

Must

a novel

Brice Austin

Prologue: East Africa

The elephant was close by, in the dark. Kip could smell him. Jomo, the strange one, could smell him, too; he was restless now, agitated. Simon Adongo raised a hand, demanding silence, and whispered for the others to stop. They crouched down, in the tall grass. There was a cool wind sweeping across the savannah, removing the memory of the hot day that had now ended. The elephant smell was strong, almost overpowering, the smell of a male in musth. This, then, was the one they had been hunting, the one the white woman at Tsavo, Doctor Jones, called Ajax. The one the Masaai warriors called Ikiye, Death. Kip felt a tightening in his stomach. This would not be easy, even though the men had guns. Kip had a gun, too, one that could shoot many bullets at once. Still, it would not be easy. Simon Adongo had told them they must not shoot the elephant until they were very close to him.

“Slowly,” whispered Adongo and now they were moving again, stirring the grass like a gentle breeze.

They came up over a rise. Below them the savannah stretched out to the end of the world, to the *Oldoinyo Oibor*, the white mountain that lived far away, in Tanzania. Kilimanjaro, the white doctor called it. Out there, in the grass, there were enormous Baobabs, upside-down trees, their roots scratching at the moonlit sky. And now, among those trees, they finally saw him: Ikiye, the male elephant, an enormous shadow with gleaming white tusks. Tusks the Colonel had said they could keep, if they would get the other thing he wanted. Tusks that would sell for many thousands of dollars. Even divided five ways, it was as much money as Kip could hope to make in one year, working for the white woman at Tsavo. He licked his lips. It would not be easy. He looked around him, expecting to see the park rangers in their painted jeeps. There was no one there. The rangers generally came out only in the daytime, and yet one never knew. Kip had heard rumors that they were making patrols by night now, trying to protect the elephants.

Simon Adongo said he had made “arrangements” with them, however, that they would not interfere. Kip wondered what sort of arrangements those were. Had Adongo promised them a share of the tusks as well, thereby reducing the shares of everyone else? Still, making such arrangements was necessary. Rangers would shoot a poacher on sight, without hesitation. Kip knew this; he had heard them say as much to Doctor Jones. He had heard them promise her this.

Simon Adongo led the way across the savannah, being careful to stay out of sight of Ikiye. Being careful to remain downwind of him. Kip followed, and then the others: Jamil, who would have come with them even had he not been paid, for the elephant had destroyed his crops and his village, and he wanted revenge. Hamisi, the scarred man, who had done this many times before, who had been gored by elephant tusks once and lived. And Jomo, the one with empty eyes, the one it was said was possessed by some evil spirit. Kip shuddered, sorry now that he had come, sorry that he had ever agreed to help Adongo find the elephant. He had not wanted to help him, but it was so much money . . .

Simon Adongo had come from Tanzania, where he worked for his mysterious Colonel, the one who of late had been on everyone's lips. What did this Colonel Muka want with the elephants? To kill them, of course, but Kip was surprised when Adongo had said he did not want the tusks. He wanted something else. When Simon told him what it was the Colonel wanted, Kip almost said no, that he would not help. But Jomo was with Adongo even then and Kip was afraid. There was no soul inside the man's eyes. And because the Colonel did not want the tusks, he would let Kip have them. A share of them, at least. It would mean a great deal of money. Far more money than Kip could earn by tracking the elephants at Tsavo, logging their numbers and whereabouts for Doctor Jones. Money he could use to help his family, his mother and father and two brothers. And most of all his sister, who was even whiter than Doctor Jones. It might even be enough money to help his sister, to send her far away from here, to some place where she would finally be safe.

Adongo led them through the tall grass. Up ahead was a grove of acacia trees. Kip could no longer see the elephant, though he could still smell its strong scent. That scent was everywhere now, all around them. Because of that, it seemed as though the elephant was everywhere now, too, all around them. This made Kip nervous. How could something that size disappear? And yet it seemed he had, at least for the moment. Kip knew that Ikiye must be on the other side of the acacias. And now he could hear him, tearing at the thorny branches with his trunk, eating. Ripping sounds filled the air. Kip swallowed hard. This would not be easy. Simon Adongo again raised his hand.

"Closer," he whispered, "we must get closer."

Why? Why not shoot Ikiye from here, through the trees? It would be so much safer. Kip knew why. It was because of what the Colonel wanted. There was no other way. Kip cradled

his gun, hoping he would remember how to use it, when the time came. That time was coming soon. Where was the elephant now? He was no longer tearing at branches; he was silent. Incredibly, they seemed to have lost him in the acacia thicket. Kip froze, listening. The air was cold, as it frequently was at night on the Kenyan highlands. In the distance, he heard a lion's roar. Then Kip heard something else, something close by. There was something behind him. Kip turned.

There, in the moonlight, stood Death. The elephant, Ikiye. How had he managed to get behind them? Strangely silent, ghost-like, as if he had appeared out of a cloud. His white tusks were gleaming. One was long and straight, the other twisted, with a hook to the left at the end that looked deadly. Thick secretions were oozing from the glands on the sides of his head, a sign that he was indeed in musth, that he had succumbed to rage and desire. The smell was overpowering. It was as though time stood still for a moment. Kip could not move. He stared at the elephant's intelligent eye, glistening in the moonlight. Ikiye seemed to be studying them, trying to decide what to do. There was more of a soul inside of the elephant's eye than there was inside of Jomo's. And yet there were other things there, in that eye, things that frightened him. Rage, and pain. The elephant's trunk reached out towards Kip then as though it were some other creature, something quite separate from Ikiye himself.

A strange sound was coming from Jomo, the soulless one, a moan that swelled into a shriek that echoed across the savannah. Simon Adongo cried "Now!" And then guns on both sides of Kip were firing. The flashes from those guns lit up the grassy plains around him like lightning. They lit up Ikiye. The elephant trumpeted and came charging towards them. Kip lifted his gun but was unable to fire it. In the flashing light the elephant seemed to be in many places at once, just like Death for which he was named.

"Stand your ground!" cried Adongo.

The thicket of acacia trees was behind them and Kip wanted to slip away into it, to hide. But he knew that if he ran, the others would kill him. The elephant trumpeted. Bullets were biting into his hide like a cloud of stinging flies. There were streams of blood flowing down that hide now, striping it. There were streams of sweat on Kip's face. He was still unable to fire, unable to do anything but stand and watch. Jomo, the strange one, let out another cry, a shriek that hardly seemed human. He ran towards the elephant. Adongo was shouting for him to stop, to come back. The others kept *firingfiringfiring*. The sound of their guns, of the elephant's

trumpeting, of Jomo's screams, seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Loud enough to bring the park rangers, if they were anywhere within several miles. For a moment Kip thought he saw the American woman, Doctor Jones, out on the savannah, but it was only the moonlight. Ikiye trumpeted, and charged. With his trunk he grabbed Jomo, and held him. Hamisi, the scarred man, and Jamil kept firing. The elephant lifted Jomo into the air as easily as if he were uprooting a small tree. Jomo was screaming. It was not a scream of fear, though, not the scream of someone who is afraid of dying. It was a scream of rage, and need. Kip fell back, into the acacia trees. The others kept *firingfiringfiring*. Ikiye slammed Jomo to the earth from up high and then lowered that evil-looking left tusk and gored him. Jomo barely seemed to notice. Free from the trunk, he charged at Ikiye again, screaming. Kip shuddered. Was it really true then, that the man had no soul? That he was a demon? The elephant grasped Jomo with his trunk once more, and this time hurled him off into the darkness, into the acacia trees where Kip now stood. The others kept *firingfiringfiring*. How many bullets had hit Ikiye? A great many. And yet still he came at them, trumpeting. The elephant would not die! The elephant truly was Death as the Masaai had named him; he was Death Itself and therefore could not die. The others were *firingfiringfiring*. Still, Kip was unable to lift his weapon. He had spent so much time watching these creatures for Doctor Jones, monitoring their whereabouts, that he could not bring himself to kill one of them now. If indeed, that could even be done.

The elephant was charging again. Kip backed up even further, into the trees. When he did he heard a moaning sound. It was Jomo. The strange one was lying there in the grass. Kip ran to him, bent over him. Jomo's back was broken. He was lying there in the grass, broken. His eyes were open. Those eyes still lacked a soul, thought Kip; they were eyes that were cold and empty. And yet Kip felt sorry for him. He was broken. Then Simon Adongo and Jamil and Hamisi the scarred man came fleeing back into the trees as well. Ikiye was right behind them. The flashes of light from their weapons were everywhere around Kip, showing him glimpses of the trees and the rampaging elephant. The elephant that would not die. That perhaps could not die. *Firingfiringfiring*. It was as though the stars had fallen out of the sky and were exploding all around him. The elephant, Ikiye, seemed to pause now, ever so slightly, at the edge of the trees. He seemed to stop in mid-step. Simon Adongo and Jamil and Hamisi had backed up until now they were standing right beside Kip again, in the darkness, in the trees. They were no longer firing their weapons. The elephant seemed frozen in front of them, in mid-step, so

massive that his head rose above the short, scraggly acacia trees. Then, slowly, almost as slowly as the turn of the world, Ikiye began to fall. The elephant staggered and fell. He collapsed to his knees. In the moonlight, Kip could see streams of blood on his hide. The elephant fell. Death fell sideways and when his enormous body hit the savannah the earth itself trembled. The acacia trees around Kip trembled. The very moon and sky seemed to tremble. Wisps of white smoke, steam, rose from Ikiye's trunk and mouth, into the cold night air.

"Hurry!" cried Simon Adongo, "We do not have much time!"

Kip hesitated. "What of Jomo?" he asked.

Behind them, in the trees, the strange one was crying "Help me!" That voice did in fact have a soul. Unlike the man's eyes, that voice seemed human. "Help me!"

Kip turned, only to have Simon Adongo grab him roughly by the shoulder. "Go!" he said, "Leave him! We do not have much time!"

"But . . ."

Then Adongo fired his weapon again, many times. He fired his weapon at Jomo, the broken man. The strange, soulless one did not cry out again. Kip stared at Adongo in disbelief. Simon only laughed. "Be glad!" he said, "It seems your share has grown larger! Now go, we do not have much time!"

Jamil and Hamisi had already fallen upon the carcass of the dead elephant like a pack of wild dogs. They were making ready for what they had to do, what they had promised Simon Adongo they would do. Kip stood watching them for a moment, watching the elephant. *So, he thought, even Death Itself can die.*

"The blood!" Simon cried, "Hurry! He is losing blood!"

Hamisi, the scarred man, was standing beside the elephant's enormous head, holding a knife that gleamed in the moonlight. He was moving his hand along the elephant's neck, looking for something. Jamil was removing several large silver bags from the pack he had carried on his back ever since they had left the Land Rover on the dirt road in West Tsavo, to travel on foot. Again Adongo said: "Hurry!" There were streams of blood running down the elephant's enormous body, glistening in the moonlight. "Hurry!"

Kip awoke from his trance and ran to help. He took one of the silver bags from Jamil. He stood at the ready. Hamisi found what he was looking for, the precise spot on the elephant's neck that he had been looking for. He plunged his knife in. Blood came gushing out of the

wound. Jamil filled his bag quickly and stepped aside. Kip took his place. Blood rushed out of the wound in a torrent. Kip could not hope to catch it all. The blood flowed over his hands and the lip of the bag. The silver bag filled up quickly but much blood was wasted. Kip stepped aside for Hamisi and Jamil to take their turns, and sealed up the bag as he had been shown. While he waited to take his turn again he looked at the body of the elephant. He felt very sad, thinking about Ikiye, this elephant the Masaai called Death. He *was* Death to any that stood in his way, but he was Life, too. He had been looking for a mate. The thick secretions oozing from the glands on the sides of his head, those secretions that confirmed the elephant was in musth, were proof of that. His smell was proof of that. What was it that the Colonel wanted with the elephant's blood? There was some magic at work here, no doubt, evil magic. The same sort of evil magic that led the witch doctors to desire his white sister's feet and hands. Perhaps with his larger share of the money from Ikiye's tusks, Kip could send her far away where she would be out of reach of such evil men?

It was his turn with the silver bags again. They must work quickly. Soon the jackals and lions and hyenas would come. And at dawn, the dark birds. And at dawn, too, something worse still than the dark birds. The park rangers. By then they must be far away. The blood was still flowing out of Ikiye's massive neck in a torrent. It spilled over Kip's hands. It spilled into the silver bag, and onto the rich, dark earth. It was a river of blood, a river that was destined to flow all the way to Mombasa.

Part One

City Full of Dead People

Chapter 1

It was just another day in Gulfport, Louisiana; then it wasn't. Detective John Briggs had dropped his son Hamilton off at Palmer High and was driving to the police station, listening to WRGU, when the DJ stopped tending to his morning zoo long enough to announce that something was going down at the Division Street Mall. The SWAT team was already there. Details were sketchy but it sounded like somebody with a gun had gone off again. Jesus Christ, what was the matter with people these days? He was glad it wasn't his deal.

Late-breaking news: a three-block area around the mall had been cordoned off. He wondered if Tom Etheridge was there. "Gone Off" cases were right up his alley. Best man on the Force, if you asked John, and for that matter his own Best Man, what seemed like a hundred years ago.

Late-breaking news: seems Gone Off had an assault rifle. Three people dead, and counting. How was the NRA going to justify this one? They'd find a way. He drove on through Palmer thinking about how much the neighborhood had changed since he was a kid, how it seemed even farther away now from Society Hill.

Late-breaking news: there were reports coming in now that Gone Off had really gone off, that on top of everything else he'd raped some girl in broad daylight. *Jesus Christ*, what was wrong with the world?

There was the station, up ahead at the corner: red bricks and dirty glass. John turned into the underground garage and parked his car and when the radio died the Division Street Massacre wasn't real anymore; it was just something going on across town. And there was always something going on across town. He was glad this one wasn't his deal.

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"Morning, Detective."

"Morning, John."

"Morning, Briggs. Say, the Chief is looking for you already."

"He knows where to find me and what time I get in." John shut the door to his office and sat there at his desk for a minute. He could feel a headache coming on already. Through the mini-blinds on his side of the glass he could see the bee hive that was the rest of the station, stirred up like it always was, Monday mornings. The phone rang.

"Briggs."

“Is this John Briggs?”

Wasn't that what he just said? “Speaking.”

“Mr. Briggs, this is Vice Principal Sleeper at Palmer High School and I . . .”

How the hell could Ham be in trouble already? It was eight thirty-five in the damned morning! “Uh-huh. I see. Wouldn't stand for the Pledge again? Well, you do know he has that right? Yes sir, I can appreciate the fact that some people want to beat the crap out of him, believe me. I've been there myself.”

John listened to him rant for thirty seconds more, which was about all he could take. “Isn't that *your* job, Mr. Sleeper? Tell you what, you tell those two punks that Hamilton's daddy is a police officer with a real bad temper. No, I never said I was trying to intimidate anybody. Just tell them that the same way you just now told me that two hooligans are out to get my son. For their information, if you know what I mean? Look, I have to go. The Chief wants to see me. You have a good day now, Mr. Sleeper.”

Ed Horsebreaker was standing in the doorway. Knocked but then came on in like he always did. He was a good egg, though, in spite of that one bad habit.

“Morning, Chief.” John never had quite come to terms with that, with calling the Chief “Chief” when he was an honest-to-God Indian. No matter how you said it, it didn't come out right. It sounded like you were making fun of him when you weren't. Not that Horsebreaker ever took it the wrong way, as far as John could tell. He was a good man and a good cop, even if some of the guys did call him Heap Big Horsefucker behind his back. The way John looked at it, being the Chief was a lot like being a parent: if people didn't hate you every now and then you probably weren't doing your job. “What's on your mind?”

“You heard about Division Street already?”

“Yeah, just now, on the radio. Glad it's not my deal.”

“Maybe it is.” Ed's face looked like it had been chiseled out of the side of a mountain. He closed the door behind him. That was rarely a good sign.

“You want coffee?” The Chief shook his head. John poured himself a cup, black as the heart of the District Attorney. “You think maybe he was on something?”

Horsebreaker shrugged. “Maybe. Just a hunch. And then there's the video.”

“There's a video?”

“Isn’t there always, these days? If you hurry you can see it on YouTube before they take it down.”

That was the kind of world it was now. You couldn’t use a public toilet without worrying that your dick might show up on the Internet. Everybody was a reporter and yet nobody was. Cameras and people’s brains both had gotten damned near microscopic. “I’ll take a look.”

“Hold on.” Something was coming in over Horsebreaker’s Bluetooth. It looked like a big cockroach stuck to the side of his head. “The SWAT team just took him down.”

“What’s the body count?”

“Eleven dead, eight injured. Could be twelve and seven by tomorrow morning.”

“And you really think he was on something instead of just Columbine crazy?”

Ed grunted. “Have a look at the clip.”

John fired up his PC and while it was booting he asked Horsebreaker: “Is there something you want me to do, Chief?”

“Yeah. After you see the footage, go down to Division and have a look around. See what you can find out. I guess we’ll know more after they give us a tox report from the autopsy, but that could take a while. I’ve got a feeling about this one, though.”

John lifted one eyebrow. Horsebreaker’s “feelings” had gotten him in plenty deep, plenty of times before.

“Maybe I’m wrong about this one,” the Chief said with a shrug. “Take a look at the clip, though, and see what you think.”

He stepped out and closed the door. John took a sip of his forty-weight coffee and surfed the web for a video from the Division Street Mall. It came up in less than a second.

Sidewalk café, looked like DeAngelo’s. Tipped over tables and chairs. Red and white outdoor umbrellas, some on their sides, getting dragged around by the wind. There was the perp, waving his gun around. From the back he looked normal enough, even with that long brown ponytail. Plenty of guys were growing their hair out these days, Hambone included.

On the other side of the shooter John could see people running, trying to save their hides. He wondered where the guy with the camera was filming this from? What was he using, a cell phone?

Gone Off let loose with a volley. He wasn’t trying to pick anybody off, at least; he was just spraying bullets around like a dog marking his yard. The footage didn’t have any sound with it

and that was a little eerie; the gun jumping around in Gone Off's hands was the only way you could tell he was firing. That and the flash at the end of the barrel, whenever it swung back this way.

Now Gone Off had some girl by the hair. Where the hell had *she* come from? Must have been hiding under one of the tables. He had her by her black hair. She actually *was* screaming; John didn't need audio to tell him that. The camera zoomed in.

He had her by her black hair. He threw her onto the red brick pavers in front of DeAngelo's. The camera rolled on. Why wasn't the Joe who was taking the pictures doing anything to help her? Maybe he was too far away. Maybe he was just smart. Who in his right mind would rush a guy holding an assault rifle when all you had was your cell phone?

Gone Off had his back to the camera now. He was distracted, raping her. You couldn't see much through all those turned-over tables and umbrellas, but enough to know he was raping her. John wanted to look away but couldn't seem to. Maybe the same was true for the Joe with the camera. Maybe that was true for everybody. Maybe that was why this clip was up on the web already, why it was racking up hits faster than Alex Rodriguez. John just hoped for the girl's sake they'd shut it down before it went viral.

Gone Off was done doing his business. He came up out of all those umbrellas, zipping his pants. Then John saw his face. He clicked on the video to pause it. He saw what the Chief meant. There was something about his eyes. John wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about his eyes. Seems like there was this reddish tint to them. He was King-of-the-World. He was joyriding. But was he sky high on something or just Texas Clock Tower crazy?

Twenty years old, John was guessing. A kid, a man, a kid who wanted to be a man and thought something like this might get him there faster. Where the hell was his daddy to whip his ass and point him in the right direction? Gone off, maybe, like all the rest of them.

John clicked in again but there wasn't much more to see: the gun was pointing right at the camera now and the clip ended in a hurry. He took another sip of his coffee. It wasn't hot anymore. He wondered again what the world was coming to, then got up and put on his jacket and drove to the Division Street Mall.

Chapter 2

There was a reason why they called it Division Street: it drew a line—*was* the line—between Palmer and Mayfair, between what used to be the bad and good parts of town. That line wasn't as clean now as when John was a kid; you couldn't always tell anymore what part of the city you were in just by looking at the people and buildings. The open air mall had something to do with that. It was the centerpiece of Mayor Crawford's push to rescue downtown from what he called "forty years of urban blight," in that deep voice that made it sound like his renewal plan was written down in the Bible.

Well, what happened on the mall that morning sure seemed Biblical to John, and not in a good way. Just the latest indication, Grandma Briggs would say, that the Second Coming was coming, any second. He didn't really believe that himself, but when this kind of thing happened it did make him wonder where the world was headed, and how fast it was getting there. He had to show his badge three times before he got to the crime scene, and when he finally did he wished he'd been turned away.

He went straight to DeAngelo's. Tom Etheridge was already there, like John knew he would be. He seemed surprised when he looked up from his clipboard.

"Hey, Briggs. Nobody told me they were bringing Narcotics & Vice in on this one."

"Chief's got another one of his 'feelings.'"

"Son-of-a-bitch is usually right. I think it's because his mother was on peyote while she was breastfeeding him."

Every town's got a Tom Etheridge: former basketball player who wasn't quite good enough to go pro, married to one of his cheerleaders. He was a guy that both men and women would agree was good-looking: tall, built like he worked out, black hair and a bushy mustache, a big smile and nice-guy eyes. John, who was five feet eleven himself, always felt short standing next to him. And just a bit chubby.

"How's Ham?" he asked.

John sighed and ran his fingers through his thick brown hair. Sweat was already building up there. "In trouble again, at school. Minor shit, at least."

Tom laughed. "He's a good kid."

Nice of him to say so. His boys were stand-up guys, both on the basketball team at Palmer. His daughter Julie was a future princess. John used to think maybe Ham might date her when

the two of them got older. Sometimes it felt like Life let you come up with shit like that just so It could show you later on how much of a dumbass you really were. “What have you got so far?”

They were standing in front of the sidewalk café. It looked like a bomb had gone off inside. There was glass and blood everywhere. The window that used to separate the indoors from the outdoors was gone. Tables and chairs were tipped over, both places. John could see cups and saucers and forks and knives strewn all over the pavers. The wind had picked up and was scooting things around the crime scene: loose newspapers, empty cigarette packs, paper napkins. Behind him, in the square, he could hear the sounds of flags cracking.

“From what I can tell it started here, then moved west down Division.”

John looked along the street past the daffodils and tulips blooming inside their raised beds, and you would have thought a tornado had been there. He saw parked cars with bullet holes in them, and more shattered storefront glass. Bloodstains. White chalk outlines of murdered people, looking like drawings on the wall of a cave.

“Where the hell do you suppose he got an assault rifle?”

Tom shrugged. “Gun show, pawn shop; the way things have been going lately, maybe a candy store.”

“Anyone else involved?”

“Not as far as I can tell. Looks like a lone shooter.” The wind kept blowing Tom’s red tie around and finally sent it up over the shoulder of his starched white shirt.

“You think he was crazy,” asked John, “or is the Chief onto something?”

Tom looked up and down the street, like maybe he thought there was some clue he’d missed in the first go-round. “I don’t know, John. It sure looks like the guy went psycho, but there are a few things that don’t fit the profile.”

“Like him raping the girl?”

“That’s one. Usually the perp is too busy shooting fish in a barrel to bother with much of anything else. He’s going after people one at a time, too, with a purpose, even if he doesn’t know who those people are. According to eye witnesses, this guy just sprayed a lot of bullets into the crowd. They say he didn’t seem to be aiming at anybody.”

“That’s the way it looked in the video.”

“You saw that, too, huh?”

“Who the hell hasn’t?”

The wind was dragging one of DeAngelo's red-and-white striped outdoor umbrellas across the patio, making an ugly, scraping sound. March was coming in like a lion. "Do you know anything about the shooter yet?"

"A little. Tad Wellington, twenty-four. Kid from Society Hill who never quite found his way after college. He'd been bussing tables at Trudy's. Lived in an apartment two blocks from here, on Oak. Jerry's there now, talking to people."

"Let me guess," said John, "Such a nice boy, they can't believe he'd do something like this."

"Probably."

"Was he using?"

"Yeah, but from what I hear so far just stuff you don't even bother keeping track of anymore." Tom paused, then said: "You know of any drug that could make somebody go off like this?"

"Almost anything, if he'd had enough of it." But John was already running through a short list in his mind and nothing was matching up real well with what he was seeing. Crack? Crank? Angel? Maybe that new South American paste they called "Paco?" Violence flowed out of all of those pretty freely. And when somebody was addicted bad enough to anything, you didn't know what they might do to get their hands on more of it. But there didn't seem to be any intent to get more drugs here, or to steal money to buy more drugs; in the clip it sure looked like Gone Off—Tad Wellington, he guessed he ought to say—was just joyriding. "When do you think we'll have a tox report?"

"Tomorrow morning, if we're lucky. A week, if we're not."

John nodded. "To tell you the truth, I'll be surprised if they find anything."

"So you think Horsefucker's wrong about this one?" Tom grinned. "Wouldn't be the first time would it?"

That brought John up short. "On this kind of thing? Yeah, actually it would be."

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By the time John left the scene it was close to noon. He decided to look in on Grandma Briggs before heading back to the station. He tried to do that two days a week, if he could, besides having lunch with her on Sundays. She was at the Center and he felt bad about that, but she was eighty-five years old and had diabetes. He wasn't home enough to look after her proper,

and neither was Ham. He sometimes thought about hiring somebody to help out, but this way seemed like it might be better; at least she had other people to talk to.

“Well there you are, John. Am I glad to see *you*. They’ve been cutting in on my programs all morning with this awful business at the Mall downtown. You aren’t mixed up in that are you, Honey?”

She was sitting on the pea-green couch in the common room, which was where he usually found her, parked in front of the TV set. They must have just done her hair because it looked real nice, like a swirl of white cake frosting. John admired her for that, how she always looked so sharp, even just for sitting around at the Center. When he was off duty he usually wore jeans and some ragged old t-shirt that he didn’t want to throw away because he was fond of it, because it reminded him of some time in his life that he didn’t want to let go of.

“Not much,” he said, bending over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “Tom Etheridge gets all the crazies.” He was still hoping Tom would get this one.

“Well, you tell Tom I said he did good work, shooting down that son-of-Satan. I don’t know what the world is coming to, John, I honestly don’t.”

He didn’t bother telling her that it wasn’t actually Tom who’d shot the “son-of-Satan.” He sat down on the couch beside her. Just then they cut in on her program again, this time to show a picture of the shooter, Tad Wellington.

“See what I mean?”

It was a photo of him when he was at the State University, dressed in his cap and gown. He didn’t look like a son-of-Satan to John, just some kid with his whole life ahead of him. Suddenly, he felt worse than he had all morning.

“What on earth is the world coming to?” asked Grandma again.

“I don’t know,” John answered softly.

Her program came back on and they talked about that for a while, until John had to go. “How’s Hamilton Briggs these days?” she asked as he was getting up to leave.

“Oh, he’s fine.”

“When will you be bringing him out here to see me again?”

“One of these days.” John wasn’t about to tell her that Ham wouldn’t stand for the Pledge, that he liked to dress all in black and sometimes wore eye makeup. She had heart trouble already.

“You know, I’d feel a whole lot better about him if he had a mother.” John started edging towards the doorway. He didn’t want the conversation going off in *that* direction again! “But then I guess he never really has had one, has he?”

Yeah he did, for a while. But Grandma never did think too much of Jenny. “I’ve got to get back to the station,” John said. “You take care now, Grandma. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Honey. I’m so glad you’re not mixed up in this thing.”

“You and me both.” He was hoping it would stay that way.

Chapter 3

After he got back to the station, John kept thinking about what had happened that morning, wondering how a Society Hill kid like Tad Wellington could get to the point where he'd kill eleven people. Tom kept him posted throughout the afternoon; his unit wasn't finding any of the usual mass-murder markers. None of Wellington's friends would describe him as "angry." He hadn't written any rambling, hate-filled diaries or blogs. If some girl had recently dumped him, nobody had heard about it. Seems he was just your basic kid with your basic minor drug problem. Could that be the key? John kept coming back to it, not only because of Horsebreaker's "feeling," but because nothing else was making much sense. As far as anyone knew Tad was just a stoner, but what if he'd recently started using something else besides weed?

Rick, the little shithead the Chief had hired as an intern, knocked on John's office door and stuck his face in. "What's up?" John said in a tone of voice that was about two degrees below zero, hoping the kid would get the hint. No such duck-fucking luck.

"Detective Briggs, Chief Horsebreaker wanted me to tell you that the critically injured victim from Division Street just passed away."

"Thanks." Kid was polite; John had to give him that. Too damned polite. It was like he was in suck-up mode all the time. So the body count was up to twelve now. Worst mass-killing ever, in this state at least. The national news was all over it. Their camera crews were down on Division already, interviewing everything that moved. No surprise there. People were thirsty for blood and if you wanted to keep your ratings up, you'd best give it to them.

What about the drug angle, though? He still couldn't think of one that would set somebody off like that, at least not without some gas-on-the-fire factor like hate or love or religion thrown in. Or money. That was what drug-related killings were usually about: the money. A hundred people were gunned down in Mexico just last week, because they got in the way of the flow of money. But that didn't seem to be the case here.

Any chance Wellington was using more than one drug at a time? Back when John and Tom were in college, they had this kick poster on the wall of their dorm room, some chart showing what would supposedly happen if you doubled up on your drugs. You'd pick LSD from the columns and peyote from the rows, and match them up to find something like this: *You see Jesus. You ask Him where to get the best tacos. You die.*

Tom's coach hated that poster, thought it reflected badly on the Athletic Department, and after a while made them take it down. They weren't using, though; they were just two kids pretending to be cool. Was there some combo out there that could turn you into what Grandma Briggs called a "son-of-Satan?" Maybe. John wanted that tox report but when he left the station at six it still wasn't there and it was looking like it wouldn't be until at least the next morning.

#

John still lived in Palmer, where he grew up, which he figured was either sweet or just plain stupid, depending on how you looked at it. He had a row house on Figueroa, three stories high if you counted the garage. The second floor was where he spent most of his time, at least while he was awake.

"Ham Sandwich, you home?"

"Yeah, Dad!"

John relaxed a little. He hated it when Ham took the bus, though that was most days. Made things easier on him at work, but he'd just as soon pick him up himself if he could. Ham's voice had come from the den. That was good. Sometimes he would hole up in his room on the top floor, when he was in one of his moods. John poked his head around the corner and saw that his son was watching TV, more news reports about what they were calling the Division Street Massacre. Christ, he was only fifteen. John wished there was some way he could protect him from this kind of crap. It couldn't be good for you. "How was your day?"

"Better than yours, I'm guessing. Are you mixed up in this at all?"

"A little." No mention of the Pledge-of-Allegiance thing. It probably wasn't worth talking about. Ham was dressed completely in black like he always was, these days. Goth or Sabbath or Midnight or something. John couldn't keep up with it. That didn't bother him nearly as much as the cross-gender stuff, the black nail polish and eyeliner, but maybe Ham would grow out of that, too. None of it would have worried him much if he hadn't found a couple of pairs of women's underwear in Ham's chest-of-drawers the week before, when he was doing one of his drug checks.

"This guy must have really gone over the edge."

Hard to argue with that. Question was: what pushed him? "I don't feel like cooking tonight," said John, "You up for Chinese?"

"Panda Li's?"

“Yeah.”

“Sounds good. I’ll take . . .”

“Let me guess: grilled tofu?”

“Yeah, and be sure to get . . .”

“Chopsticks?”

“Yeah.”

“Show off. I’ll give Li a call.” John hung up his coat and took off his tie. He went to the kitchen. He turned on the little set on the counter so he could see what Hambone was seeing. The same pictures, over and over. Yellow police tape, flashing red and blue lights, bloodstains on the pavers out in front of DeAngelo’s. Every little thing they could dig up about Tad Wellington’s life. He picked up the phone.

“Delivery. One grilled tofu, brown rice. Chopsticks. One kung pao chicken, extra spicy.” He’d have heartburn in the morning but what the hell? “Fried rice for me. No, no chopsticks. Stick a shovel in it.” He gave the address. As soon as he’d hung up the phone, the doorbell rang. He was used to Li having their food ready fast, but this was ridiculous.

“I’ll get it!” said John. Like anybody else was going to. The little TV in the kitchen and the big one in the den were both blabbering on. Wellington’s mother still lived on Society Hill and reporters had staked out her place like she was the criminal. John didn’t know her but felt sorry for her all the same; she hadn’t done anything wrong but her life was pretty much over now, too. She’d been voted off the island.

He went down the steps to the entryway and looked through the peephole. Wasn’t one of Li’s runners yet. It was Mick. Friend of Ham’s, gender unknown. He/she/it was a Visigoth, too, or whatever they called themselves, dressed in the same black clothes. Nice kid though, really, as far as John could tell. Had only been coming around for a week or two, and John was still holding out hope that maybe Ham had found himself a girlfriend.

“Hey, Mick,” he said, “How’d you get way over here?”

“Rode the bus. Hope that’s OK, Mr. Briggs. Is Ham home?”

“Yeah, sure, come on in. I just ordered Chinese. If I’d known you were coming, I’d have got something for you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Briggs, but I already ate.”

Mick went up the stairs ahead of him like It owned the place. That thing It was wearing almost looked like a skirt. Maybe, just maybe? John couldn't tell for sure. Nice kid, though, and seemed to like Hambone. The two of them were hanging out a lot lately.

“What do you think of the Division Street Psycho, Mr. Briggs?”

Was that what they were calling Wellington now? “I don't know what to think yet.”

“I think his girlfriend must have dumped him.”

“Is that right?” From what John had heard he didn't have one. That sounded like something a woman would say, though. Maybe Mick was short for Michelina, after all?

She was in the den now, with Ham. They were sitting on the couch together but at opposite ends, talking up some video game. Next thing John knew they were playing it. First person shooter, with zombies. He shook his head and went back to his real-life video game, the one that was still running on the box in the kitchen. No zombies there but the woman from Channel 4 looked like a vampire, with her white teeth and red lips and black hair.

She was talking about the clip that had been up on YouTube that morning. She couldn't show it because the images were too disturbing, but you could tell she wanted to so damned bad. You could tell she was thinking what a ratings boost it would be for her station. All she could show, though, was one still-frame of the shooter. Even that was a bit graphic, she said, so if you wanted to look the other way . . . Right. That was TV-talk for *Please turn your attention to the Center Ring!*

It was pretty much the same frame John had paused on in his office that morning. Wellington was still waving his gun around. There was still that same strange look on his face. What the hell *was* that? Now they had Tom Etheridge on, talking about how he didn't know much of anything yet, but was following up on all the leads. John thought: *Better you than me.* Tom was used to that kind of crap, talking to reporters. He'd been interviewed after every basketball game since he was fourteen.

The doorbell rang again and this time it really was the delivery boy from Panda Li's. John wondered if he'd remembered the fortune cookies.

#

John popped a Bilge Light and ate at the counter in the kitchen, so as not to disturb the Visigoths. Channel 4 was doing profiles of the victims now, and that got hard. It was one thing to say “twelve people dead” but something else once you found out that Mark Williams, 37, was

the father of two young girls. John didn't know any of them and apparently neither did Wellington; the shooting was looking more and more like a random thing. Something must have set Tad off, though. What the hell *was* it?

The news looped on, 24/7, like it always does. Talking heads were all trying to put their own spin on it. Anybody who had ever said two words about mass murderers was popping out of the woodwork to pitch his latest book. Republicans and Democrats, the new Crips and Bloods, were each trying to hang this thing on something the other gang had got dead wrong. After a while, Mick came into the kitchen.

"Guess I'd better be going, Mr. Briggs."

"All right, Mick. Good to see you again. You got a ride home?"

"Same way I got here: the bus. I'll see you tomorrow, Hamilton!" she called back towards the den.

Had to be a girl. No guy would call Ham "Hamilton," unless he was riding him. His mother used to call him that, but then she was the one who named him. "Hamilton" never had seemed quite right to John; it wasn't the kind of name that went with a place like Palmer. But then Jenny was raised on Society Hill. Up there, they liked giving out names that sounded like they came from the Revolutionary War. He wished Jenny was here now. He wished Ham had really known his mother. With that blonde mop of his he looked more like her than he did John, whose hair was what Grandma Briggs liked to call "chestnut brown." John wasn't even sure what the hell a chestnut was.

He smiled to himself, wondering what Jenny would think about all this Midnight stuff, the black clothes and makeup. He wondered what she would do about it. Nothing, probably. She'd just laugh it off, go along with it, remembering that she'd done the same kind of thing when she was that age. So that's what John tried to do, too, even though there were times when he just wanted to kick his son's ass sideways.

After Mick left, John went into the den to watch TV with him. They didn't say much, just a word now and then, but it felt good to stay connected even like that. There'd been times in the past when they'd been a lot further apart. A year ago Ham was calling him a "narc" and didn't want to have anything to do with him. If John even mentioned his job, Ham would say he had "narc-o-lepsy" and pretend to fall asleep on a dime. Did that at the breakfast table one morning and his face actually hit the cereal bowl, spraying milk and Cheerios all over the kitchen. It

seemed funny now but at the time it was pretty bad because John had been under a lot of stress at work and he'd been worried, too, that Ham might be getting into drugs. He still worried about that sometimes, mostly because of what had happened to Jenny.

“Guess I'd better go up and do my homework, Dad.”

“Good plan.” He was a good kid. John wished he was more straight-up sometimes, like Tom Etheridge's boys, but then he wished for a lot of things. He wished Ham hadn't lost his mother. He wished kids like Tad Wellington didn't go off and kill twelve people in an outdoor mall with a machine gun.

After Ham went upstairs, John popped another Bilge Light. Sitting there in the dark with the news on he thought back to one night when Ham was nine years old and they were watching some old movie together. Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. Jenny hadn't been gone all that long at the time. After a while, Ham had asked him something.

“Dad, when did the world stop being just black-and-white?”

John had thought about that for a minute, watching the light and shadows dance across the TV screen. Then finally he'd said: “I'm not sure, Hambone. I'm not sure.”

And he still wasn't sure, even now.