, there was all this shit goin' on, and when I got hold a the notebook and saw mention of a “Dr. V” and then the pretty pony comment just struck me as too coincidental. I wanted to call you as soon as I could cuz I have no idea what this guy's capable of and I just thought...”

“I appreciate - ” Valese interrupted him, as Jake in turn returned the rude favor, wanting to finish his thoughts first.

“-I'd check in with you and make sure everything was okay.”

“I know. And I'd do the same for you too, Jake. But I'm fine. As far as I know, no one's out there trying to get me. And I just don't get it. Why make a list like that? Was the guy a little slow on the uptake?”

“I'm not sure why the list. All I know is right now is it's lookin' connected to a bunch a weird stuff happen' up here.”

“So how is it you drew the short straw on this case?”

“Let's just say thanks to my Lieutenant, I now have the distinct privilege of workin' the fruity loopy, wack-job cases. I get all the 1096's now,” he said referring to all calls involving emotionally unstable citizens. “That's why I'm callin' you. Well, two reasons really. One, like I said, because we think this guy either means to touch base with you somehow or already has; and two, I think you worked this guy up before when you were internin' at Springdale, so I may need you to look over those records if you could. I've already contacted Springdale but the medical records people out there are bein' less than helpful pucker butts about turnin' over any goods on this guy. They keep hidin' behind HIPPO or HIPAA or whatever the hell all that confidentiality crap is.”

“It's HIPAA Jake, and actually they don't have to turn anything over since confidentiality does apply here. You just need to get a court order. A pain in the ass for the likes of you, but necessary for ensuring people's privacy and confidentiality when they go into a place like Springdale. Even in death, corpses have confidentiality rights.”



“Yeah okay, whatever. I still see it as an obstruction a justice. It’s a pretty fucked-up system when a criminal’s rights supersede those of victims. This guy Harrington could be a menace to society, and probably likely to escalate. In the meantime, the nut-jobs at Springdale and now *you* are tellin’ me we need to protect this bozo? I don’t think so, Richard.”

“A simple judicial order will get you what you want, Jake; just a bit more red tape than anything. And by the way, even though Mr. Harrington may be guilty of heinous acts against society, he is still presumed innocent and has constitutionally protected rights just like any other patient institutionalized in this country.”

“All right, enough of the psycho-legal mumbo jumbo. I didn’t call you to get into an argument about your radical left-wing civil liberties bullshit . . . Can you help me out or not?” he inquired sharply.

“Well I suppose so. In fact, I can probably take some time and come on up to Baltimore if you’d like.”

His self-invite caught Jake off guard. An unexpected proposition. Having Dr. Valse’s help would normally be welcomed with open arms. But not knowing how things would play out, having Valse *there* could be problematic.

“That’s okay, Doc, but I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“It’s not a problem. Things have been pretty slow down here lately. As far as I know the only thing that might make it a problem is an upcoming conference at the University. I’m sure I can get out of that. I’ll look into it first thing Monday morning.”

Urging him to stay in Charlottesville, Jake said, “I really don’t know that I need you up here yet. I tell you what Richard, if I need you to come up here, you’ll be the first to know. You know I’ll drag your ass up here if I need to.”

Sensing discomfort on Jake’s part about his invasive invitation, Valse retreated. “Okay Jake, that’s fine. Now tell me, how is it you think this guy has something to do with Cathy’s accident?”

New silence. “It’s like I said Richard, he just had some words in this notebook and . . . well, and I knew Cathy’s license plate. And this guy was out of the pen about six months before her accident. Seein’ what might be reference to your name on the list, I thought—”

“I got that Jake, but how would this guy even know about Cathy’s car? He was locked up when I bought that car.” Valse’s pacing slowed.

“That’s exactly my question to you. I haven’t a clue how the hell he knew about the car, but the fact uh the matter is it’s written in black and white in this notebook. Sure looks to me as if he was makin’ plans for some kinda pretty pony.”

“I really don’t remember this guy too well and as far as I can recall I didn’t piss off any patients on the adolescent unit. Most of those kids liked me. You know me Jake, I never want to be the target of anyone’s repressed anger that should be rightfully aimed at their daddies.”

“I know . . . Honestly Richard, it might not have anything to do with you, and I hope to God it doesn’t. Maybe I’m wrong about this guy, but at the very least I wanted to give you a head’s up about all uh this.”

“Understood. In the meantime, why don’t you get my evaluation report on this guy and fax it to me. And the raw data too, not just my report. I was just an intern then and I certainly don’t want to rely on a novice’s interpretation of the data. Even if that novice is yours truly. So get the data too okay?”

“Got it. Raw data. That means all your test scores and forms and anything else right?”

“Correct. Get everything you can. If there are pieces of paper with writing that seems pointless and irrelevant, snag it anyway because it might be meaningful to me.”

He sighed knowing he would run into a few administrative roadblocks. “Okay, I’ll get it if I have to pull it out uh their asses. I want to get rollin’ on this case before it gets out a hand. I just don’t need the Governor squeezin’ my balls over this nutjob.”

“That’s exactly why I think you could use my help up there, Jake. You’ve got yourself a psych case. Who better to work on it with you than yours truly?”

Jake was feeling trapped again. He knew his rejection of Valese’s offer was out of the ordinary. He was dealing with a fucking psychologist for Christ’s sake. *Aren’t they like damn mind readers?* He and Valese were best of friends and turning him down was like a groom rejecting his bride at the altar. But he couldn’t risk having him come to Baltimore. Not now.

“You’re right Richard. I could use your help. That’s why I need you to look that report over for me and tell me who the hell we’re dealing with. But there’s no need for you to come up here yet. You know I’d do all the damn paperwork myself to get you up here. But there’s nothing for you to do here right now. You’d be bored to death.”

“I don’t know about Jake. You know I haven’t been too happy down here and since Cathy’s death, I’ve been wanting to find my way out of the University.”

“I know, Richard. But you just gotta be patient. Hell, I’d love to work this case with you. It’d be a lot of fun. Remember the Bobby Ray Swisher case? That was a blast wasn’t it?” he said reminding Valese of one of their first cases together.

“Oh yeah, I just love sleepless nights worrying about Rest Area psychopaths. You know Jake, to this day, whenever I’m at one of those disgusting public sharing shit holes I still pay close attention to women who look like they’re alone. Hoping there’s a boyfriend, husband, or friend with them somewhere. Sometimes I don’t leave until I’m sure they’re hooked up with someone or they drive off alone and out of harm’s way. It’s like I’m playing rent-a-cop for the interstate rest areas.”

“You were the one who said women instinctually go to the bathroom in pairs to avoid that kind a thing,” he reminded Valese.

“Yeah, I know and I still believe that, but I guess when you get directly exposed to psychopathology like that it tends to adjust one’s perspective on life. Before that case I wouldn’t have paid any attention to anyone wandering around a visitors’ center.”

“That kind a shit changes all of us Richard. Why do you think cops booze, snooze, and abuse? It all builds up after awhile. Having an outlet is the key. Findin’ somethin’ that helps wash the scum off at the end of our day that doesn’t involve a toke, an indecent poke, or an alcohol soak is essential. That’s why I golf. I suppose that’s why you jog.”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

“Look Richard, I’m sure I’m gonna need you up here to work this case. But for now, you can help by lookin’ over your report. If I need you up here I’ll tell you so.”

Valese sighed again. “I’m sorry Jake. I’m acting like a dejected little kid. I just thought this could be my chance to get back to what I really like doing. And even though I don’t think any of this has anything to do with me or Cathy, I’m already getting a bit charged about the case.”

“I know. It’s like morphine to a junkie ain’t it?”

“No shit,” Valese said, thinking the analogy appropriate. “Well, just send me what you can get hold of, and I’ll look it over and call you after I get the chance to digest it.”

“Great . . . and hey Richard?”

“Yeah?”

“Watch your back buddy, I don't know what this guy's about yet, okay?”

“Consider my eyes moved to the back of my head.”

“Jeffers.”

“What?”

“Jeffers. That woman's last name was Jeffers. Rheana Jeffers.”

“Oh.”

“And I'll make sure you get to hear those tapes.”

“Sounds good.”

After they hung up, much to Valse's surprise, he was able to get back to sleep despite the early morning caffeine. He dreamt of beach walks, sand combing, and passionate morning sex with his wife. When he awoke at 8:15, he gradually recalled most of what he and Jake discussed and realized this was the day he was to begin a week's vacation in Emerald Isle with his wife.

## Chapter 7 – Phone Tag

Sunday seemed to have more than the typical 24-hours allotted to a day for Dr. Richard Valese. His body initially remained glued to the mattress as he thought about how he and his wife should be arriving in Emerald Isle about noon. He imagined their excitement while driving over the B. Cameron Langston Bridge connecting the mainland to the banks. As he returned to his present state of being, he realized his gallant efforts to suppress tears were unnecessary as there were no witnesses to generate personal embarrassment. He cursed God; a rare occurrence for him, and cried himself back to sleep. He awoke two hours later, cursed God again for failing to fast-forward this mournful day, and became deeply saddened knowing he may never stroll along a beach again. It just wouldn't be the same without her. He knew the crashing waves, sunsets on the sound, and breakfast at Sam and Omie's would only make him miss her more and come to despise that part of the world he shared with his wife nearly every summer since they met.

At 10:30 A.M., he scrutinized his liquor cabinet for mind numbing remedies but fell short in his hopes, locating only a half-empty bottle of sweet Vermouth and a drop of Tangerie. He wasn't that desperate. He considered returning to bed but opted for a walk outside instead. Fresh air would do him good, he thought. During the walk, he considered an angry drive to the beach, but found his way home and vegetated on the couch for the remainder of the day and tuned into a TNT Clint Eastwood honorarium. Hang 'Em High, High Plains Drifter, and Dirty Harry saturated his family room, but did little to take his mind away from Cathy and the termination of their shared dreams.

He didn't hear from Jake until 10 o'clock the following morning when he noticed the red button illuminated on his speakerphone. He pressed the 4004 sequence and awakened the faceless voicemail lady who prompted him to enter his numeric password. He obliged.

*Hello, the voice said, you have two new messages and one saved message. To hear new messages press one, to hear old messages press two.*

He pressed number one. "Hey Richard," the voice said. "I just got my white powdered donut fingers all over your psych eval of Mr. Zachary James Harrington dated July 10, 1993. I'd fax it, but with all that confidentiality shit you rode me about yesterday I thought I'd wait until I knew you'd be the only one to receive it. Don't want to blow a case like this on some bullshit technicality. I can hear it now, *Yes your honor that is correct . . . Detective Freeman prematurely faxed this evaluation and it landed in the hands of Dr. Valese's secretary.* With my luck the Judge would not only dismiss the case but fine me for prematurely faxin' all over your secretary . . . Anyway, call me when you get this message so I can send the report your way."

He deleted the message then played the next, which was left fifty minutes later.

"Ah yeah Doc, me again . . . call me ASAP will you . . . I think we might have our first homicide on this case . . . I told you it was gonna get ugly. And I do mean ugly. Later."

It was 10:05 A.M. and looking like his first court-appointed evaluation of the day was running late or just running away. His windowless office illuminated by overhead fluorescent tubes sat in the mildewed basement of the University of Virginia's Institute of Law and Forensic Mental Health. The two-story building, located five miles south of the main campus, should have been condemned years ago. But like most large academic institutions, the psychology department was almost an after-thought for administrators. So the decrepit building still stood,

and the division of forensic psychology remained sequestered there like a forgotten yo-yo buried at the bottom of a toy chest.

Although initially not privy to the office politics, it became clear to Valesse soon enough that the “new guy in town” was sent to the basement where he or she remained until they proved themselves worthy of an office above sea level. He didn’t even attempt to make himself at home in this bacterial-experiment-gone-bad office other than to bring in a few personal belongings including a 1983 Orioles World Championship coffee mug and a framed embroidered sign that read AS YOU THINK, SO SHALL YOU BE—a graduation gift from one of his mentors. He knew trying to make this office look any homier would be like giving Quasimodo a Mary Kay facial.

10:15 and still no call from Beth Ann Trestle, the Center’s receptionist whose office and 300 pound desk sat directly above Valesse’s head (creaks from above were always unsettling, although there were times during the first few weeks after his return from grievance leave that he’d look to the ceiling and invite an implosion). Knowing his call-back conversation with Jake may be lengthy, he proactively called to the world above and checked the status of his pending evaluation.

“No sir, I haven’t heard a thing,” replied Beth Ann.

“Okay, well, I’ll be on the phone for a few minutes, so could you please page me if and when the defendant arrives?”

“Yes sir, I sure will Dr. Valesse.”

As he hung up the phone, he hoped that her excessive courtesy and ingratiating demeanor was a temporary façade and not genuine Beth Ann church mouse charisma. Time will tell.

He dial the number Jake gave him Sunday morning and got a curt and surly Detective Simmons who wanted the caller to know beyond all reasonable doubt that he worked **Homicide**.

“Good Morning Detective, this is Dr. Valesse. I’m looking for Detective Freeman, is he available?”

“Just a sec,” he replied.

Valesse heard the receiver hit the desk, as Detective Simmons was apparently unaccustomed to using the HOLD button. Waiting for Jake to take his call, he couldn’t help but listen in on the background clatter that accompanies any active police station. Voices for the most part were muffled, but the intonation informed him that some of the officers were shooting the breeze about the pending NFL season while others were feigning a polite demeanor to witnesses or citizens filing complaints against noisy neighbors or abusive spouses. He faintly heard, “she’s thirteen and didn’t -port to scho- this -m-ing.” Then there was a frustrated voice indicative of a cop preparing to rough up a suspect ignorantly serving as bait for bigger fish. Phones rang off the hook like a Jerry Lewis telethon. The frightened voice was louder: “No she’s -ver run -way -for. She a -ood kid.” The psychologist in him wanted to beam himself there to comfort a distraught mother. Just then, a jolting bang in his ear alarmed him, abating his voyeuristic eavesdropping.

The voice on the other end of the line wasn’t Jake Freeman. “Sorry Dr. Valesse, Detective Freeman’s not in the house right now, but I’ll page him right away for you and let him know you called.”

“That’s fine. I can also try his cell phone. Thank you, detective.”

He dialed the number. On the third ring heard a surly, “Bout time.”