

2012 IPPY GOLD MEDAL: SCIFI/FANTASY

A conceptual image where a skull is formed from wisps of white smoke rising from a globe of the Earth. The globe is partially obscured by bright orange and yellow flames at its base. The entire scene is set against a solid black background.

SIX HUMAN SURVIVORS
ONE KILLER AMONG THEM

STRANDED

DOUGLAS WENTWORTH

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The vacuum of space allowed Evelyn's hair to float freely, framing her face in spun gold. Her eyebrows and lips, animated just minutes ago with a strange amalgam of fear, wonder and curiosity, held a hint of surprise. The pale blue eyes, which had witnessed twelve years of life's experiences, were closed; the long, blonde lashes stilled.

If not for the golf-ball sized hole in Evelyn's forehead, she might be asleep.

It was this hole that intrigued Sandra Hapgood. She noticed that the inner brain matter had swollen, the result of its moisture boiling away. If Evelyn's eyes or mouth had been open upon her body's ejection from the ship, they would have swelled also. But Evelyn's death had been peaceful, and Sandra was content that she had killed her quickly.

The deck beneath Sandra's feet trembled slightly and, with her eyes still gazing at Evelyn's corpse, she instinctively began to swipe her hand across the window's sensor pad. But she abruptly stopped and rested her palm on the thick glass. Evelyn's hand was touching the other side, a mere four inches away; her fingernails soundlessly scraping the glass as the ship's main thruster engines began their forward thrust.

Sandra, her face a taciturn mask, slowly peeled her hand from the glass and swiped the window's sensor. Upper and lower solar shields noiselessly glided towards one another, steel eyelids slowly obliterating Sandra's view.

And, as the shields winked out its sole remaining emanation of light, the starship, *Prometheus*, gained momentum; cutting through the black velvet of space while plowing indiscriminately through the fifty-two human corpses that surrounded it.

*I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that
my passion for writing, and my writing style,
has been greatly influenced by the adventure
stories of Ian Fleming and his successors.*

I hope I have done them justice.

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*I must thank David Hogan
and Andrew Bell, without whom
The STRANDED universe would not exist.*

To my loving wife, Jennifer

*Though we inhabited the same house
as I penned STRANDED,
I wasn't really 'there',
I was traveling through the cosmos,
chronicling the trials and tribulations
of six intrepid astronauts...*

It's good to be back.

STRANDED

“The future enters into us long before it happens.”

– Rainer Maria Rilke

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PART I

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

1. THE SEED IS PLANTED

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

Before replying, Sandra looked up and across the kitchen table at her twelve-year-old twin sister, who was eating a big bowl of spaghetti. Eating was the wrong word; she was playing with it, twirling strands of the pasta around her fork in a way that would make Crick and Watson proud, for she formed a reasonable facsimile of a double helix. After admiring her work, she opened her mouth wide and swallowed the forkful. A stray, inch-long strand wormed its way out of the corner of her mouth, adding a pale yellow comma to her mocking smile.

“You’re gross!” Sandra snarled. She abruptly turned back to the task at hand. Spread before her was a bowl of red delicious apples, canisters of sugar and flour, and a Pyrex pie plate. Sandra grabbed an apple, and in one swift motion, cored it with her mother’s antique Kitchen-Aid utensil. She casually dropped it in a bowl to her right and reached for another. “And yes, I know what I’m doing.”

"Sure you do." Her sister jerked on her pigtails and, like an old-fashioned lamp having its cord yanked to light its incandescent bulb, her tongue darted out.

"I hope you bite that off someday."

Sandra put the corer down on the family kitchen table.

Family. When a father just gets up and walks out one day, are the people left behind still a 'family'? Is that the right term? Or is it 'broken home'? Well, I guess it's better than being an orphan, thought Sandra. She turned back to the bowl of apples but her thoughts were still focused on that fateful day, four years ago.

Her father had abandoned the household when she was eight years old. One minute she was doing homework and the next thing she knew, her father came into the room and told her that he had to go somewhere; that he might not be back because he and mommy were always fighting. He said that wasn't good for her (I'm glad he was putting my interests first, Sandra thought sarcastically). And then, when she asked who would do the things with her they had always shared, like bicycling, soccer, and skating (her mother had an aversion to sports), he turned to leave and said, "You're on your own."

She remembered her eyes stinging as if she had been slapped in the face.

Are there four other words in the English language that can have such diametrically opposed meanings depending on their use? When the student pilot has successfully completed his training and it's time for the first solo, those words instill a sense of pride and accomplishment. But if that same pilot has instrument problems during that solo

at ten thousand feet, those same four words mean nothing but abandonment and hopelessness.

The chair across from Sandra squeaked. And, like a dog trainer snapping its fingers to break the bored dog's obsession with licking its tail, Sandra's memories of that event slithered back into a dark corner of her mind and she looked up at her sister.

With childlike curiosity she studied the human mirror that sat opposite her. She contemplated the wavy, dark black hair that was so much like her mother's. She didn't like the splattering of freckles that covered her cheeks and nose like sprinkles on an ice-cream cone, but her mother promised her they would lighten with age. Of course, when she reached her teens, she could wear makeup.

And what about the eyes? Well, Sandra hoped that her big brown eyes didn't have the light of mischief dancing in them, as her sister's did right now. It made her untrustworthy for some reason, even a bit scary.

The doorbell started ringing; a harsh, buzzing sound that rattled Sandra's brain. She shot her hands up to her ears.

'Rrrrrr-Rrrrrr'

Why won't someone answer it?

'Rrrrrr-Rrrrrr'

Why won't it stop?

Her sister said matter-of-factly, "You're supposed to go now and save humanity...but are you sure you know-"

Even through her covered ears, Sandra heard her sister's words clearly. "I know what I'm doing!" she screamed back.

'Rrrrrr-Rrrrrr'

Sandra sat bolt upright in bed. The dream of her younger self dissipated like the ink of night at the break of dawn.

Now what the hell? Oh no.

The emergency lighting system was bathing the small, utilitarian room in a blood red pall. Sandra dove out of bed, zipped on her jumpsuit, and ran towards the door. She was halfway out when she turned back and quickly swept the room, her still dilated eyes wide with terror and anticipation. After taking the mental snapshot of the room she would never visit again, in a building that would crumble within the hour, on a planet that would soon cease to exist, she slammed the door behind her. Her diminishing footsteps echoed down the corridor in double time; a fitting coda to a fitful night.

Sandra exited the building and, as her deployment orders dictated, stood by the NASA CREW ASSEMBLY sign. The early morning Florida sun cast warm fingers on her cheek. How beautiful that sun was. White threads of clouds criss-crossed the sky in a checkerboard pattern, setting the stage for the gods of good and evil to play their penultimate game of chess. Would humankind win or lose? Flourish or vanish?

Captain Kalin Bennish stepped up next to her. He inserted an unlit cigar between his teeth, then placed his hands on his hips. His right hand reassured him the Beretta 92 was in its holster. He turned to address Sandra, his piercing blue eyes practically jumping out from the bronzed, worn leather face.

"Lieutenant, this will be our finest hour."

"What's happened, Captain?"

The doors behind them burst open and the other four crewmembers stumbled onto the waiting area.

Chief Mechanic Daniel 'Mac' MacNamara adjusted his tattered 'Red Sox 2004 American League Champions' cap. "They've done it, eh Captain?"

"Wait until we're on the transport," said Bennish. Like a conductor's baton, his cigar moved up and down in time with each word. "Come on. Let's load 'em up. Keep order, people. Hapgood, Minami, MacNamara, Rottweiler, Van Lank, let's go. Let's go!"

Sandra stepped onto the van-like transport, walked towards the rear, then slid into the last seat on the right and watched the others follow.

Commander Mineko Minami walked down the aisle with her head down and hands crossed at her waist. She looks like she just took Communion, thought Sandra. But her church mouse persona betrayed the crack pilot that she was, and Sandra was grateful that she'd be at the helm of the *Prometheus*.

Mineko shot Sandra a smile as she slid into the seat across the aisle.

Mac was next. He sauntered down the aisle, twisting his broad shoulders to avoid hitting the overhead storage bins. "Last call for the Escape Earth Express," boomed Mac. "Stragglers will be incinerated!"

"Grow up for once," chided Mineko.

Sandra smiled in spite of herself. Mac was like the proboscis of a mosquito, always getting under one's skin with his instigating comments and ill-timed remarks.

"Ladies!" Mac ignored Mineko's reprimand, tipped his cap, then folded his six-foot, four-inch frame into his seat.

Next on the transport was Power Specialist Eric Rottweiler. Eric avoided all eye contact as he headed for his seat, stole a brief look at the others, then grunted before he sat down. Though Rottweiler was in his early thirties like the rest of the crew, Mac had described his disposition as ‘an old man with perpetually abscessed teeth’, making Rottweiler one of those few people whose obvious nickname, Rott, match his personal temperament.

Sandra begrudgingly acknowledged him with an imperceptible nod. She then looked at the man stepping onto the transport and felt a warming in her heart, just as she had every day for the past year, from their first introduction at the *Project Prometheus* inception meeting.

Planet Assessment Specialist Ryan Van Lank smiled at each crewmember in turn. He shot a sly wink at Sandra as his disheveled dirty-blond hair splayed in front of his twinkling eyes. The deep dimples on his cheeks and chin, gained a bit more shadow.

Van Lank stopped for a second before sitting down.

“Good luck, everybody.”

The seated crewmembers responded in kind.

Sandra was pleased that the others liked Van Lank. It reaffirmed her belief in him, confirmed that her instincts were correct in having turned her heart over to him.

And what are the others thinking of me, Lieutenant and Chief Scientific Officer Sandra Hapgood? Graduate of Harvard Medical School followed by residencies at Carnegie Mellon and Johns Hopkins. A few years at the Air Force Genetic Medical Recovery Labs and then Lady Luck struck.

Happenstance put Sandra at the right place at the right time, for she had stood on the shoulders of giants.

She studied and modified her professors’ experiments, then worked day and night until the prayed-for ‘Eureka’ moment. First, the successful lab trials, then the publishing of papers and the peer review process. And finally, the awarding of U.S. Patent Number 17459-28479: Digitizing Genetic Code and Basic Core Memories via Gray Matter Extraction.

Sandra was the first person named to the then secret *Project Prometheus* a little over a year ago. And now it seemed like just yesterday when the Chairman addressed them all with his ‘We are going to save humanity...’ welcoming speech.

The thud of the transport’s door slamming shut brought the crew to attention. Captain Bennish waved his hand over a sensor on the dashboard. The maglev track became electrified. The transport, repelled by the magnetism beneath it, levitated, and then was propelled forward. They would be boarding the *Prometheus* in five minutes time.

Bennish pulled the cigar from his mouth, spit a speck of tobacco leaf on the transport’s floor, and addressed the crew.

“At 04:00 hours cease-fire negotiations broke down. Within minutes a few small countries, figuring they had nothing to lose, let off a few of their nukes. As predicted, all neighboring countries retaliated. Europe is on the brink of destruction, Asia is next, and we are already tracking nukes coming at us over the Atlantic.”

Rott spat out a single epithet.

Sandra’s mouth went dry. She gathered some saliva.

“How long before...”

"About an hour. Now, we knew this was going to happen...just not today. Hell, our mission was based on it happening. So, the fueling has been stopped..."

Bennish held up a hand to ward off comments.

"...but we have enough for the mission. Now..." Bennish paused and looked each crewmember in the eye. "Now, we're going to do the job we were trained to do. We'll board, get systems operational, and prepare for liftoff. The gates will be opened and Hapgood will be stranding civilians up to the last possible minute."

Sandra's trigger finger twitched involuntarily. She remembered reading that Billy the Kid's finger used to twitch when he was sleeping, due to either the memory of those he killed or the anticipation of those to come. Or both.

How many had she killed, had she stranded, in the last month? How many had she stranded altogether? Let's see. About two hundred mice, two hundred pigs, a hundred dogs, twenty five terminally ill patients (should those count?) and five thousand perfectly healthy men, women, and children. Oh well, they'd thank her for it later.

The first twenty or so were tough. She hadn't perfected her aim and there were some that lived for a few moments. Tremendous suffering for the subject and humiliation for Sandra, for she had designed the brain-core extraction process. But with practice came perfection and soon she could terminate subjects before they even knew what hit them. But she couldn't take credit for all of the deaths, three thousand of them were done by others; she had only supervised.

Sandra gazed out the window and scanned the sprawling grounds of NASA; a concrete prairie poured into place

on Florida's Atlantic coast. Just fifteen years ago she had made her first visit here. She and a group of friends had skipped school to see the last original Space Shuttle liftoff. Sandra looked to her left at the old Shuttle launch pad. Oh what a day that had been! The incredible roar of the engines had sent shock waves through her body that must've jarred something loose, triggering some deep, hibernating seed to sprout, take root, and reach for the sun, for she made a vow, right then, to explore the heavens someday. And now here she was, preparing for her seventh, and arguably her last, spaceflight.

A crease formed in Sandra's brow. Whatever happened to those classmates? Where in the world were they? Sandra bowed her head and prayed that their impending death today would be as quick and painless as possible.

Sandra looked up and contemplated the design of *Prometheus*. Thirteen hundred feet of polished ceramisteel, the strongest, most heat resistant ceramic-metal alloy in the world. The sleek, bullet shaped fuselage glistened in the morning sun. Long, lazy streams of condensation flowed down its sides, joining at its base like rivers to an ocean to form a translucent white pillow, which ebbed and flowed around the rocket's four fins.

Prometheus resembled those iconic rocket ships in old science fiction movies and Sandra was ecstatic over it. Heck, she half expected to see an astronaut step out wearing a Michelin Man-like spacesuit and a big glass sphere on its head! But the computers had spit out its design based on the needs of the mission and it coincidentally matched the old-fashioned hand drawings of those early space pioneers. Guess they were onto something even back then.

A half-mile behind the ship, wrapping around the launch area like a miniature Great Wall of China, was the hurricane fencing that had been erected two weeks ago. Thousands of people had gathered behind it during the past few days, hoping to gain entrance to the ship. The fencing was designed to funnel civilians to the gantry, like cattle to a slaughterhouse (how appropriate, thought Sandra). Once on the gantry, they would have to navigate the endless zig-zagging escalator. The prize at the top was the *Prometheus*' civilian entrance, where Captain Bennish would allow ten at a time to enter the Strand Extraction Lab, where Sandra would be waiting for them.

But today, something about the crowd was different. The fence was undulating like a sheet on a clothesline in heavy winds. Sandra realized that it was caused by the civilians fighting, kicking and clawing in a futile attempt to get to the front of the line. They had heard the news regarding the cease-fire and assumed, correctly, that the ship's launch was imminent.

The crowd numbered about seven thousand. Sandra would be lucky to process a few hundred of them before liftoff, if that. The 45,000,000 pounds of thrust that the *Prometheus* would produce on liftoff would quickly incinerate the rest of them.

The NASA engineers predicted a force of that magnitude, six times stronger than a Saturn V rocket, would destroy all structures in a half-mile radius. But the engineers didn't care. They knew that if *Prometheus* had to launch, NASA was doomed anyway.

The jerk of the transport coming to a halt pulled Sandra out of her introverted musings. Bennish was on his feet and out the door practically before it opened.

"Let's go, people. Let's go!"

The crew exited the transport's door and stepped immediately into the steel, cage-like elevator. Bennish engaged its motor before Hapgood's left foot had barely cleared the doors.

As they were lifted towards the ship's entrance, one hundred stories above in the nosecone, Sandra surveyed the area, willing herself to store forever these final mental photographs of Earth's wonders. Granted, they could view holographic photos and movies once they were all re-instantiated, or brought back to life, in eighty years time, but they would pale in comparison to this: the aqua blue sky; the peaceful, rippling blue-black water; the circular, fan-like leaves of the Dwarf-Palmetto; and the Florida Gama Grass, whose long green blades provided spots of color along the edges of the concrete launch pads. She would never see this sight or these images again. A shiver shot up her spine like a lightning bolt.

The elevator slowed to a stop, the rear exit door opened, and as Sandra turned to follow her crewmembers into the ship she thought what a strange day it had been. And to think it all started with that disturbing dream of her being a child, making an apple pie while her twin sister ate spaghetti. Why, she had never baked pastry in her thirty-year life! And as for the twin sister, well, that just made a strange dream even stranger, for Sandra was an only child.

2. HADES ON EARTH

The roar of two jet fighters zooming by NASA's launch control building nearly shook the teeth out of Marlon Richemond's head as he stood, binoculars in hand, studying the *Prometheus*.

"Jesus Christ! Did you see that?"

Darren Callahan looked up from his monitor. "That's great. As if we don't have enough problems."

A split second later, the BOOM-BOOM-BOOM of surface-to-air mortar fire echoed off the surrounding buildings. The unmanned sentries, woken from their sleeping state, were firing skyward but, like drunken skeet shooters, couldn't hit the fast moving targets.

"Turn the machine-gun sentries on, continuous fire mode. Maybe we'll get lucky and keep those jets away from *Prometheus*."

Marlon flipped a switch. Outside the windows, thousands of bullets cut through the air skyward like an infinite swarm of angry hornets. Marlon sat down at his console

and studied the screen. "The crew's been on board for forty minutes, ready to launch in T minus thirty."

"It's going to be tight." Darren consulted his screen. "Looks like the first nuke will hit Miami in about twenty minutes, then one with our name on it about ten minutes after that."

"At least it will stop the strafing." Marlon's cracking voice betrayed the humor in his remark.

"Out of the frying pan..." Darren let the comeback hang in the air. "But at least we'll see the *Prometheus* off. They've processed about forty of the civilians so far. That means they're leaving Earth with five thousand chosen by lottery, and however many they can do today." Darren spun in his chair to face Marlon. "That'll ensure genetic diversity when they make it."

"You mean 'if' they make it."

"They'll be all right. Top-notch crew. Bennish is hard so he'll follow through. We'll see the ship off safely then stand at the windows and watch nuclear fusion right before our eyes." Darren winked at Marlon. "That'll be one science experiment I won't be able to skip by playing hooky."

Marlon smiled meekly. He appreciated Darren's attitude. They were the only two technicians remaining in the entire NASA complex and Marlon was grateful Darren had stayed behind with him. When the lottery for slots on the *Prometheus* was held, both men had declined to enter. Neither of them was married nor had any next of kin. The idea of being in stasis, digitized and stored in a database for eighty years, didn't appeal to either of them.

On top of that, they knew they could serve the future of humankind much better here, in this room, than they

could by being stored in some database onboard the ship. Yes, their jobs would be over, terminated in the most permanent way possible, but what a grand exit: the saving of humanity!

Marlon looked up at the row of video monitors that lined the wall like tiles of a mosaic. One monitor displayed the sea of people that were pushing and shoving through the gates. Another kept track of the *Prometheus*' gantry, which was covered in a moving sea of color; civilians that were trying to gain access. Marlon was reminded of a twig he had once stuck into an anthill. Within minutes, an angry black, writhing mass had covered the twig, forming one large living organism. This had repulsed Marlon, and to quell it, or perhaps to assure himself that his position in the food chain was secure, he pulled the twig out and flung it in a lake.

Well, that twig, which was now that gantry, was going to be flung into the ocean, by two forces stronger than his hand, yet forces forged by the hand of man. First, a vessel filled with explosive plasma gas would soon try to break the shackles of gravity and bring God's creation to another world where it would, hopefully, flourish again. The second force would be a weapon of ultimate destruction that would ignite one mile above them.

Marlon wondered which would impress God most, man's ability to destroy His world or the ingenuity man employed to escape it?

As if in answer to his question, one of the blank monitors came to life. The picture kept freezing and pixelating into blocky images and the audio dropped in and out. Marlon remembered how it had been years ago, when all

broadcasts were analog as opposed to today's digital. Back then, if your TV couldn't latch onto a signal, the screen would be filled with 'snow', a constantly shifting black and white houndstooth pattern. But with digital, it was either picture or no picture. In this case, he wished it were no picture, for the man whose image appeared on the screen disgusted him.

The Chrysander (Christian name: Charles Chaconas) was born in Kuala Lumpur on May 14, 1990, the same day that it celebrated its one hundred years of local authority. His father, who owned a Greek shipping company, had moved the family to this capital of Malaysia in order to expand his base of operations to Port Klang on the western shore.

The young Chaconas excelled in school and had a voracious appetite for reading all things pertaining to religion and philosophy. While other children were out playing or swimming, he could always be found in his family's living area, laying down on his mat (his family lived like natives; using removable mats as bedding material to eliminate the need for bedrooms), absorbed in an obscure book he had found in his local library.

Charles was fascinated by the power that the great religious leaders in history held over their followers and soon he was engaging, and angering, the local priests, imams, and monks (Malaysia is a multi-confessional society that celebrates the major festival days of Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists) in philosophical debates; his main point being that since all religions had such glaring differences, they must all be wrong, and only their commonalities had a chance of being right.

By the time Charles was twenty, he had a following of subjects that had become disenfranchised with their own religion. Using every social network, podcast, and webcast service available, he soon amassed a global following. By his thirtieth birthday, the name Charles Chaconas had been systematically 'scrubbed' from all digital records and 'The Chrysander' was a household name.

When the resource depleted, polluted planet Earth became a hotbed of anxiety and mistrust between the countries that 'had' and the ones that didn't, it became clear that things would spiral into the ultimate 'war to end all wars'.

Rumors circulated that the United States had funneled huge sums of money into what other countries perceived to be a far-fetched plan to digitize, or 'strand' (nicknamed after the DNA strands that were sampled by the process) a diverse group of citizens. These strands, or genome maps of the individuals, would be stored in a database then sent off to a life-supporting planet some eighty Earth years away.

There, the digitized citizens would be re-instantiated by a process that would 'rebuild' them using water, amino acids, trace minerals and elements. Then the inhabitants of this new community would utilize the cryopreserved plant seeds, insect larvae, and animal embryos to resume the cultivation of crops and the breeding of animals. Until food could be grown locally, the 20,000 tons of irradiated and frozen food stored on board would have to do.

Leaders of some countries thought the idea so far fetched they called it science fiction, but their jaws literally dropped once the U.S. started building *Prometheus* and their informers and spies located in the U.S. confirmed its mission.

But The Chrysander had knowledge of *Project Prometheus* from the get go, for he had followers in all walks of life. And, like a splinter naturally working its way up through the skin, his subjects would 'pay forward' any information they were privy to that might affect their fellow man. Once *Prometheus* was common knowledge around the world, The Chrysander tapped into foreign anger and protestations and became the face of the anti- *Prometheus* movement. But unlike others that wanted to stop the project due to jealousy or competitiveness with the U.S., The Chrysander had a genuine concern:

If humans had ruined the planet Earth, what right did they have to travel to a distant planet and ruin that too?

And now, in Earth's final moments, The Chrysander was the last person that Darren and Marlon would hear preaching.

They both looked up at the monitor, where The Chrysander, passionate and red-faced, was pounding his pulpit. "If you bring forth that which is within you, it will save you. If you do not, it will destroy you."

Marlon shook his head. "Still preaching to the choir."

"I don't sing," spat Darren.

The Chrysander was now appealing to the camera. The storm had passed. The piercing blue eyes, so fiery a minute ago, were now relaxed. The skin, which earlier resembled third-degree sunburn, was now pink, as it continued its transformation back to translucent white. He passed his hand through his hair, comb-like, in a futile attempt to tame his salt and pepper mane. Sweat stains showed through his cream T-Shirt which, combined with black jeans, comprised the only outfit that he ever wore in public.

He continued calmly. "All our technology and machines and efforts have only sealed our fate by increasing the potency of evil that we are. The evidence is irrefutable, the sentence...unavoidable."

"I wish he'd...Oh my God!" The color drained from Darren's face as he looked back at his monitor. "I'm tracking a nuke heading towards us from Tampa Bay! An under-sea launch!"

Darren slammed his hand down on his microphone switch. "Captain Bennish! Launch immediately. Repeat. Launch immediately. Missile ETA in five minutes!"

Marlon and Darren immediately flipped the switches that released control of the ship. Darren engaged his microphone once more.

"*Prometheus* stranding process postponed. Will be resumed post-launch. Hand over and transfer of control to *Prometheus* on my mark...now!" Darren paused for a second then resumed. "The wishes of the good human race are with you. Control out. End of entry. Darren Callahan, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 05:40 hours, June 6, 2026."

Darren turned to Marlon and forced a meek smile. "You never know, someone might listen to it someday."

Marlon was silent. What could he possibly say now that would mean anything? He reached over and flipped a switch. As if on cue, both men stood up and walked like automatons to the window.

It was a surreal scene. Jet fighters buzzing the sky, anti-aircraft mortars and tracers streaking after the fighters, and thousands of bullets following the mortars as if in a game of 'Tag'. And, about a mile away, the four main thruster

engines of *Prometheus* ignited in perfect unison like synchronized swimmers in an old Esther Williams movie.

Both men stared impotently as the civilians on the gantry and mooring platform scrambled for cover, but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from the six thousand degree Celsius heat and flame that would soon engulf them. They watched the launch pad's concrete turn to liquid chalk and the nearby buildings fall like houses of cards.

Hades on Earth, thought Marlon.

Behind Marlon and Darren, on the monitor that would soon be darkened forever, The Chrysander continued. "And yet there are cowards among us who believe the psychopathic humankind should spread. We chose our fate; now our actions ensure it. Let it go and let it be. This is the hour of destiny. The end of destiny..."

The broadcast abruptly ended. But Marlon and Darren didn't notice; they were concentrating on the *Prometheus* as it cleared the top of its mooring platform just as a jet fighter threaded its way through NASA's defenses. They watched in horror as an anti-aircraft mortar clipped the fighter's wing and sent it hurtling into the melted mooring platform. The resulting explosion and fireball engulfed the base of the ship. Shards of debris sliced into one fin and thruster. But the ship continued skyward.

"That was close," squeaked out Marlon after practically swallowing his tongue. He turned from the window, visibly shaken, and sat at his monitor.

"May God protect them," prayed Darren.

"He's not protecting us," countered Marlon. "Look."

Darren turned toward his monitor. His face drooped and twisted as if he suffered a major stroke. On the screen,

seven other nuclear launches from the submarine off Tampa Bay were projected on a course for NASA, along with hundreds of other trajectory lines traversing every country and ocean.

Thoroughly defeated, Darren and Marlon didn't move; they just stared out the window. They followed *Prometheus'* path until she was just a dot in the sky. Then, in the distance, a single nuclear missile appeared. They watched it arc serenely, almost majestically, over the horizon and, as it reached its zenith directly above them, someone turned all the lights in the world on at once. Their eyeballs melted and their bodies, along with every building and life form within a twenty-mile radius, vaporized within a second.

3. THE END OF THE WORLD

When Bennish and the crew had stepped into the entry area of *Prometheus*, they immediately scrambled to their assigned areas, like roaches reacting to a flipped light switch.

Mineko headed to the cockpit, and with a trained eye, scanned all the data that was streaming in from the ship. Usually, if any system: autopilot, hydraulics, coolant, fuel, etc. generated a 'system check' error, the flight would be delayed, but not this time. They had to launch no matter what and they'd only have one shot at it. And though the flight path was preprogrammed, Mineko would be able to disengage the autopilot within seconds if her considerable skills were needed. That is, if Bennish allowed it.

In a normal NASA flight, a Commander like Mineko would be in charge of it and all other crewmembers. But *Project Prometheus* was under military command, so Bennish had been deemed leader of the mission. Mineko was to follow his orders. She wasn't used to that but she believed in

the chain of command and she knew one bad link would weaken it, so Mineko promised herself she'd swallow her pride and do what was right for the greater good.

Oh well, thought Mineko, we'll all be in stasis in a few days and I won't have to follow his orders again until the ship finds an inhabitable planet in about eighty years or so. We'll be re-instantiated three days before we land and, once we do, I won't be under Bennish's command any more.

Mineko turned in her seat and glanced through the bulkhead door. Bennish, in his usual rough and gruff manner, was directing civilians, one small group at a time, toward the Strand Extraction Lab. She wondered how many Sandra—

The intercom system screamed to life.

"Captain Bennish! Launch immediately. Repeat. Launch immediately. Missile ETA in five minutes!"

Mineko quickly hit the master override switch, which would put the ship in launch mode. She turned to see Bennish slam his hand on the wall-mounted intercom and, with spittle flying from his mouth, scream into it. "*Prometheus* crew, scramble. Repeat. Scramble. Prepare for launch!"

The civilians on the gantry, having heard the announcement and Bennish's reaction, surged forward, pushing and screaming, desperate to gain entry to the ship.

"Back off!" demanded Bennish as he slammed another switch on the wall. The entrance door began to slide close, but as it sensed the bodies, arms and legs of the now desperate civilians still clawing their way onto the ship, it paused and reversed itself.

"Minami!" screamed Bennish. "Override the door!"

Mineko, noticing that some civilians were still only halfway onto the ship, placed her finger lightly on the door control switch, waiting for them to clear harms way.

"Minami! Override that door now! Goddammit!"

Mineko flipped the switch then turned and grimaced as the sounds of crunching bone and blood curdling screams echoed in the entranceway.

Bennish jumped quickly back from the door, so that the severed extremities would not land on his feet. The last civilian that slipped onto the ship, appalled at Bennish's disregard for his companions, stared into Bennish's eyes.

"For the love of..."

Bennish punched the man in the mouth. Then, angered that the man's now loosened teeth left indentations in his knuckles, he slugged him with his other hand. The man fell to the ground like a sack of pig iron.

Bennish turned to the other twelve men, women and children that were still in the entranceway, waiting to enter the Strand Extraction Lab. They stared at him fearfully, like a class of pupils being introduced to the headmaster.

"Get down and grab something. We're going to launch!"

Bennish scurried to the cockpit and strapped himself into the copilot seat. He turned to Mineko. "Light her up, Minami."

"Yes, sir." Mineko flipped the steel guard, which prevents buttons and switches from being thrown accidentally, up from the launch panel and revealed the four switches that would ignite the main thrusters. As she consulted a status screen, Bennish, annoyed at what he thought was delay on Mineko's part, slapped her hand away and flipped the switches in one movement.

"Captain. That wasn't necessary," protested Mineko weakly.

Bennish turned in his chair and leaned his face directly into Mineko's. For a second, she thought she was looking into the wild eyes of a madman.

"Don't you ever, ever, question one of my orders. Got that, Minami?"

Mineko had to turn her head. The stench of Bennish's breath was like fire in a sealed room; it stole the oxygen. To cover what might be considered by Bennish to be a breach of manners, Mineko quickly looked down, as if in a pose of remorse, and through gritted teeth said, "Yes, sir."

And as this test of wills was playing out, *Prometheus* was slowly lifting from the launch pad, a skyscraper sitting on a lobby of fire, lifting it skywards.

* * *

Major Mark Dwyer swiped his finger up, then down, then up again on the surface of his touchpad. He was confirming the space station's manifest and shut down procedures. For a second, he felt bad for Bennish. Boy, that mean son-of-a-bitch must've rushed like hell to get *Prometheus* ready once he, Major Dwyer, notified him that the space station's monitors had spotted nukes heading across the Atlantic.

Dwyer could imagine Bennish trying to keep his cool, while that temper of his boiled like magma beneath the Earth's crust. And, like that magma, Bennish's anger would erupt once it found a weak point, or a crewmember Bennish pegged as weak-willed. Dwyer prayed that whoever that

person was, he or she would find a way to pay Bennish back in kind.

"Major Dwyer, sir? The *Prometheus* will be docking in five minutes. We are ready for evacuation. Are there any other duties I should attend to?"

Dwyer swallowed hard and turned to Mission Specialist Larissa Ketanka. He reflexively wiped his hands on his pants (they always became moist with sweat whenever he laid eyes on Larissa) and wished he had popped that mint in his mouth that he had contemplated earlier. He hoped that the sound of his heart, which always beat in double time when the Russian beauty entered his surroundings, was not being heard outside of his middle-aged, yet fit, body.

"Yes, Ms Ketanka, I would like to make love to you; slow, passionate love. Something I've wanted to do since you took up residence here a year ago."

Major Dwyer didn't say it, but he thought it.

"Thank you, but no, Ms Ketanka. We are all set. Please just take your station and report the progress of *Prometheus*."

"Yes, sir." Larissa's golden, shoulder length hair (cut to military regulations) moved forward and back from her beautiful elfin face as she nodded. She slid her lithe five-foot, five-inch body into her seat and stared at her monitor. Her brow furrowed immediately.

"Major Dwyer, sir? The *Prometheus* is on course to dock with us, but her speed is increasing, not decreasing."

"That can't be..." Dwyer quickly moved to a position behind Larissa and leant over her, his head practically resting on her shoulder. Even in this time of stress, his mind subconsciously registered Larissa's natural scent (perfumes and colognes are banned from spaceflights), and a tingle shot

down his spine to his groin. His conscious mind was only concerned with the computer graphic that showed the trajectory of a very large icon named 'PROMETHEUS' intersecting and then passing through the tiny icon named 'SPACE STATION'.

"What the hell is that stupid bast—" Dwyer grabbed the microphone. "Space Station to *Prometheus*, Space station to *Prometheus*. Come in. Over."

Silence. Just a bit of interstellar static.

"Space Station to *Prometheus*! Come in. Over!" Dwyer's voice wavered a bit.

"Major Dwyer, sir. Impact in one minute." Larissa turned her head slightly to look at Dwyer. His jaw was set hard. His eyes were large and Larissa could see the gears spinning inside that brilliant pilot brain of his, weighing options and judging odds.

Dwyer's mind was working furiously. All engines had been shut down. He had no way to vent any gas, oxygen, or anything that would cause a force strong enough to nudge the space station out of its orbit. He was in a position of hopelessness.

When he was a child, he and his sister had walked down to the corner store to buy blue-vanilla Popsicles. They were strolling along innocently with their beloved dog, a collie-shepherd mix named Dusti. As they walked home, a neighbor's dog charged the fence they were passing and scared the hell out of them.

Dusti instinctively ran into the street (there were no leash laws in that small Texas town) to avoid the perceived threat. When she reached the far sidewalk she circled back to make a run at the offending dog.

Dwyer's heart still hurt when he remembered seeing, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the truck barreling down the street. He saw his dog barking and running full speed, her concentration solely on the dog that had harassed her masters. Dwyer couldn't stop it. A collision was inevitable. He could've closed his eyes or turned his head, but he didn't. He did remember yelling out, "Dusti!"

The truck slammed on its brakes but it was too late. The bumper caught Dusti broadside and she was rolled under it.

Even today, some thirty-five years later, he could not explain what went through his head at the time. It was a combination of 'I'm going to see something I love die right now' and 'how am I going to deal with what I'm about to see?'.

Dwyer looked at Larissa. Her eyes were pleading, hoping that he was going to say something brilliant, save them from the inevitable. But there was nothing. No tricks from a magic hat, no heroics that they would be able to joke about for the next fifty years at spaceflight reunions. No, they would not be holding court with a group of old-timers, former astronauts that were hearing the story again for the upteenth time, who would begin to laugh when he'd say, "Larissa, remember that time when that idiot Bennish almost rammed us?"

Dwyer swallowed hard. No. They were the dog in the road, the slow hanging curveball, the nail sticking up from the floorboard. They were about to be whacked. And Dwyer cursed the heavens that the only thing that came to him, the only words he could offer one of the most gorgeous creatures that God had ever created, was this:

"Get down and cover your head."

If Larissa was disappointed in Dwyer, she didn't let it show. She pushed back her chair and deftly dove under the table. She scrambled into a sitting position.

Dwyer, feeling more impotent than he had ever felt in his life, numbly climbed under the table opposite her. He looked at her and smiled meekly.

"Mark, come under here with me." Larissa patted the floor next to her.

Mark? Mark! Larissa had never called him by his first name. Dwyer scrambled out from his cover and crawled next to Larissa. They were squeezed shoulder to shoulder. Larissa looked into his eyes and placed her hand on his cheek. A thousand fireworks went off in Dwyer's head.

"Mark. Please, I must tell you. My feelings, I mean. I love you."

You can take me now, God, Mark thought, for I have heard the greatest words ever stated to me in my life.

Dwyer gently took Larissa's face in his hands. "You, Larissa, are the most beautiful girl I've ever known, and I love-"

Mark could've sworn he was able to read the letters 'P-R-O-M' on the fuselage of the ship that tore through the space station. He remembered holding Larissa's face in his hands and then the floor opened up and his world shattered into a million pieces. And now he realized his eyes were shut and he was slowly exhaling. Training. Yes, it was his training that made him close his eyes and exhale his breath after the collision.

When he was in astronaut training school years ago, he remembered reading about the accident in 1965 at the

Johnson Space Center Vacuum Chamber. An astronaut's suit had developed a leak and he was exposed for about fifteen seconds to the same conditions as the vacuum of space.

Scientists had learned that holding your breath would likely damage your lungs, and regardless of the myths, Dwyer knew he wouldn't immediately explode, or have his blood boil, or instantly freeze into that blue Popsicle he loved as a kid. He knew he'd probably live for a minute or two before he blacked out from lack of oxygen.

But, as luck would have it, he had been speaking when the ship hit and his lungs were depleted. He had maybe fifteen seconds left before his next futile gasp for air. Of course, it wouldn't find any in the vacuum of space and his body would then reflexively go into spasms, jerking like a hung man at the end of a botched execution. It would then be only a matter of minutes before his gaping mouth would set in the rictus of death.

But before that happened, he had something to do. He'd always been disappointed that man couldn't leave their space vehicles without space suits. He yearned to see space with the naked eye, not through multiple layers of heat shielding, sun blocking, and optically distorting glass. No, he had always wanted to see it without a fishbowl on his head and now he had the chance!

Dwyer opened his eyes. The stars were shining like diamonds. The spinning, rotating splinters of the space station reflected the reds, orange and yellows from the *Prometheus*' exhaust, which was now about ten miles away. Of Larissa, there was no sign. Why had his hands let her go? Oh, that's why, thought Dwyer when he looked down. His right

forearm had been severed just below his elbow, and his right leg was gone also.

Dwyer was about to look around for Larissa but then his vision blurred. He realized the moisture from the surface of his eyes was boiling away so he closed them. Hell, he was out of breath anyway. He would think of a few good thoughts then he'd take that futile attempt at a next breath and start that journey to the light that we all begin the moment we leave the womb.

He smiled as he remembered that Dusti survived her accident and escaped with only a fractured hip. She lived happily for five more years. And best of all, the best memory of his entire life had happened only seconds ago. Larissa Ketanka said she loved him.

4. STRANDED

“We’ll be docking with the space station in two minutes, sir. *Prometheus* to automatically decelerate in thirty seconds,” stated Mineko as she studied the display before her.

“Auto-pilot off. Take manual control, Minami.” Bennish was guiding the last of the civilians through the Strand Extraction Lab doors.

“Sir?”

Bennish clenched his fists and looked sharply at Mineko. “Minami, what did I tell you about questioning orders? Shut that damn auto-pilot off!”

“Captain Bennish, sir. I programmed the auto-pilot myself. It will position us optimally and we’ll dock with the station perfectly. I appreciate you trusting me to guide *Prometheus* under manual control but I’d prefer-”

Bennish walked over to Mineko, reached across her, brushing her breasts as he did so, and flipped the auto-pilot switch and the external communication channel off.

I hope you enjoyed reading the first three chapters of STRANDED.
On the following pages, you'll find the first three chapters of the horror novel,

CARNEVIL

And please feel free to visit

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to view the video trailers, learn more about the author, etc.

CARNEVIL



STEP RIGHT UP... THEN RUN LIKE HELL

DOUGLAS WENTWORTH

CARN EVIL

Douglas Wentworth

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*To my parents, who planted the seed of imagination in a
young mind, and nurtured its growth.*

CARNEVIL

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1

HEAD CHOPPERS

Sunday, September 24, 1950

Vernon Thomas drained the last sip of coffee from the tin cup, then spit a few bits of bean on the dirt-packed floor. He ground them in with the toe of his boot, then hung the cup back on the bent nail that protruded from the eastern white pine log, one of seventy-eight that Vernon’s ancestor, Bernard Thomas, had used to build the cabin.

Vernon was thankful for his plot of land, and its location on the western bank of Snow Shoe Lake in Maine, for it teemed with an abundance of salmon, yellow perch, and chain pickerel. But he was especially proud of the cabin’s construction, for in the mid eighteenth century, the majority of eastern white pine trees were reserved for the masts of His Majesty’s fleet, and it was very hard, nigh

impossible, for the average colonist to obtain enough to construct a homestead.

But Bernard Thomas had thought of himself as American royalty, and he had felled the marked logs while thumbing his nose at His Majesty, King George III. And after he killed the third Redcoat that was sent to investigate, there was never a fourth. So Bernard believed he had scared the bejesus out of the British Army (even though this coincided with King George III proclaiming the cessation of hostilities). Thus, he appointed himself as leader of the three families that lived, toiled, and, eventually, died, around him.

Yup, thought Vernon, as he belched, tightened his suspenders, and headed for the door, you're from royalty and don't ever forget it. Forget it. Vernon stopped in his tracks. He had promised Leola two scoops of ice cream today, instead of the sole one she had enjoyed last week, so he turned back to grab the extra ten cent piece he had placed on the table the previous night. He rubbed it on his shirt, deposited it in his chest pocket, and then stepped out to the brisk, morning air.

As soon as Vernon took his first deep breath, there on the smooth planked porch, he knew something was wrong. There was a strong smell of burned wood in the air, much more than normal. But there was also another smell riding the wind of this September morning, a smell that wrenched the gut; a smell that meant death and destruction, for this was the smell of burnt flesh; human flesh.

Vernon scanned the skyline and saw a wisp of smoke coming from the northwestern part of the forest, in the

direction of the *Wasseck County Carnival*. That old fool, thought Vernon as he took off in a fast trot, conserving energy, as the carnival was a good two miles away. Because of his penny pinching ways, Jeremiah Wasseck, the owner of the carnival, had placed it at risk of fire. The carnival was surrounded by acres of forest, yet many entrepreneurs, drawn like moths to a flame by the carnival's success, had offered to raze the woods so they could build restaurants and shops nearby. This would have, eventually, lead to a fire station being built. But Jeremiah had refused all proposals. "If people want to eat, they'll buy something from my food booths," he declared forcibly. "If they want to shop, they can purchase souvenirs from my vendors and no one else. I won't have leeches bleeding me dry or making one penny profit on the back of my hard labor."

Jeremiah's rantings had no effect on attendance, though, as the carnival remained as popular as ever. People from all around filled the place each season, which lasted from April to September. But they wouldn't anymore, guessed Vernon, when he finally entered the clearing.

The blackened, twisted steel skeleton of the *Fair-Ground Ferris Wheel* was the first thing Vernon noticed. The heat of the blaze must have been intense, he thought, for the frame was buckled almost in half. And those newfangled, colored plastic seats that adorned the ride, now looked like melted globs of his favorite treat, Bazooka Bubble Gum, which had just recently been introduced by Topps Chewing Gum, Inc. For some reason, Vernon remembered hearing that the gum was not

named after the weapon, but in honor of the musical instrument made famous by Bob Burns. Burns. My God, what has happened to the Bailey family, to Leola? Were they burned alive?

The chain links of the carnival's boundary fence were cool to the touch and Vernon pressed his face against them; his eyes scanning for any sign of life. Nothing. Nothing but the wisps of smoke that rose like the tendrils of some runaway vine, climbing from the burning embers of the food and game booths. Vernon ran to the front gate and tried to pull it open. He knew it was kept locked overnight and, as he suspected, his effort proved futile. Wait a minute. Something's wrong.

Vernon examined the mortise lock that prevented the gate from opening. Someone, or something, had mangled it, smashed it in, so that even if one had the key, it would be impossible to unlock the gate. Did someone do this on purpose? Was the carnival set on fire, then the arsonist left through the front gate, and smashed the lock in hope that no one would be able to enter and douse the flames? Or worse, was it done to ensure that no one would escape? Vernon bit his lip. Who would want to hurt the Baileys?

Thoughts filled Vernon's head as he turned and started toward the police station, a good four miles away. Now let's see. The Baileys had been caretakers of the carnival for the past twelve years. The carnival closed for the season just two weeks ago. Who could they have come across in that length of time that would do this to them? Now don't jump ahead, Vern, you don't even know

if they're in there. But reasoning that they were, maybe the arsonist only had it in for one of them, not the entire family. Vernon bit his lip. No, the entire family was a bit off, something wasn't quite right with them. The head of the household, Ben Bailey, was a very stern and strict man, never smiled, and his hatchet-faced wife, Edna, was a pompous ass, thought Vernon. That teen son, Amos, the spittin' image of his father, was just as glum and serious, but the sixteen year old daughter, Leola, now she was different. Or was she?

The first time Vernon saw Leola, exactly one week ago, it was from behind. How many men have fallen in love with women based on that view alone? How many men stayed in love after seeing them from the front? Vernon recalled that he had been walking towards town to pick up some supplies when he spotted Leola a few steps in front of him. He studied the tight little backside in the hand-me-down jeans that were a bit too small, and burned that image into his head forever. The perfect hourglass shape and the silken black hair cascading down her back were mesmerizing. The resulting stir in his groin gave new strength to his legs and he jogged to catch up with her. And once he saw the pure, milky white skin of the face, with the cutest little button nose set between blue eyes that sparkled like diamonds...well, he was ready for marriage. He then looked down at the budding breasts that were straining at the wool of the knitted sweater and swallowed hard. He was lucky he remembered his name. He knew he'd never forget hers.

As they strolled along, Vern learned that Leola was sixteen and was now allowed to walk alone into town. In previous years, her older brother, Amos, did it. That's why he had never seen her before. Vern decided right then and there to take more interest in the caretakers and visit the carnival every few days.

So on that first day, when he entered the general store with Leola, he thought he'd be a gentleman and buy her an ice cream. Leola's eyes went wide in anticipation but then a wave of disappointment extinguished them. No, she explained, she was permitted to have ice cream only once per year, on Easter. And though she loved it dearly, she had to decline. Vern feigned understanding, but something he saw in her eyes, a glint of conspiracy, perhaps, made him pull her aside, away from the proprietor, where he spoke to her in a low whisper. He asked if he were to bring the ice cream outside, away from prying eyes, if she'd partake. She readily agreed. So once the shopping was completed, Vern asked for scoops of vanilla in cups, and brought them outdoors to a waiting Leola, who had exited the store moments earlier. Vern motioned to the blacksmith's shed, which he knew would be empty until noon, and suggested they sit on bales of hay and relax while they ate their ice cream.

A shiver shot up Vern's spine when he thought back to what had transpired in the darkened blacksmith shop once the last spoonful of the cold, creamy delicacy had been devoured. Good Lordy, that was probably the best morning of his life. Leola's body would've brought the Pope himself to his knees. The skin was flawless, her

muscles toned and taut. And when he entered her she made the cutest little sound-

Vern stopped and looked up at the wooden sign that indicated he had reached the police station. The next half hour was a whirlwind of confusion. Vern telling Chief Wisehunt about the smoldering ruins; the Chief putting a call out to his deputy, and the deputy rounding up concerned citizens willing to travel to the scene. Someone grabbed a pair of bolt cutters and off they went; bouncing and jostling over the dirt road; all while standing on the police wagon's running board and holding on for dear life.

When the wagon pulled up to the carnival's front gate, everyone jumped off and rushed it, Chief Wisehunt brandishing the bolt cutter over his head like it was some magical talisman. And once enough chain links had been disjointed, the gate pulled free, allowing the men from town to swarm over the carnival's grounds like a bull stampede. But Vern didn't enter the carnival. He held onto the gate, and gazed through it with unseeing eyes, as his mind transported him back one week's time. Back to the last conversation he had with old man Bailey. It had been on Sunday, the day after his tryst with Leola.

Vern had been walking by the gate on that clear crisp morning and saw Ben Bailey oiling the gate's lock. Ben eyed Vern and his facial expression projected that he was in a particularly foul mood. Vern wished he hadn't been noticed, that he could have slithered away. But no, Vern had walked too close to the gate, hoping to catch a glimpse of Leola, when the hawk-nosed face of Ben Bailey reared

its head. Vern didn't scare easily but he remembered how he had unconsciously taken a step backward. Then he swallowed hard and asked Ben how he was doing. It was a weak opening but he couldn't think of anything better. He had even forgotten to mention the weather, which is second nature to a New Englander, proving just how discombobulated he was. And he became even more befuddled, when he realized that Ben Bailey was opening up to him; telling him what was perturbing him.

The more Ben spoke and warmed up to Vern, the colder Vern's blood ran, for Ben described how he had ordered his son, eighteen year old Amos, to run some electrical cable in the ticket booth, and how that had evolved into a nightmare...for Amos, that is.

Apparently, Ben Bailey was making his rounds and when he walked up to the ticket booth, he found Amos with his pants down around his ankles, his male member in one hand and a magazine cover of the swimsuit clad actress, Lana Lake, in the other. Ben was red-faced and furious as he explained how Amos had almost 'released his seed' which would have doomed his soul to hell for eternity. After hearing what Ben Bailey did to his son's testicles with the hammer and steel staples he was supposed to be using for the cabling, Vern guessed that Amos would've rather burned in hell than faced that punishment. And as Ben Bailey went into excruciating detail regarding the torture to his son's manhood, Vern felt like he was going to faint. That feeling almost became reality in the next minute.

Ben pulled his hanky from his back pocket and wiped the glistening sweat from his forehead, which had

perspired profusely as he relived the improvised penance he had inflicted. He then calmed down and stated flatly that he would have to keep a better eye on Leola, as she was now a young lady and she might be tempted to touch herself 'down there'. Ben didn't seem too concerned, for he stated that he had already had a long talk with Doc Baker, who had assured him that once Leola was done with her chores this season, he'd be able to perform something called a clitoridectomy on her, which would miraculously chase any demon thoughts of self pleasure away from the young woman's head. It was being used in Africa to great success, said Doc Baker, and he would gladly inspect and reconfigure Leola's genitals for free.

Ben had thanked the good doctor profusely and asked him to remove whatever he had to so that, in addition to Leola's mind staying free and clear of temptation, the area below her waist would be unattractive to men. Ben went on to explain that Leola would be working for them until she was an old maid and would have no need to marry or bear a child.

Vern's blood now turned hot with fear. He could feel his face becoming flush. Had he not bedded Leola just a week ago in the blacksmith's shop? Didn't she promise him that if he gave her two scoops of ice cream this week she'd let him defile her young, nubile body in whatever way his heart desired? If Ben Bailey believed in mutilating his own children to prevent sexual thoughts from entering their heads, my God, what would he do to me for deflowering his only daughter? Vern mumbled something to Ben about his being a good father with great

intentions and all, then quickly bade goodbye, using the excuse that he had planned to spend the day fishing and wanted to get out on the lake as quickly as possible.

All this came back to Vern as he looked through the chain links of the fence and watched Chief Wisehunt head toward the Baileys' cabin with the rest of the boys. Guess they couldn't find any sign of them among the rides or booths. Vern stepped back from the fence and looked up where the large, hand carved, gold leafed letters spelled out the name, *Wasseck County Carnival*. Now that's odd, he thought. Why are some letters missing? Vern counted aloud as he used his index finger to point to the remaining letters: W, C, K, O, U, N, and T. No doubt about it, fourteen letters were missing, including the ones that made up the word 'carnival'. Vern looked around him. No letters on the ground. And he was sure that they hadn't perished in the fire, for the remaining letters weren't even scorched.

The yells and screams from Chief Wisehunt and his men caught Vern's attention. He looked up and saw some of the younger men from town run out of the Bailey cabin and immediately vomit all over the neat rows of annuals that Mrs. Bailey had tended to these past twelve years. And when Vern saw Chief Wisehunt walk out of the cabin, holding Leola's severed head by its hair, he felt the kick in the gut, and within a second, his breakfast was covering his shoes.



By the time Chief Wisehunt sat down to write his report, this is what he knew: All four members of the Bailey

family had been hacked to death with, what appeared to be, an ax or a large hatchet. The bodies had been dismembered with parts strewn about the cabin's floor. For some reason, a page from the Bible was found stuffed in Mrs. Bailey's mouth. The Chief figured it was meant to be a statement left by the killer, but neither he, nor the detectives assigned to the case, could ever figure it out. They were thankful that, though the killer set the walls of the cabin ablaze, the bodies on the ground hadn't burned, thus leaving some evidence behind. Not that it was useful. For the only iron clad evidence that was ever found, evidence that pointed to a killer's thirst for revenge, was found outside the carnival grounds a few days later.

An insurance assessor, surveying the carnival's property line, found something that the police had missed. A piece of paper, on which someone had written a crude poem in Ben Bailey's blood, had been attached to a tree with a couple of large, steel staples; the type one would use to hold cabling or small diameter pipe against a wall. The staples had been pounded so forcefully, that indentations around them gave clue as to what instrument was used to create them. And it was decided that the blunt end of an ax had been used; probably the same one that killed the Baileys.

And though the poem was published in local papers and read over the evening newscasts, no one was ever able to identify its author. Without any clues, the police were stymied, and no arrest was ever made. Jeremiah Wasseck was never able to raise the funds needed to rebuild, so,

emotionally devastated, he took the small settlement from his insurance company and moved to Poland, to be near an ailing sister. A year later, while accompanying her on the German cruise ship, *MV Wilhelm Gustloff*, Jeremiah was killed along with nine thousand others, when a Soviet submarine sunk the ship in the Baltic Sea.

Jeremiah's bloated, floating body was recovered a few days later. A small, leather-bound diary was attached to his waistcoat by a stout, gold chain. Those that read the diary, hoping to find names of relatives, found instead that Jeremiah kept lists of the names of every amateur poet he came across in his travels, in some twisted hope that the police would track down all of these 'suspects' and match their handwriting to the killer's note attached to the tree.

When the parcel containing the diary finally arrived at police headquarters, Chief Wisehunt opened it, looked at the accompanying letter from the ever-efficient German police, then opened the diary. There, on the very first page, was the killer's 'poem', which had been copied from the original, letter by letter, by Jeremiah Wasseck.

Chief Wisehunt remembered how Jeremiah had stormed into the station after the note was found and had demanded to see it. Two deputies, donned with rubber gloves, held it down on a desktop, while Jeremiah's arthritic fingers painstakingly transcribed the note into his diary. The Chief remembered that Jeremiah's fountain pen kept blotting the page with globs of ink; his hand was shaking so much. And once Jeremiah finished, he double checked his spelling, then exited the building, putting his faith in Chief Wisehunt, who he respected.

And now the Chief felt terribly about not being able to solve the crime.

Before placing the diary into the near-empty 'Wasseck County Carnival Murders' evidence box, the Chief stared at the poem, then read its contents aloud to no one in particular.

I asked for a job to help feed my kin.

They beat me so hard, they flayed off my skin.

They hadn't a clue with who they were messin',

So I taught one and all, a hell of a lesson.

Chief Wisehunt slowly closed the diary, placed it in the evidence box, and then closed the lid for the very last time. He had a gut feeling that the perpetrator would never be caught. But that didn't bother him as much as the depressing thought that he would never know exactly what happened. He didn't have enough evidence to establish a timeline, and that would bother him like an itch he could never reach. It killed him to know that somewhere, right now, there was someone out there that knew exactly what happened on that fateful day.

2

VICTIM OR CULPRIT

Saturday, September 23, 1950

Casey Leester shifted the duffel bag from his left to right shoulder. He took a moment to check his watch, which he had shoved deep in his pocket before heading out from home earlier that morning. Well, it wasn't really Casey's home; it was his in-laws'. Casey had married the former Virginia Collins in August, and her parents had offered them the use of an empty stable on their farm as temporary shelter until Casey found another job.

The hot, humid air that had settled over Maine's farmlands the previous few months had sapped the life out of Casey, like a wet blanket thrown on a roaring fire. He had been laboring in the fields over fifteen hours a day, with nothing to show for it but some emaciated livestock.

And the August harvest of broad beans, beetroot, and shelling peas, was as slim as the withered cucumbers he'd gnaw on during the day to soothe his parched throat. No, Casey Leester needed to find a new job; a way to generate income for, what he hoped, was the start of a new family for himself and his missus. So he packed up a few belongings and headed south, leaving Aroostok, Maine, around 6:30am.

The sun, which had risen to greet him when he started out, now hung low in the western sky, casting long shadows among the trees. But it was still unseasonably warm; Indian Summer would last a little longer this year.

Casey took the pocket watch out again. Was it really almost 4:00pm? It's funny how a man walking through the forest, with just his own thoughts to keep him company, could lose track of time. In a way, it seemed like he had only been walking a few hours. But on the other hand, the good-bye kiss he had shared with his new bride that morning was a distant memory. Oh well. If he didn't come across anyone soon, anyone that would let him put his head down for the night, he'd make a bed of pine needles and hunker down until sunrise next morning. He had two oranges left in his kit and, though he was thirsty, he'd wait for bedtime to eat the first one and breakfast for the other.

Not a soul in sight. Casey stopped and cocked his head. Now that's strange. Why's it so quiet here? Where are the sounds of the birds, or the squirrels, or the chipmunks? A shiver shot up Casey's spine, as if someone walked over his grave. Casey was no coward and he didn't

scare easily. But something about this place just didn't feel right. He decided to walk another few miles, hoping the terrain, and the accompanying mood of the place, would change for the better.

Less than a half mile later, as he entered a small clearing, Casey stumbled, and not because his legs were weak from walking or he had tripped over a partially concealed root. No, Casey's left foot had hit an unusually soft patch of ground. His foot sank into the earth a good four inches. Once he steadied himself he surveyed the area and made a disturbing discovery.

The soft patch was part of a larger plot of land, about three feet wide by six feet long. The dirt was dotted with weeds and grass but not enough to conceal it among its surroundings. At the far end of the plot, Casey eyed two thin slats of wood, lying on the ground. He picked them up and hefted them in his hands. They were constructed of light wood, probably pine, that had been painted white. The pieces were only half an inch thick and two inches wide. One was three feet long, and the end of it was pointed, stake-like. The point was dark and rotted, as if it had once been planted in the soil.

Casey's curiosity was piqued when he realized that the slats were joined at their centers. Someone had driven a single nail through them so the boards could be rotated, like the hands of a clock. By looking closely at the peeling paint, Casey could see that the boards had been, at one time, positioned perpendicular to one another. So he rotated the slats until they were in, what he was sure to be, their original positions.

The slats formed a crucifix.

Casey dropped it back on the grave and continued walking, due south. If he had walked just thirty feet further east, he would've found two other similar graves, which perhaps would have caused him to reconsider the wisdom of continuing his journey in the same general direction. But the discovery of the one grave resulted in Casey believing (or trying to believe) that he had found the reason for the dark mood that hung over this section of forest. He convinced himself that the absence of animals was due to the disruptive human activity that must have taken place during the grave digging. Or maybe an animal's sense of smell was so sensitive that it could discern the smell of a rotting body, no matter how deeply buried, and instinct would make it avoid the area. Yes, that was it, thought Casey as he quickened the pace. If this had been in an open area, or a desert, birds of prey would've descended upon the area after the dumping of a dead body. But since this was a forest, it had resulted in the opposite.

His mind relieved, Casey whistled a childhood song, off tune, and continued his fateful walk.



"Well I'll be a son of a gun."

Casey let out a low whistle. He had just emerged from the forest and found himself on the edge of an empty, graveled parking lot. Looking left and right, he calculated the width of the lot to be about one hundred yards,

and it was about twenty-five yards to the opposite side. Casey traversed the distance slowly, his eyes glued on the sight before him. When he reached the opposite side, his hands grabbed onto a chain link fence and he pressed his nose to it, like a gawker at a zoo, to get a better glimpse of what was inside. But the fence wasn't built to prevent animals from escaping. It was erected to prevent humans from entering. And it looked like it was up to the job.

The fence enclosed an area the size and shape of a football field. It stood twenty feet high and was topped with barbed wire. An opening in the fence was sealed off with a section of chain link that sat on steel wheels, and had been slid across the opening. And the mortise lock that ensured the gate was secure, posed a formidable barrier to entry.

The establishment that was so competently protected brought a smile from Casey, for it brought back wonderful memories of similar establishments he had visited as a child. He wished the gate was open and he could enter, but the sign on the fence that proclaimed it was '*Closed for the Season*' reminded him it wouldn't be much fun at this time of year anyway.

Releasing his grasp on the fence, Casey stepped back a few feet and looked up at a spot about five feet above his head. Attached to the fencing were beautiful, hand-carved wood letters, which spelled out the name, *Wasseck County Carnival*. Every letter was upper case and over two feet tall. The intricate scrolling and edgework was highlighted by, what looked like, real gold leaf, while the main body of the letters was the color of treated redwood.

Well, Mr. Wasseck, whomever you are, you sure know how to build them, thought Casey. He slowly scanned the carnival's grounds from left to right, relishing in the architectural and design elements of the attractions: the various game and food booths; the towering Ferris wheel; the double, camel-humped roller coaster; the majestic carousel with its elaborately carved horses and chariots; and numerous other, smaller thrill rides. Oh, what a shame these marvels of engineering were stilled for the winter, thought Casey, for they are so full of life when moving, surrounded by celebrating throngs of people, causing shrieks of laughter and screams of fear. Such a waste that here it sat, a beautiful carnival, dormant for months, looking like a still painting.

Wait a moment. What was that?

Casey silently scooted to his right, closer to the center of the fence. When he reached the gate he pressed his face as close as possible to the chain links. He had recognized movement near one of the food booths to his left, and had changed his position to provide a better vantage point. Yes! Yes, there it was again! Someone stepped behind *Harry's Hot Dog Booth*!

Keeping his eyes focused on the booth, Casey was soon rewarded. A young woman, probably about sixteen or seventeen, stepped out and examined the clapboards on the side of the booth. She looked down at the paintbrush in her hand then back at the boards. Her face scrunched up as if she had tasted a lemon. She folded her arms and started tapping her foot.

Casey leaned into the fence, cupped his hands, and yelled out, "Staring at it won't get it painted!"

The young woman, visibly startled, turned her head so fast that Casey half expected her to self induce a whip-lash. But once her eyes settled on Casey, she quickly regained her composure.

"Well, instead of you standing there all insulting and stuff, why don't you offer to help me?"

Casey threw his head back and laughed. She was a hot ticket; dishing it out as good as she could take it. He spit on his hand and held it out, as if to shake hands. "You hire me and I will. Is it a deal?"

The young woman walked over to the fence. As she approached, Casey was able to get a better look at her. She was one of those rare specimens that actually looked better up close. He noticed her skin was flawless, what he could see of it. It appeared that someone, her mother or father, thought it would be wise for the girl to wear World War II era WAC (Women's Army Corps) coveralls; the kind made famous in the '*Rosie the Riveter*' posters. In a way, it made sense, for the olive drab, herringbone twill uniform would protect her torso, arms and legs from paint splatter. But the weight of the material was all wrong for the heat of Indian Summer. She must be sweating up a storm, thought Casey. But when she reached the gate he noticed that her blue eyes were wide and bright, displaying no sign of exhaustion, and the forehead under the silken black hair was void of perspiration. This hot ticket was also one cool chick.

"So you want to be hired," said the girl with a sly smile. "Well, that would be up to my daddy. You see, my family's the caretakers here."

Casey twisted his head and looked around at the deserted parking lot and carnival grounds. A dense forest surrounded the entire area. Casey couldn't imagine a more isolated, remote location. "A carnival in the middle of nowhere," proclaimed Casey. "Does it do much business?"

"We're told it's packed in the summer."

"You telling me that you and yours don't come here yourselves during open season?"

"No," said the young girl bluntly. "We don't like what goes on in places like this. You know, the drinking and carrying on and stuff."

"Some people would call that fun."

The young girl shook her head. "We're good Christian folk, we keep to ourselves. It's why we like the caretaking. No one bothers us. Well, maybe a drifter once in a while."

It was Casey's turn to smile slyly. "Like me."

"Like you."

There was an uncomfortable moment while the young woman looked Casey up and down, like a plantation owner eyeballing a potential slave. Usually, if an attractive young woman gave Casey the eye, his ego would jump up a notch. But for some reason, he wasn't flattered this time; he was uncomfortable yet he didn't know why. He conquered the awkward moment by forcing out a question.

“So how many years have you and your family been caretaking?”

“Since I was a baby.”

“Then how is it you don’t know how to paint?”

The young woman crossed her arms and pouted. “Cause it’s my first year having to whitewash. I’m usually helping my ma with the general cleaning.”

Casey nodded his head. “Okay. I’ll buy that. Well, if you want to learn, I can teach you how to do it. And how to do it right.”

The young woman bit her lip, contemplating Casey. Without saying a word, she walked over to the ticket booth, a small, wood shack positioned just inside the gate. She squatted down and pried out a large knot from the front of the booth. She reached in, pulled out a skeleton key, then made her way to the gate that Casey was now leaning against.

“Back up a bit,” she commanded.

Casey obliged and the young woman unlocked the gate. She grasped the chain linking with both hands and slid the gate open. Casey stepped across into the carnival’s grounds. There it was again, that fleeting feeling that someone had just stepped over his grave. What was wrong with him? Why was he entertaining thoughts of doom and gloom? Regardless of his emotions, Casey remembered his manners. He held out his hand.

“Casey Leester. At your service.”

The young woman took his hand and shook it firmly. “Leola. Leola Bailey. So what brings you to these parts?”

“Looking for work. Got hitched last month but we have to live with my wife’s folks until we can afford a place of our own,” said Casey. He tried to judge Leola’s age. He wasn’t sure if she was old enough to understand the need of newlyweds to escape from their parents’ roost. “How old are you, Leola?”

“Sixteen,” said Leola haughtily. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” said Casey dismissively. He looked at the hot dog booth then the brush in Leola’s hand. “How about showing me to your daddy? Once I tell him how hard I’ll work, I bet he hires me on the spot.”

“Well, aren’t you the confident one.”

“I sure am. So put that there key away and take me to him. Then we’ll come back and paint that booth.”

Leola pursed her lips as if to say something but held her tongue. She instead walked calmly to the ticket booth, deposited the key in its hole, placed the knot back in position then turned to Casey. “I’ve a better idea,” she said with a slight smile plastered on her face. “What’s say we paint it, then I show my pa what a good job you’ve done. Then he’ll be more apt to hire you.”

For some reason, Casey felt that Leola’s words didn’t ring true. But that was ridiculous; he had no reason to doubt her. He drove all doubt from his mind. “I guess you know better than I how your daddy will react to me.”

The smile on Leola’s face broadened. “I sure do.”

Leola walked toward the booth and Casey quickly took up station with her. She looked him up and down then nodded at the duffel bag slung over his shoulder. “How many shirts you’ve got with you?”

Casey stopped and pointed at himself with both hands, indicating the tattered, plaid shirt he was wearing. "You're looking at it."

"Then you'd best take it off," said Leola seriously. "The paint's oil based. It won't wash out."

"Okay," said Casey with a shrug. He unbuttoned his shirt and peeled it off, revealing a sinewy, taut physique. As he placed it in his bag, Leola's lips parted ever so slightly. The tip of her tongue emerged just long enough to wet her lips, then it darted back out of sight, like a cuckoo after marking the hour. Casey, oblivious to Leola's telling expression, stepped behind the booth. His eyes settled on a couple of extra brushes and two coffee cans filled with white paint. Leola nodded toward them.

"My daddy said each can should be enough to paint two sides of the booth. And I may have a bit left over cause the front of the booth has that big opening."

"Well, you're daddy knows what he's talking about. I think we'll have just enough," said Casey as he held his hand out to Leola. She looked at it blankly for a second then realized he wanted her brush. She handed it over and watched as Casey dipped it in the paint, and wiped off the excess on the lip of the can. He stepped toward the rear of the booth. "Come here and I'll show you how it's done."

Leola approached and Casey placed the brush in her hand and adjusted her grip. He turned her to face the wall and stepped behind her, placing his right hand on the back of hers. Then, like some sort of futuristic, exoskeleton teacher, he controlled her hand and

applied paint to the clapboards in a fluid up and down motion. "The trick's in the wrist," said Casey. "That's it. Nice and easy."

Casey was pressed so closely to Leola that his warm breath was tickling her right earlobe, sending shivers down her spine. She felt her nipples harden and her stomach fluttered. Casey, meanwhile, was all business. Though Leola was a sexually attractive young woman, there was something about her that made her unattractive to him. She was just a bit off, though he couldn't put his finger on it.

After five or six strokes, Casey was sure that Leola had the hang of it. After all, she was whitewashing a hot dog booth, not painting the ceiling of a chapel. He let go of her hand and stepped back.

"You go that way," said Casey as he pointed to the right hand side of the booth. "And I'll go this way. We'll meet in the middle of the opposite side."

"Sounds good to me," sighed Leola as the wave of hormones that had coursed through her body abated, like an ocean's swell at low tide.

Casey smiled, grabbed a brush and a can of paint, then concentrated on the job at hand. He soon found himself in a rhythm; his long, perpendicular paint strokes covered the boards efficiently. He found he was whistling to himself. And why shouldn't he? It was a warm, fall day, he was engaged in honest work, and it was work he excelled at. He looked forward with high hopes. Soon he'd meet Leola's father and his work would be rewarded.

But if, at that moment, a psychic, clairvoyant, or fortune teller had told Casey what his reward would be, he would've bolted like a jackrabbit, headed for the proverbial hills, and never looked back.

3

SETUP

Half an hour later, Casey and Leola were painting the same side of the booth, their hands and arms covered in spots of paint. Fifteen minutes later, their brushes were side by side, completing the whitewashing. There was a few feet of clapboard left to cover and Casey, wanting to prove he was a gentleman, suggested that Leola step back, relax, and let him finish it.

"That's mighty kind of you," said Leola slyly as she retreated a few feet behind Casey. "This hard work has made me overheat. Any more and I'd feel faint."

Casey concentrated on the job before him. "I wouldn't want you getting all hot and feverish."

"I already have," said Leola as she dropped her brush and paint can, then unfastened all of the coverall buttons above her beltline. Grabbing a lapel in each hand, she spread her garment open, baring her chest like

Superman exposing his stylized 'S'. She then moved her bra cups aside and released her grapefruit sized breasts; her raspberry hued nipples hard with desire.

Casey, who had just completed the last stroke, stepped back, placed the brush and paint can at his feet, then admired his work. Satisfied, he turned to Leola. "Leola. I think—"

Leola rushed him, grabbing Casey's biceps with her hands while she pressed her lips against his. Casey, caught totally off guard, recovered quickly and brought his hands up. He grabbed Leola's wrists gently, yet firmly. He pushed her away. "Hey, Leola! What are you doing? C'mon, now? I told you I'm spoken for!"

Leola backed away, panting. "Since when has that stopped any man?" She rushed forward again, more determined this time, like a shark coming in for the kill. This time, instead of grabbing Casey's biceps, she gripped his wrists and, as she pressed her face close to his, she pulled his hands to her breasts. She knew she had placed his thumbs directly over her nipples.

"Can you feel how excited I am?"

Casey immediately broke Leola's grip and turned the tables. Grabbing her wrists, he pushed her back forcibly.

"Stop it!" he said with the stern tone of a commanding officer.

Leola's eyes shot daggers at Casey. "What's a matter with you? You queer or something?"

"No. Not at all."

"Oh, so it's me then. Am I ugly or something?"

"Of course not, Leola. You're a very pretty girl. Believe me. But I just got hitched to a fine woman. And I'm asking your daddy for a job," Casey said as he shook his head. "And I'm sure he wouldn't take too kindly if he thought I was messing with you."

Leola's face, which had reflected pure contempt while Casey was speaking, underwent a remarkable change once her father was mentioned. She smiled, but it was a sly, devilish grin. "You're right," she said. "He wouldn't." Unashamedly, she folded her breasts, which now bore spots of paint from Casey's hands, back into her bra and buttoned her coveralls, as matter-of-factly as if she was tying a ribbon in her hair. She looked at Casey, the smile growing broader. "Come on. I'll take you to him now."

"Much obliged," said Casey as he nodded his head and reached for his duffle bag.

In awkward silence, they picked up the paint cans and brushes. Leola turned toward the center of the carnival and started walking. Casey stepped in line behind her. After walking a few feet, he felt he had to say something. If he was going to be working with Leola, he wanted to pour oil on any troubled waters he may have stirred up.

"I hope there's no hard feelings, Leola."

Leola stopped and turned. Her face was the picture of innocence. "Why would there be?"

Casey scuffed the dry ground with his toe. "Well, I'd understand if you felt offended."

Leola turned back around and started walking. Under her breath she said, "And the righteous will rejoice when seeing the vengeance."

“You say something?” asked Casey.

Leola flashed him a warm, embracing smile. “I said I’m sure your wife appreciates your allegiance.”



The toolshed that Leola lead Casey to was relatively small, about twenty feet to a side. Casey figured that there must be a larger building, probably a storage shed, somewhere nearby, and that would be where the heavy equipment: utility truck; lawn mowers; machine tools, were probably kept under wraps. He briefly looked around as Leola fumbled with the door but couldn’t pick out which building it would be on this, the back right quadrant, of the carnival’s grounds.

Leola had opened the door, so Casey followed her in. She placed her things on the floor and he followed suit. He then glanced at his new surroundings. His first impression was of a place that could turn the most outgoing extrovert into a claustrophobic. The walls were fashioned of dark brown wood. This alone wouldn’t be bad but the shed was not, to his knowledge, equipped with electricity. The only light appeared to be coming in from three small windows that were centered in the side and back walls. Pegboards covered the walls, and a myriad of hand tools were neatly hung from them. Casey noticed that, on the wall to his left, three duffel bags, similar to his, were hung just inside the door. A seed of doubt sprouted in his stomach.

The sound of water running from a faucet caused Casey to focus diagonally across the room to the opposite

corner. There, a strapping young man of about eighteen years old was rinsing something in the sink. He had looked back at Casey and then, with disinterested eyes, turned back to his chore. As for what he was rinsing, Casey didn’t have a clue; the man’s back blocked his view.

Immediately to the right, a tall, stocky man, about fifty years old, presumably Mister Bailey, was stacking bags of cement. At first, Casey snickered at the man’s choice of work clothes, thinking him to be an amateur, for he was outfitted in a heavy, grey, wool suit with noticeable perspiration showing on his face and forehead. The pants had a flat front (Casey read somewhere that men’s suits were supposed to have pleats but that practice had stopped during the war to save on fabric) and the vest was of matching material. Even in the stifling confines of the shed, the man had his tie knotted up tightly to his Adam’s apple. His shirtsleeves ended in double cuffs, held together by plain, silver cufflinks.

Any thoughts that Casey nurtured regarding the man’s work ethic withered as he studied the way he stacked the cement bags. He knew what he was doing. Wooden planks protected the bottom bags from the damp floor, and the bags were placed as closely together as possible to reduce the circulation of air. The bags were arranged in the preferred header-and-stretcher fashion, in which bags are placed both length-wise and cross-wise, allowing them to interlock, reducing the risk of them toppling over.

As each bag was placed in position, the man shouted out a solitary number, which Casey noticed was dutifully written down by, what he assumed to be, the man’s wife

and Leola's mother, Mrs. Bailey. Casey took an immediate dislike to the obese, hatchet-faced woman, that had been stuffed into her Victorian dress like ground meat into a sausage casing. And though Casey found her physically repulsive, there was still something else disturbing about her, something emanating from her. Conceit. Yes, that was it, thought Casey, conceit.

Mrs. Bailey sat on a makeshift bench, back ramrod straight, holding the chewed Number 2 pencil in her chubby little hand, with her pinky extended...as if she was holding the Queen's necklace. She looked down her pig-nose to transcribe the entry on her clipboard, which she could barely see due to her large, shapeless breasts. They looked like two sand bags, void of any definition, hanging over her stomach, which hung over her thighs, which hung over her knees, etc., etc.

Leola made a statement that pulled Casey's thoughts away from her disturbing parents, and he was overjoyed for the distraction. Though it was short-lived.

"Ma. Pa. This is Casey Leester. He sweet-talked his way in here. Made me open the gate. Says he's looking for work."

Casey turned to Leola, puzzled, but then turned back to the Baileys, who had stopped their work to appraise the shirtless stranger in their midst. Their faces were void of expression.

"I explained to Leola that I'm newly married and would put in an honest day's work for you good people if you'll hire me," said Casey hoping to soften, what seemed like, a harsh introduction from Leola.

The father, Ben Bailey, approached Casey and felt his biceps. He then poked him in the stomach. He never looked Casey in the eye or acknowledged him as a person. No. Casey was being evaluated as a slave, a piece of machinery, and Ben Bailey had to be assured that Casey wouldn't be the cog that stopped the machine or prevented it from working efficiently. Ben Bailey looked to his wife and raised an eyebrow. "Mother?"

The mother, Edna Bailey, was studying Casey with dead eyes. She turned back to her chart. "Looks strong enough."

Ben Bailey grunted what Casey interpreted as approval. But then he grabbed Casey's hands and studied the spots and streaks of white paint. "What's this?"

"I helped your daughter whitewash."

"Without my approval? No pay for that."

Casey glanced at Leola. A sly grin was cast his way. He turned back to Ben Bailey and said humbly, "I was just trying to help your daughter, sir." He swallowed hard. "That one will be on me."

Ben Bailey nodded. "All right, then." He pointed toward the dirty brushes then the sink. "Take the brushes you used and wash them at the sink before they're ruined."

Casey thought he had given this man too much credit earlier. Maybe Ben Bailey, regardless of his cement stacking knowledge, really didn't know anything about handyman work. Casey tried to make his next words seem as innocuous as possible. "Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Bailey, sir. But water won't work. I'll need turpentine."

"That's for oil based paint," Ben Bailey spat back. "This is that new one--"

Leola jumped right in, to make sure Casey knew she had played him. "Latex, daddy. That new fangled paint is called latex."

You son of a bitch, thought Casey.

"Yes. Latex. Washes off with water. Get to it!" demanded Ben Bailey.

"Yes, sir."

Casey picked up the brushes, looked at Leola, received another devilish grin, frowned, then made his way to join Amos at the sink. Amos was concentrating on the brush he was twisting and turning under the weak, trickling water. Casey leaned in and stuck his hand out.

"Casey Leester."

Amos looked at the outstretched hand then turned back to his brushes. "I heard your name."

"So if you know a man's name, you won't shake his hand?"

"Not if he's only hired help."

"I see," said Casey as he pulled his hand back.

Amos looked Casey up and down and sneered. "Where are you from?"

"Over the border."

"This here state has a number of borders."

"That it does," said Casey while scratching his chin. "I'm from up north."

"Well, well, well," said Amos as he bit the side of his cheek and squinted as if pondering a word puzzle. "That narrows things a bit. Could be another town, another state,

or even Canada. And that's a whole different country." Amos gazed at Casey with pure contempt. "If you're not sure where you're from, I could draw you a map."

Casey returned the gaze and prayed his voice matched it. "I'd be much obliged. I'm sure I could learn a lot from a home-schooled hick like you."

For the first time, Amos stopped cleaning the brush. He placed it on the porcelain sink bottom, grabbed a towel, wiped his hands, and turned toward Casey. "You just earned yourself a whipping."

Casey opened his mouth. He was going to goad Amos into throwing the first punch, but he thought better of it. He had tensed himself for a fight, but he visibly softened and lightened his voice. "No need, Amos. I think I made a mistake coming here. It's best I move on."

A brief apology to the other family members for wasting their time, thought Casey, and I'll be on my way. He turned to face Leola and her parents.

Ben Bailey was holding the shaft of a spade shovel as if it was a baseball bat. He was in full swing and he was swinging for the fences, which in this particular situation, was Casey's face. In less time than it took for Casey to blink his eyes, he surmised that his nose, cheekbones, and teeth were about to be smashed to smithereens. But before the approaching tempered steel blade of the shovel blocked out his view, he had seen enough to guess why Ben Bailey was playing Babe Ruth with his noggin.

People say that, when faced with near certain death, their entire life flashes before their eyes. Well, in Casey's case, it wasn't his entire life. As a matter of fact, he wasn't

reviewing his life at all, his brain was putting recent events into some semblance of order, as if it believed that by understanding why it was meeting its doom, it would somehow temper it.

Before the shovel blocked his view, Casey had seen Leola. She had her shirt open, bra aside, and her breasts, the breasts with Casey's handprints on them, were exposed. She was looking at Casey with that same damn sly smile plastered on her face. Leola's mother was standing next to her, eyes wide with anticipation, probably hoping the shovel would knock Casey's head clear off.

Casey didn't have to be clairvoyant to know what had happened.

Leola, upset at Casey's rebuff of her, had told her mother that Casey had forcibly fondled her. The mother, seeing Casey engaged in conversation with Amos, had probably pulled the shovel off the wall, handed it to the father, and suggested he teach the young heathen a lesson. Casey was sure that Ben Bailey jumped at the chance. So that was it. Even though Casey had been a gentleman and turned aside Leola's advances, he was going to pay a price for it.

Why did he ever stop at this place? He should've just kept on walking, he and his duffel bag. Duffel bag. Of course! Now it made sense. The grave outside the carnival, the duffel bags on the walls. How many other poor bastards had come upon this place, only to be killed and buried? Casey's heart sank as he pictured his final resting place, a plot of land in the middle of nowhere. At

least they'll put a makeshift cross on my grave. That was Casey's last, morbid thought.

The shovel struck Casey's face. His nose exploded in a spray of blood, and he fell to the floor like the proverbial ton of bricks.

4

HEARTLINE

When a person wakes up from being knocked out with a blow to the head, it's natural for the body to react to the head trauma by vomiting, for most people wake up in a state of dizziness and nausea. Of course, some people don't wake up at all. A blow to the front of the skull, one that can knock a person out, could prove to be a fatal blow if delivered to the back or side of the head. In addition to the immediate symptoms, a person must worry about long-term effects, which could be extremely debilitating, even fatal.

Casey didn't have time to worry about his future when he regained consciousness, for he was sure he didn't have one once he opened his eyes and was able to focus on the scene before him. He knew he must've been unconscious for at least a couple of hours, for a low sun was visible out the toolshed's west facing window and dusk would soon

be upon them. For some reason, the shed's walls seemed taller and the ceiling higher, than he remembered. How could that be? And his shoulders felt as if they had been torn from their sockets. He knew from the difficulty he had breathing through his nose that it was broken, but he was forced to breathe through it because, try as he might, he could not open his mouth. He guessed, correctly, that a swatch of packing tape was adhered to the lower part of his face. He was also aware of something wet (blood?) dripping down from his hairline, but that wouldn't be blood from his nose. If he could've tasted the liquid, he'd have a good chance of identifying it. But his tongue was a prisoner within a prisoner.

The answers to these questions would become evident once Casey was cognizant of his body's position and surroundings. He was about four feet away from the back wall. His wrists were bound by a rough, hemp rope that was tied to cleats attached to the side walls of the shed. His arms were supporting the weight of his body, for his knees were about an inch from the ground. He longed to be able to put his knees down in order to take the strain off his shoulders. He was basically in a crucifixion position and he could not think of anytime in history when a person had been strung up like that and it hadn't gone downhill from there. What the hell, he thought, what is happening to me?

Due to the way he had been restrained, it tasked Casey's neck muscles to look around. Though he would surely feel more comfortable if he let his head drop, he knew he couldn't afford to pull his eyes away from

the scene. He was convinced that his life would depend on him watching everything, seeking a clue as to how to escape his predicament, which was getting worse by the moment.

Ben Bailey stood in front of Casey. He had removed his jacket, vest and shirt and was wearing a white T-shirt. He was a muscular man and his arm muscles now rippled as he attended to the task at hand. He was holding a length of rope, about six feet long, and he was wrapping a steel staple, the U shaped ones used to hold cabling against walls, around the rope. Ben Bailey reached into a cardboard box that was resting on a nearby bench. Casey noticed a half-filled pail of water resting by the bench's leg. He would've bet his bottom dollar that the liquid dripping from his hair was water, water that had been thrown onto his face to wake him up. And he was woken up so that he could witness what was now going to happen to him.

Ben Bailey had pulled a staple from the box, and held it close to Casey's face.

Even in the dim light of the room, Casey could see it was manufactured from steel. The crown of the staple, which connected both legs, was a good inch across. The legs were almost two inches long and the tapered ends, or teeth, were razor sharp. Casey wondered why Ben Bailey was twisting these staples around the rope. He was sure he'd find out soon enough. He'd be willing to wait, for he was sure if that if the staples provided a benefit to Ben Bailey, it would be to his own detriment.

After the last staple was twisted around the length of rope, Ben Bailey ducked under one of the restraining ropes and made his way behind Casey. With Ben Bailey's body no longer blocking his view, Casey was able to see the rest of the Bailey family. He almost wished he hadn't.

Edna, Leola, and Amos were kneeling on a makeshift pew, their faces lit by a row of candles that burned before them. The candles were of tapered beeswax, and Casey surmised that whoever made them, and it was probably Edna Bailey, had used the wrong size flat braid wick, for the candles were burning unevenly. The flickering flames danced in the eyes of the three Baileys, while throwing large, macabre shadows on the wall behind them.

Casey smirked when he noticed that his duffle bag was now hanging next to the three others he had eyed upon entering this hellhole. He had no doubt that he faced the same fate as their owners, unless he could do something to change it. He wondered if the other poor bastards had been strung up just like him, had looked at the three Baileys while the fourth moved behind him, and had desperately racked their brains to devise an escape plan. They probably had, but the duffel bags on the wall were irrefutable evidence that they had failed miserably. They were the recipients of unwarranted punishment, doled out because they had entered the carnival and paid with their lives.

When it came, it was a shock to Casey's nervous system, for he was stunned so severely that a scream never formed in his throat. Instead, his eyes just widened and he took a short breath through his nostrils, then expelled

it like a bull before charging the red cape. But his mind had deciphered the pain that had wracked his back, and he quickly deduced the cause. He had been whipped across the shoulders with the staple-twisted rope. Now he understood the purpose of the staples. They added another dimension to the whipping effect that the rope, by itself, could impose. The hundreds of razor sharp staple legs added their own notes of pain, creating a torturous harmony with the rope's own inflictions. And as the whipping continued, Casey counted the rhythm of the beating. One-two-three-four, and a one-two-three-four, over and over. Inside of Casey's head, the familiar voice of Lawrence Welk, whose radio show he never missed, was counting the beats. One-two-three-four. And a one-two-three-four. The whipping continued and the band played on.

At one point, as Casey neared unconsciousness, he looked at Leola. Her tongue was licking her lips, while she panted in quick little breaths. She was in her glory. Amos, on the other hand, looked annoyed, as if he should've been the one wielding the rope. And Edna, well, she was the strangest of them all. She was staring at a large Bible that was splayed open in her hands, and as she rocked back and forth she mumbled something over and over. A little pink ribbon, the Bible's bookmark, was dangling over the back of the Great Book, and swaying in time with Edna's movements. What passage had it marked? How many times in the past had she recited it while watching her husband torture someone to death?

Casey let his head drop and looked at the floor. After every stroke of the whip, a splatter of blood marked it; strokes to count by. Once in a while a long strip of flesh would be mingled in. Damn those staples! Damn them to hell!

When it happened, Casey wasn't even aware of it. He just lost consciousness, like a patient on the operating table asked to count backwards from one hundred. And as Casey's head drooped further, and his body lost muscle tone, the whipping ground to a halt. Ben Bailey carefully coiled up the rope and placed it in a trunk beside him. With his left hand, he grabbed a clump of Casey's hair and pulled his drooping head skywards. He dipped his right index finger into one of the rivers of blood that crisscrossed Casey's back, then used the precious fluid to draw a smile on the packing tape that covered Casey's mouth. As he let go of Casey's head he proclaimed, for all to hear, "I rejoice in my sufferings for I am now saved. Amen".

The other members of the Bailey family made the sign of the cross and replied 'amen' in unison.

Ben Bailey pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket, wiped his forehead, then his finger. "It's time for dinner. Let's go and pray for the Lord Jesus to forgive this heathen's soul." Then, as if he had just killed something as insignificant as a bothersome fly, he said, "Amos and I will dig the grave after dessert." And with a nod of his head, the Bailey family members stood up, walked around the pew in an orderly fashion, then grabbed a candle. They filed out of the shed with the same calmness

and feeling of self-righteousness as churchgoers exiting Mass on a beautiful Sunday morning.



It was the nightmare that woke Casey up. He had dreamed that he was prone, face down, on the makeshift grave outside the carnival's gate, and his hands were stuck fast in the dirt. Leola had the wooden cross in her hand and, with the stained pointed end, was carving her name across his shoulder blades. He wanted to yell but his mouth wouldn't open. When she had finished disfiguring his back, she put her finger to his lips, as if to quiet him, even though he hadn't been able to say anything. She stood up and walked away, leaving him alone. Horrified, he realized he was sinking into the dirt. A faint voice inside of him gave warning, that if he couldn't pull himself out of the muck, he'd be gone for good. With an incredible will to live welling up inside him, Casey forced himself back to consciousness.

The memory of the torture flooded his brain, but for only a moment did Casey feel self-pity. Why? Because self-pity would not help him escape, it would blunt his thinking, which was the only weapon he had. Now was the time to assess his surroundings and the maiming his body had experienced.

The first thing he noticed was that the Baileys were no longer in the shed. That provided him with the first ray of hope. The second thing he noticed was the Bible. He slow-burned inside to think the Baileys had used the

Lord's Book so deviously against a good Christian like himself. They didn't deserve to have such a book in their midst, the bastards. He prayed they'd be paid back in kind someday.

Oh well, more important things to think about. Casey shifted his attention to his left hand. For the first time, he noticed that the rope that bound it to the wall was also wrapped with staples and the razor sharp legs had cut into his wrist, causing little rivulets of blood to trickle down his arms. He pulled hard, trying to free his hand, but he only succeeded in making the cuts deeper and longer.

Wait a moment.

The legs of the staples were all parallel to his arm, so when he pulled, the staples made a series of straight cuts, as if someone was drawing small red lines from his wrist towards his palm. But what if he *rotated* his hand? That would make a circular cut all around his wrist, like the cuff of a sleeve. Would he then be able to pull his hand out? Yes, he'd be leaving the skin and muscles of the hand behind, but an arm would be free!

Casey had heard of animals gnawing off a leg to escape bear traps, so why couldn't he lose a hand? Two hands! With his heart in his throat, Casey started to slowly rotate his left hand. The staples started to separate the skin of his hand from his lower arm. Faster, I must go faster! But not too fast! Don't want to slit my wrist and bleed to death on the floor of this God-awful tool shed.

And so it was. Casey twisted his hand back and forth until he was sure the skin had fully separated and,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Frank D'Angeli (aka Douglas Wentworth) sold his first script, a teleplay for *Columbo*, to Studios USA. His second *Columbo* script was awarded top honors in the American Accolades Movie of the Week Screenplay Competition. His debut novel, *STRANDED*, won the 2012 Independent Publisher Book Awards-Gold Medal in sci-fi/fantasy. Mr. D'Angeli resides in Massachusetts with his wife and two dogs.