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# MIKE MONSON TUSSINLAND



"Mike Monson's *Tussinland* is a fast trip to the dark side—a world of broken people and desperate dreams. It's violent and propulsive, but in the end it's also strangely—and surprisingly—touching."

*Jake Hinkson, author of Hell On Church Street and The Big Ugly*

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# **Tussinland**

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**By Mike Monson**



**Tussinland**

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*Thanks to Chris Rhatigan. For everything.*

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*For Rebecca*

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## ONE

Miranda stared at the images of Tina and Mark's corpses on the video screen of her iPhone. She didn't understand how they could be so, like, *dead*.

Five minutes before, they both walked around like regular humans, yelling and screaming their asses off. *Two* minutes before, they were still breathing, but with great difficulty since Logan shot them each twice in the torso with a sawed-off shotgun.

Just a few *seconds* previously they were both gasping, gulping, screeching for air. Mark died first with a slight smile on his face, then Tina went, as she glared up at Miranda and Logan.

Loud, then quiet, then nothing.

Blood everywhere. And piss and shit. Awful smells—the worst of it seemed to be coming from Mark. Miranda filmed close-ups of Mark's slimy guts slipping out and his cracked rib bones and other stuff she didn't recognize but found fascinating. Tina's face still looked pretty, but just below it she was nearly severed in half. Miranda zoomed in just as Tina's left saline breast implant popped out and oozed onto the floor beside her armpit.

Wow.

"Are you kidding me right now?" she said.

"I know, right?" Logan said.

"This is so completely awesome. You killed them. You fucking destroyed them."

"That's what you wanted?"

"Hell. Yes. God, I love you so much."

Logan put down the shotgun and reached out to Miranda for a hug. She didn't notice. She'd turned off the video and moved closer to the bodies. She stared at Tina. She reached out to touch her aunt's face, then quickly pulled her hand back.

"Logan. Get a trash bag from the kitchen for all the shit. And one for the shotgun. I'll start the cleanup. We need to move fast."

She heard sniffing and looked up, saw Logan standing with his arms out. Trying not to cry.

Ashamed at ignoring him, Miranda sat down on the couch. Held out her arms.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said, as soothingly as possible. "Come on over, sweetie."

The large young man crawled into the petite Miranda's lap. He curled up against her like a baby and buried his face in her neck. He slowly stopped crying as she stroked his thick hair.

"There, there, baby," she said. "I love you so much, you're such a good boy. You make me so so proud."

"I do?" Logan said.

“Are you being serious right now?” she said. “Of course you do. You are the *best boy ever*.”

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Logan pulled back and looked Miranda in the eyes.

“So everything is going according to plan?”

Miranda looked back at the corpses, at the more than a dozen bricks of heroin stacked up on the coffee table.

“Yes,” she said. “Everything is going great. Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad,” Logan said. He got up off the couch. “I’ll get the trash bags.”

Miranda Fish grabbed a Rayovac she’d brought, along with a spray bottle of disinfectant, and a roll of paper towels. The two left twenty minutes later with a shit load of heroin, hoping they’d removed all traces of their visit.

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## TWO

Even though it cost nearly double the price of Walgreen's generic version, Paul went for the Robitussin Extra-Strength DM in the largest possible size—twelve fluid ounces. DM stood for dextromorphan and the Robitussin had 30 mls of DM in each recommended dose.

He didn't have a cough or a cold, just a strong desire for as much DM as possible. For some reason (maybe, he'd always wondered, for the same kinds of reasons wines had such varying tastes and effects—perhaps there was a *terroir* of DM recipes?), Robitussin was just better than any other DM-type cough syrup. Other name brands and even most generics all had a decent effect if he took enough, and lots of little DM-containing pills also had their various potencies and variations, but the Robitussin Extra Strength was the best and the fastest method to go all the way to Tussinland—a fucked-up place of intense euphoria and colorful, rhythmic hallucination.

It was just past eight on a Monday night in June 2012 at the Walgreen's near the old Modesto downtown district on McHenry Avenue, the main drag that years before had inspired native George Lucas' movie *American Graffiti*.

Modesto had recently become somewhat notorious for various bloody scandals, such as the murder of Laci Peterson by her husband Scott, the murder of native Sandra Levy while working in D.C. at the same time she was the mistress of local U.S. Congressman Gary Condit, and the finding of the street of the wallet of one of the four female murder victims of Cary Stayner—who wasn't caught until he'd severed the head of a naturalist in nearby Yosemite National Park. Paul'd often wondered why the shit wasn't spread more evenly around all the towns in California's Central Valley. Why was it always *Modesto*?

He took the Robitussin to the counter and examined the clerk closely to make sure he hadn't bought DM from her before. He'd recently gotten Coricidren DM at another Modesto Walgreens and the clerk scanned the bar code on his driver's license. Not a good feeling. Still didn't know what *that* was all about.

He stared at her name tag as she scanned the purchase: Dayna. She didn't even glance at him until she grabbed his debit card.

He hated that, hated feeling like he wasn't even worth looking at. Figured Dayna looked him in the eye briefly only because he'd held the card back for a moment, forcing her to reach for it. Surely Walgreens had some kind of rule or something, like: "Greet each customer with a pleasantry such as 'hello' or 'how are you today?' while also making a point to smile and look each of the assholes in the eyes."

Something like that, for sure.



When she handed over the plastic bag, she smiled big and said, “Have a great evening!” This made him feel like an asshole. And she was pretty cute too.

It'd been a long shitty boring stupid day, like the last hundred or so. He looked forward to sitting around and watching TV with his mother, then spending some quality time in Tussinland before drifting off to a long-ass sleep.

When he got home, Mavis had started that night's episode of *The Bachelorette*. She sat in her easy-chair, sipping vodka on the rocks and smoking a Virginia Slim. The place, as usual, was cold as a walk-in refrigerator because Mavis kept the AC cranked down to like 60 degrees all summer long. Also, as usual, it reeked of weed. Smoke still drifted out the top of the bong on the coffee table.

Emily Maynard and her bachelors were in London. Mavis rewound the show to the beginning and fast-forwarded through the commercials to get Paul caught up with the episode. Digital cable—one of the many joys of living with Mavis.

When Emily found out bachelor Kaylon had called her daughter Ricky “baggage,” she said she was going to go all “West Virginia” on him. Paul laughed when Kaylon admitted to what he said and refused to apologize, and Maynard said to him, “Then get the fuck out.”

“I thought she was from North Carolina,” Mavis said.

“Maybe that's how North Carolina people talk when they're trying to say they're going to get all violent and mean. But, if that's true, it's kind of a dis on West Virginia.”

“I don't like this side of her. Such a beautiful girl, though.”

After the Rose Ceremony, Paul grabbed some water and went to the hall bathroom to down his Robitussin. A serious, subtle, careful process. Had to get it all down (slowly, to prevent vomiting), and get into bed under the covers with the bedroom door locked and the lights out (and all the evidence hidden), before Tussinland really hit. Because once he entered, he was in another world and no longer had the motor or mental skills necessary to handle regular reality.

It took about an hour if he got the dosage right. Back when he first took large quantities of DM, he'd often miscalculate dosage, time, and place and wind up somewhere he was expected to act or communicate and be totally incapable. Once he sat in a locked car, parked alongside the 99 Freeway outside of Merced during evening rush hour, unable to drive or even move (he could barely *see*) for almost an hour while the entire world and all its colors and objects seemed to be pounding and flashing like a giant combination human heart beat and strobe light—terrified that at any second a police car would pull up and an officer straight out of *Cops* would tap on his window.

Another time he picked up his stepson Tyler at a Cub Scout meeting. As he walked down the steps to the basement, he lost all depth perception and could no longer walk without lifting and moving each of his legs with both hands. Tried to make it seem like he wanted to be silly for the kids, but no one laughed and he felt sure the other dads thought he was some kind of nut. Luckily, he managed to drive home that night, but he never again mixed DM and driving and children. At least on purpose.

Now, as long as Mavis didn't need or want anything, he should be okay. He'd hidden the empty Robitussin bottle in its plastic Walgreens bag under the bed. In the morning, he'd throw it in some parking lot trash bin in a different part of town.

He made himself aware of the rising and falling of his abdomen as he breathed in and out. He waited. Felt nauseous and resisted the urge to vomit. Also tried to resist the urge to think. Still, as usual, his mind wandered to images of soon-to-be-latest ex-wife Tina in her tight jeans, nasty black boots, long brown hair, and AC/DC t-shirt dancing with that asshole used car salesman slash drug dealer Mark Pisko at Nino's that night when things became so fucking clear. Missed her so much and hated her so much and so fucking hoped to never see her again ever, which wasn't easy since they once lived about a mile away. He avoided all her usual places. Especially since Pisko'd put out a restraining order against him for threatening to kill them both. Asshole had no sense of humor. Besides, there was no way Mark was afraid of him. Unlike Mark, Paul wasn't a violent person, and Mark had to know that he intimidated the shit out of Paul. Dude just wanted to fuck with him because he could.

Out of habit, his right hand wandered down to his penis as he thought of Tina and her adulterous seductive dancing, but there was no erection as DM completely interfered with sexual stimulation. Made the mistake of thinking about Mavis and the four hundred dollars he owed her every month, but hadn't paid for three months. Thought about the list of household projects Mavis kept demanding: lawn mowing and edging, tree pruning, watering. Fix the faucet, fix the ceiling fan, repair the patio roof, and on and on and on. Fuck! Why couldn't she understand he still needed to recover from the slip and fall injury in the kitchen at Denny's that fucked up his back? Plus, he was incompetent as a fix-it man, a fact to which all three of his exes would gladly testify.

He didn't know why Mavis cared so much; bitch was rich as fuck. So rich she didn't even need to live in her old house in the old neighborhood that got shittier and shittier every year.

He'd spent nearly all the workers' comp money. After the lawyer took his cut (all expenses, then forty percent of what remained), he only netted nine grand. Had just under three left, but he was still unemployed and had alimony and child support in addition to the rent to Mavis (and it was a good thing Mavis paid the digital cable and the internet, and let him on her family plan for his iPhone).

His back was okay most of the time, but every once in a while—with no warning—it would seize up, preventing Paul from walking or standing or even sitting. This condition could last anywhere from a couple of seconds to several weeks. There was no telling.

Finally, things began to change. Thoughts of Tina and Mavis and household chores and money were gone—poof. He felt warm and fuzzy, mostly in his chest, neck, shoulders, face, and scalp. Noticed a rhythmic pattern of sound and light in the darkness of the room. Began to relax, become a little excited. Thrilled. (*Finally.*) Kept his eyes closed and saw patterns of shapes and colors. The patterns, the colors, and the shapes became more and more complex and more and more rapid. He let go. Surrendered to this new environment that was all in his brain, all behind his eyes.

Usually at this point, he'd begin to interact with certain entities that only existed in this state of mind. Like a veil lifted so he could see a world that was always there but could only be seen after ingesting just the right amount of DM. While very strange, it all seemed familiar and real. He never remembered any of it clearly afterwards (just that it was amazing and cool), but every time he went back in he thought, *of course, this is it.*

Tonight, though, just when things were supposed to get wonderful and freaky, he began to feel sick. The patterns and colors, instead of being fascinating and beautiful, seemed dark and sinister. Evil, even. He needed to vomit—quick.

He rushed to the hall bathroom. Saw Mavis' face illuminated by the TV screen. She was watching *Dateline* (she saved all the crime and murder shows like *Dateline* and *20/20* and *48 Hours* on her DVR queue and watched them over and over). It was one he'd already seen, about a husband and wife who preyed on other couples at vacation resorts, stealing their valuables and money after partying with them, before stabbing them to death. He got inside the door, locked it, and tried to vomit as quietly as possible. Soaking wet from sweat. It looked like the bathroom walls were breathing. He didn't dare look in the mirror.

He kneeled on the carpeted floor in front of the toilet between each wave of sickness. These came again and again for what seemed like hours. He'd recently seen an episode of *Two and a Half Men* in which Charlie watched Alan vomit into the toilet and told him to put the seat down to give his forearms a place to rest. Paul tried it and was glad to find that it worked.

Just before Walgreens, Paul ate several servings of hot wings and fries along with a pitcher of Coca-Cola at Wing Stop, and now he could see bits and pieces of chicken meat and chicken skin floating in the toilet. Some of what came up seemed like it was not food, but pieces of organs or muscle. Some of it looked like grey pieces of paper. Over and over he saw mental images of himself bent over his food at Wing Stop eating eating eating and in his mind he looked like a huge slobbering pig with pig's feet instead of hands, and a snout instead of a nose.

When there was no more to throw up and he'd had dry heaves for about ten minutes, he peeked outside the door. The TV was off, so Mavis had gone to bed. It was two a.m. He cleaned things up as best as he could and careened back to his bedroom.

Several hours passed. All he wanted to do was sleep. Had more disgusting visions—of himself, his ex-wives, his kids, his shrinking bank account. And jobs. (*Fucking jobs.*)

Just before five a.m. he drifted off, and dreamt of monsters and lizards and rivers of shit. Several minutes later he heard a banging banging banging at the front door screen. Decided that whatever it was would go away if he paid no attention to it.

Eventually, Mavis came to his door and banged on *that*. So, he got up and went with his mother to see what shitty thing waited for them on the porch.

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### THREE

“What do you think it will be like when we finally get to Hollywood?” Miranda said.

“Oh, wow,” Logan said. “You’re going to be hounded by photographers wherever you go.”

“Really? Awesome, right?”

“You’ll have someone doing your hair and make-up. A stylist will buy you all the best clothes.

How great is that?”

“Will I look totally hot like 24/7?”

“Dude. Of course. Duh.”

They were lying in bed in Logan’s room in his adopted parents’ house in North Modesto. Logan stabbed a spot next to his right big toe with a syringe-full of heroin. Miranda only snorted the shit occasionally and so far hadn’t even developed much of a habit with the drug. She needed to hold off today for sure because she had to edit the Mark and Tina murder video. Plus, she had a lot of shit to do all day. She moved the mouse with her index finger, switched over to a window containing a photo album of her and Logan fucking.

“What’s your favorite?” Miranda stared at the screen. She clicked through the pictures. “What’s like, the *best* one?”

“That is so hard to say, dude.”

“I *know*.”

“It’s probably the anal one, right?”

Miranda clicked backwards four or five times.

“This one?”

“Naw, one more.”

“*This* one?”

“Yeah. That one’s a keeper.”

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## FOUR

The first thing Paul saw when Mavis opened the door was a red-faced plainclothes policeman. He knew he was a policeman because he held out his badge about an inch from Paul's face. Behind him stood a uniformed patrolman. Paul was barefoot and wore yellow sweat pants and a white undershirt. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Mavis subtly loosen the belt of her white silk robe to show more cleavage from the front of her pink teddy underneath. Mavis always had a certain attraction to law enforcement. It was no secret to Paul that his fifty-four-year-old mother—with her long blonde hair and great body—was still considered hot by most men (he'd recently heard her referred to as a GILF), and that at this point in their lives, she barely looked older than him.

“Are you Paul Dunn?”

He froze, not at all sure if he could even talk. His head felt thick and slow and he couldn't focus his eyes.

“Don't fuck with me,” the policeman said. He put one foot across the threshold and brought his face up close to Paul's. “We need to speak with Paul Dunn. Are you him?”

“Yes I am. What's going on?”

Paul got a strong feeling that if he said the wrong thing (whatever that might be) that the policeman would hit him in the face and break his jaw or something.

He moved behind Mavis.

“I'm Detective Fagan and this is Officer Plant.”

Detective Fagan was a big man. Reminded Paul of the wrestler and politician Jesse Ventura. He'd never seen such a large policeman.

“Great, why are you *here*?” Paul said, sure it had something to do with his purchases of DM all over town the last two years or so.

“Do you have an ex-wife named Tina Dunn?”

“Well, technically, we're still married.”

“She and her boyfriend Mark Pisko put out a restraining order on you last month? Because you threatened to kill them?”

Mavis said, “Oh that's just part of the typical divorce back and forth. You know how people can get, Detective. Paul'd never hurt anyone.”

“Ma'am, both Ms. Dunn and Mr. Pisko were found dead just after one-thirty this morning.”

“Oh shit,” Paul said. “*Goddamn* it. I warned her. I told her not to get involved with Mark Pisko. Fuck.”

“Now watch your language, sweetheart,” Mavis said.

“Mr. Dunn,” Detective Fagan said, “do you own a shotgun?”

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“I’ve never owned a gun in my life. I’ve never even fired one.”

“This is silly,” Mavis said. “Paul’s been here all night, since around eight-thirty.”

“We don’t have a time of death for sure yet but it was certainly several hours before they were found.”

“Why don’t all of you come inside and have a cup of coffee and we can work all this out?”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s Mavis, Detective.”

As Mavis offered her hand for Fagan to shake her robe opened a bit more. The Detective stared, his face growing redder.

“I’m Paul’s mother.”

“Uh huh,” Fagan said. He didn’t take Mavis’ hand. “Yeah, so ... we’re going need your ... uh, so ... to come with us down to the station. He isn’t under arrest—at least not yet—but we need to talk to him.”

Paul started to cry.

“What happened? They were both *shot* ... with a shotgun? Fuck! I fucking loved her. *Goddamn* it! It’s all that fucking Pisko’s fault. I’m sure it’s some shit he got them into.”

“Paul!” Mavis said. “Seriously. Watch your language.”

“I warned her I warned her I warned her, but she thought he was so hot and cool. Jesus! Now I wish I *had* killed him.”

“Paul,” Mavis said as she put her arm around her son. “Maybe you better go with the officers now. Don’t you think?”

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## FIVE

They didn't let Paul change clothes for the trip to the station. They allowed him to put on a pair of flip flops, but they made him wear his ridiculous yellow sweatpants and puke-stained t-shirt. He wanted to bring his phone, but Fagan wouldn't let him, though the detective insisted that he get his wallet.

An unmarked black Ford sedan and a patrol car sat at the curb. Paul automatically followed Detective Fagan to the passenger side of the Ford. Fagan raised one angry eyebrow and nodded at the patrol car. Paul got into the back of the black and white with officer Plant.

Mavis said she'd come to the station as soon as she "fixed herself up." He knew that meant putting on makeup and some kind of sexy outfit. Plus, she'd need time to call everyone she knew with the news that her son had just been taken in by the police because they suspected he'd shot his wife and her lover to death with a shotgun.

This wasn't his first trip to the police station. He'd gone there intermittently for years, usually with Mavis or his sister, Bethany, to pick up a niece, or a brother-in-law, or the nieces or nephews of one of his wives, or to pick up his mother or sister after visiting one of the wayward fuck-up relatives that always seemed to surround him.

He'd never been past the entryway and had never interacted with the policemen, but he'd seen every episode of *Law and Order* and hundreds of other crime dramas, so he recognized the tiny room Fagan put him in: metal desk with two wooden chairs, a video camera attached to the ceiling opposite the door, and a mirror on one wall that of course was two-way. He wondered who was watching. There was a notepad and a pen on the table for his confession.

Paul knew from TV he should keep quiet and ask for his lawyer, though he was pretty sure that strategy was just for guilty people. He didn't have a criminal lawyer and didn't like the idea of such a thing. For him, lawyers had always been all about wasted money and broken promises. Decided to go ahead and play innocent—perfect typecasting, after all. And, maybe, he could help.

"Did you kill Tina Dunn and Mark Pisko?" Fagan got right to the point.

"No, I did not, and it's a ridiculous idea."

"Oh, really? Why is that?"

"I'm not that guy, you know?"

"No, I don't know. What do you mean? Who is 'that guy?'"

"Someone who kills people. Someone who even *has* a gun."

"Don't fuck with me, asshole. I think you did it, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd just confess so I can sign off on this case and move on to other things. Save me all the trouble of going out and

finding evidence and shit. I got enough going on without some pissant like you holding things up on this case.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you.”

“I’ve been doing this a long time. And, I’ve developed what you could call a sixth sense. So, I know you did it. I’m going to find out sooner or later but I guarantee that things will go a lot easier for you if you’d just confess now.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Okay, dumbshit. Have it your way.”

He stared at Paul for what seemed like five minutes before speaking again. Paul couldn’t look him in the eyes. Paul had a hard time looking anyone in the eyes.

“So, Mr. Dunn, take me through your day yesterday.”

“Starting when?”

“When did you get up?”

“Around noon.”

“Really? Was it your day off?”

“I’m presently unemployed.”

“Why is that?”

“I have a back injury, from a work accident.”

“Oh, so, you’re one of those, huh?”

“Whatdya mean?”

“On workers’ comp?”

“Yes, but—”

“Just sittin’ around on your ass collecting money? People like you make me sick.”

“Hey, I have a legitimate claim.”

“Of course you do. Just looking at you I can tell you are suffering. Big time.”

“Uh, Detective, really, shouldn’t we be concentrating on how to figure out who killed my wife? I mean, I know I didn’t do it, so let’s just get me cleared so you can move on and I can help you, okay?”

Fagan stood up. He took a step toward Paul and leaned down, grabbed a front leg of his chair and pulled. Hard. Paul went down on his ass. It hurt like hell.

The detective leaned over Paul, and, incredibly, held the chair above his head. He glared.

“What are you? Some kind of hard-ass?”

“No sir, just asking.”

“I ask. You answer. Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good, now get back up and sit the fuck down and tell me where you were yesterday.”

Paul sat down. He could feel his face darkening with some humiliating version of a blush. He



didn't understand what was happening. Sure, he wasn't perfect, but he was a regular citizen and had never been treated like this before.

"Got up at noon. Then I had breakfast and watched TV until around five, when I left to go run some errands."

"Productive."

"Uh huh ..."

"Jesus. Don't you have *any* ambition?"

"What does that have to do with anything? I don't get this shit."

"So you just sleep away the day and veg out in front of the TV? That's the kind of life you want to have? What are you, forty years old?"

"Hey, I'm only thirty-five."

"Could've fooled me."

"I've had a lot of jobs. I'm not totally worthless. I even have a college degree and a teaching credential. But I need to get my back fixed before I can get to working again. That's all."

"Do you have any actual skills?"

Thought about this for a moment. He shook his head. "Not really. I was a horrible teacher."

"Big surprise."

"But I'm sometimes good at getting information about stuff, about people, figuring out facts, research, that sort of thing. You know, googling."

"No shit?"

"No shit. Not that it's ever done me any good. Made me any money or anything."

"You know, I'm pretty good at getting information myself. I have a feeling it won't be very long before I find out that you stand to profit from killing your wife. That is, if you were able to get away with it, which will *not* happen."

Paul looked down. Didn't know what else to do.

"So, was anyone else with you at your house, I mean your *mother's* house, up until five?"

"My mother."

"Anyone else?"

He wasn't sure what to say. That was kind of private. He thought about it for a moment.

"Mr. Dunn! Anyone else there?" Fagan leaned forward in his chair. Paul covered his face with his hands until Fagan leaned back.

"My mom had a visitor."

"She did? Who?"

"I don't know his name. Just some guy."

"Why was he there?"

"He came to see my mother, like I said."

“What did they do?”

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“I don’t know ... just hung out I guess. They were in her room when I got up.”

“Did he see you?”

“Yes, when he left he walked past me. I was on the couch watching TV.”

“And you two didn’t speak?”

“No.”

“Your mother had a guest in the house and she didn’t bother to introduce you?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“And when did this mystery man leave?”

“I’m not sure, around four or so.”

“We’ll have to speak with your mother about this.”

“Okay, good.”

“Does your mother make it a habit of having strange men over in the middle of the afternoon?”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“Your mother is a fine-looking woman. I think I’ll have to pay her a visit some afternoon, myself.

You know what I mean?”

Fagan smiled, the fucker was enjoying himself.

“So then what?”

Paul shrugged.

“I went to the bank, then I guess I drove around for a while. Then I went to Wing Stop over off of Prescott. Then Walgreens, then home.”

“And that took from five to eight? Three hours?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay, Mr. Dunn.”

Fagan pushed the notepad toward Paul and handed him the pen. “Write all that down and be as specific as possible with locations and times and be prepared to produce receipts and bank statements to prove all of that activity. I’ll be right back.”

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## SIX

The Reverend Pete Fish pulled his black Mercedes sedan into the used car lot out on Crows Landing Road. It was seven a.m. and the sun was already high and bright. The dash gave the outside temperature: 78 degrees.

Jorge Rincon waited for him next to a 2001 Nissan Sentra (\$1999). Big unlit cigar in his mouth. Hands behind his back. Rincon's face was in shadow from his wide-brimmed hat so Fish couldn't sense the man's mood. Fish called and arranged this meeting, but that didn't mean he wasn't scared to death.

He parked a couple of feet away. As soon as he slammed his door shut he felt metal on the back of his neck.

“What the fuck, *pendejo*?”

Reverend Fish put his palms up about chest-high and started to turn around. Out of the corner of his eye he recognized the pistol in Rincon's hand: A Sig Sauer P239 Tactical. A beautiful weapon—the same gun he'd tried to get Rincon to sell him a couple weeks before. Fish knew guns. And he knew that Rincon liked to shoot people when he was pissed off.

“Don't you move, Rev,” Rincon said. “Put your hands on the roof.”

Fish complied.

“Did you do it?”

“No, of course not, Jorge.”

“But weren't you there, you and your wife and daughter and that crazy Logan Swift? Trying to make a buy or whatever the fuck that was about. What kind of reverend deals in guns and now fuckin' drugs?”

Rincon pushed the barrel of the gun harder against Fish's neck.

“No, not last night. We were there the night before and Mark decided he didn't trust me and kicked us out.”

“That's because he was fucking smart. Told me you brought one of your fucking guns to the meeting. What was that shit about?”

“Just trying to be careful. He wasn't supposed to see it.”

“Didn't know you were such an outlaw badass, Reverend Fish. What's the name of that church of yours again, ‘The First Church of the Colt .45?’ ”

Fish looked at the ground. He lips moved.

“So tell me who killed my partner and his idiotic wife. And stole all that product I hadn't even paid for yet.”

“It was Paul Dunn.”

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“The fuck?”

“My wife’s brother. Tina’s husband. He killed them because she left him for Pisko.”

Rincon took the gun off of Fish’s neck and stepped back. “No shit?”

Fish turned around. Rubbed his neck. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“That pussy? He came and threatened Mark a couple months ago. We thought it was so funny.

Laughed in his face right in front of his wife.”

“I guess he finally got pissed enough. We heard he got a shotgun a couple of days ago.”

“Why’d he steal the dope? He’d never know what to do with it.”

“Maybe he hoped to make it look like a robbery? I don’t know.”

“Where is he now?”

“In jail. They took him in about an hour ago. Just for questioning we think. Police found out that

Pisko and Tina’d put out a restraining order on him for the threat.”

“But that was just to fuck with him. Mark wasn’t scared of that *maricón*.”

“His mother called my wife after they picked him up, she said they knew about the threats and

since he was an estranged spouse he was the most likely suspect. You know.”

“Still, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure, it does, happens all the time.”

“I saw the bodies, Reverend. I just don’t see this Paul Dunn doing something like that.”

Fish looked at his shoes. His lips moved rapidly.

Rincon tucked the pistol in his pants at the small of his back. Stared at Fish. “You keep me

informed,” he said and walked into his office.

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## SEVEN

Nearly an hour passed as Paul wrote up the previous day on the pad. He wondered what his mother was doing. Wondered why Fagan hadn't returned. Hadn't eaten since the wings and he was starving. He'd DVR'd *Longmire*, his new favorite show, the night before and he really wanted to watch it. Didn't think they were allowed to just hold him for this long. It had to be illegal. He was close to asking for a lawyer. Plus, he wanted to know who the hell *did* kill Tina and that asshole Mark Pisko. He tried not to cry again.

He got up and walked to the door. Turned the knob. Wasn't locked. As he pulled it open, Fagan rushed in carrying a manila folder. The policeman opened the door so hard onto Paul that the back of his legs struck the side of the table and he kept going and fell over onto the other side. His back seized up and he lay there for a moment unable to move.

Fagan stood over him.

"I told you I have a back injury," Paul said. "Shit, I think you fucked it up even more. What's wrong with you?"

Fagan picked Paul up like he was nothing and slammed him back down into the chair.

"I know you did this, you sonofabitch."

Paul *really* thought it might be time for a lawyer.

"I've been doing a little research," Detective Fagan said. "Want to know what I found out?"

Fagan took off his suit jacket. Hung it up by a hook on the door. Blue dress shirt soaked with sweat. Walked over and sat on the table so he was practically sitting in Paul's lap. Planted his huge legs on each side of Paul's chair and used his feet to drag the chair closer.

Paul looked at the camera and at the mirror.

"What? What are you looking at? You think someone is watching us? No one is watching us."

The policeman's body odor was foul. His breath was even worse.

"You know why no one is watching us? Because no one gives a shit."

Fagan stared.

"And you know why no one gives a shit?"

"Why?"

"Because you aren't shit. That's why. You are just about the worst thing a person can be. A murderer."

Paul felt enveloped by Fagan's body, by his smell, by his hatred. The floor disappeared beneath him.

"Don't you want to know what I found out?"

“Okay.”

“I had a nice long talk with your mother. Such a charming woman. She told me that you have a lot of financial obligations. Alimony, child support, etc. Isn’t that right?”

Fagan brought his face even closer to Paul’s and stared.

“I said, ‘is that right?’ ”

“Yes! That’s right.”

“Your kids’re living up in Shasta with their mother?”

“Yeah. So?”

“She says you never see them. That you have them every other weekend but don’t even bother.”

“It’s a long way off! I just need to get over this injury and get some stuff together and I’ll start seeing them again. When I get my own place and some money I’m going to petition the court for more custody and I’ll bring them back here more often.”

“According to Mavis,” Fagan said, “you could’ve fought them moving all the way up there. She didn’t get it. I don’t get it.”

“Yeah, whatever. I do my best.”

“Really? Your best seems pretty half-assed to me, asshole. Your mother also told me you got yourself into some credit card debt. She doesn’t know how much it is because you refuse to tell her but she says your phone rings off the hook from collection agencies. She also said you were running out of money from your little worker’s comp scam and that you’re behind in your rent. You really are a fuck-up, aren’t you? Can’t even afford to live at your mommy’s house and can’t get your shit together enough to be a proper father to your children. I got the feeling Mavis was a little ashamed of her son. What do you think of that?”

Paul didn’t answer. How do you answer such a question? Sure, he’d maxed out his Amex, Bank of America Visa Card, Chase Visa and Master Cards, and his Discover Card. He owed a lot, too, about eighty thousand. So what? Lots of people were in that position, especially with the shitty economy and all the foreclosures and unemployment. Didn’t make him a murderer.

And the thing about never seeing his kids. What Detective Fagan didn’t get was how expensive it could be to fight an ex-wife who hated you and who had some pretty good reasons to keep you away from the kids. At least he thought about it all the time and felt like total shit about it. Wasn’t that something?

“Then I did some digging into your precious Tina and do you know what I found out?”

“What?” Paul said.

“That you’re still the beneficiary to her life insurance policy at her job, which was for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You’ll also be entitled to survivor benefits from the money in her pension fund, in the form of a lump payment or as a monthly annuity. Since Ms. Dunn had worked twenty years for the county, it adds up to quite a bit of money coming to you—possibly several

hundred thousand dollars. How do you like that?”

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Fagan leaned back.

“That is what we in the law enforcement business call motive, Mr. Dunn. Not only were you clearly pissed at your wife for leaving you, and at Mr. Pisko for taking her away, but you stood to gain handsomely from her death.”

Paul hadn't even thought about the life insurance and pension money. He wondered if he was really entitled to it.

“And, now, as far as opportunity goes, I'm pleased to report that the time of death is most likely sometime between six and eight p.m.—the time you were out eating chicken wings and shit.”

Fagan picked up the notepad and studied it. “I don't care what it says here, I don't care what we find on the surveillance cameras or in the receipts and records of any of these places. I think you had plenty of time to drop in at the Pisko house. Just around the corner from Walgreens isn't it?”

Paul could not stop the tears.

“Stop looking at me like I'm some kind of fucking murderer. Stop it stop it stop it! What the fuck are you doing? This is crazy! I didn't kill them. I would never kill them. That's not what I do. That is not my world. Can't you see that? I'm just some ... regular person. I belong out there.”

He pointed to the door.

“Can't you see who I am? What I am?”

Fagan stood and moved over to the other chair on the other side of the table. Paul sobbed. Didn't look up.

“Grab the pen and paper shithead. You'll feel a lot better after you confess.”

“Isn't there someone else I can talk to?”

“What, like the ‘good cop?’ Is that what you want? Sorry, that's only on TV. I'm afraid all you got is me.”

“How about a lawyer then?”

“Who's your lawyer?”

“I don't have one, at least not for this kind of shit.”

“Then who the fuck're you gonna call?”

“I thought you'd appoint one for me, a public defender. You know, like you say in the Miranda rights. Or at least give me a chance to find one.”

“I haven't read you your rights. That's only if you're arrested.”

“So I'm not under arrest?”

“No.”

“Then I want to leave.”

“You can't. You're being detained.”

Paul felt certain Fagan had to arrest him to keep him there, even to detain him. Decided to

demand that he let him leave, see what he'd do. What did he have to lose? Shit. He didn't want to get arrested. Saw an image in his head: dressed in an orange jumpsuit in a large cell, surrounded by inmates all taking turns hitting him in the face while giggling. He had to get out of there. But, if he stayed, he'd demand a lawyer, someone to help him.

"Arrest me or let me go," Paul said.

They stared at each other. Fagan looked at the mirror and nodded his head. It was slight and almost imperceptible, but a definite nod. What the hell?

Seconds later a knock at the door.

"Come in," Fagan said.

Another plainclothes cop stuck in his head.

"Detective Fagan, could you come out here real quick? It's important."

"Hold on one second," Fagan said to Paul. He turned to go.

"I need to leave," Paul said. He began to stand. Fagan lurched at him quickly while bringing his right fist behind his head. Paul sat back down. What else could he do? The guy scared the shit out of him.

Fagan returned just a couple of minutes later. Holding a cell phone. One of those huge Samsung Galaxies.

"Hold still," he said. He pointed the phone at Paul and took his picture. Turned the phone around and stabbed it with his index finger until he saw the image. Seemingly satisfied, he turned to go.

"I'll be right back."

This time when he left the room, Paul heard the lock click. Fagan was gone about ten minutes. When he came back, he was smiling. He sat down, this time all the way across the table. He seemed less stressed, less pissed. Relaxed, even.

"Mr. Dunn, do you own a 1988 Honda Civic?"

"Yes."

"Is it silver?"

"I'm pretty sure you know that. But, yes."

"And is that the car you were driving around last night back and forth from the bank to Wing Street to Walgreens, etc?"

"Yes, it was."

He leaned back.

"Guess what?" Smiling.

Paul just looked at him.

"I just spoke with a witness that identified you as the man who parked a vehicle in front of Pisko's place at just after 7:30 last night. The sun was going down but it was still light. This witness saw you then enter the house carrying an object that was the approximate shape and size of a sawed-



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