

**Azazel**

**Paul S. Kemp**

**PART I: GENESIS**

**Chapter One**

The smell reminded John of the inside of a slaughterhouse, the heavy smell of old blood and old fear, the faint sweetness of distant decay. Tape bound his eyelids closed. He sat on his ass on a concrete floor, the cold oozing through his jeans and causing his jaw to tremble. A thick strip of tape covered his mouth, stretched from ear to ear. He breathed through his nose, fear pulling air in and out of him so fast he sounded as if he had just finished a sprint. He tried to move, found his wrists and ankles bound by something thin and unyielding.

Zip ties, he realized. Soldiers and police used them instead of handcuffs. Realization beat back denial, and panic seized him in cold fingers. He struggled against the ties until they knifed into his skin. Warm blood turned his hands sticky.

“Do not struggle,” said a soft, fatherly voice, a voice that led a congregation, that led them in eating the flesh and blood of their Savior.

Dominick Cook’s voice.

The Blood Priest.

John’s mouth turned arid. He tried to swallow but could generate no saliva. Terror turned on the faucet of his pores and in moments he was soaked with sweat. Moments after that he was shaking with cold, his skin as clammy as that of a corpse.

He knew where he was -- in the basement of the rectory on Woodward Avenue, in the makeshift confessional built by Cook to murder his victims.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” he tried to say, but the tape turned the words to inarticulate, fearful grunts.

A sound froze him, turned him dizzy.

The *schk, schk* of a blade against a strap.

“All of the Lord’s instruments need to be hard,” Cook said. “Hard and sharp.”

Screaming behind the tape, John struggled anew against the zip-ties, rolled onto his side in panic, bumped against the wall. Agony from his bloody wrists nearly caused him to pass out. The acrid stink of his fear-born sweat mingled with the coppery smell of his own blood.

The sound of the sharpening blade gave way to the sound of approaching footsteps.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Cook said.

John shook his head, the movement rapid, animal, unconscious. He could not stop it. He imagined Cook looming over him, looking down on him with the dead eyes of a shark, the shiny, curved meat knife in his hand.

“No! No! No!,” he shouted, mere grunts behind the tape.

Cook did not hear him and would not care if he did. Neither did God.

Cook’s hand closed on his jaw, held John’s head still. Cook’s fingers pawed at the tape over John’s eyes. John squeezed his lids closed. He did not want to see what he knew he would see.

“Are you prepared to make your confession?” Cook asked, his voice the emotionless drone of an automaton, of a sociopath. He tore away the tape over John’s eyes.

“I can’t talk!” John screamed, and sat up in bed.

Sparrows chirped in the ash outside his bedroom. Sweat soaked him, his sheets. The dream had his heart revving like the Porsche inside the walls of his ribs. He sat there for a moment, letting time erase the worst details of the dream from his conscious mind.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

The smell of brewing coffee carried from downstairs.

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Uriel stood third in line at McDonald’s. The obese black woman in line before him wheezed with each breath, her flower-print dress like a pavilion tent, her perfume unable to mask the sour reek of body odor. A whip thin white man stood behind Uriel, muttering under his breath.

“C’mon. C’mon.”

The man's thin, straggly hair and thin, straggly body pronounced him an addict. He wore a stained *I'm with stupid* t-shirt.

Uriel regarded him, holding his wings close around his body. The soul of the addict flared feebly in response, the arrhythmic flaps of an ill nightingale caged in failing flesh. The addict, dumb to all but the needs of his addiction, noticed nothing.

"What's up?" the addict said to him, his eyes everywhere but Uriel's face. "I just want a Coke, man. Can I cut?"

"McDonalds is your temple," Uriel said.

"Right, right," the man said, smiling nervously to show rotted teeth. He ran a hand through his dirty hair and looked away, perhaps shamed by the proclamation of his sin. "Can I cut? Seriously."

Uriel deemed him lost and turned away.

The obese woman faced Uriel, all wheezes and billowing dress.

"You all right, young man?"

"I am surrounded by sin."

She laughed. "Amen. You right. You right."

She turned away from him when a false priest wearing vestments adorned with arches of gold summoned her to the counter to abase herself. Uriel was next in line.

Conversation buzzed from the dining area behind him, laughter, a crying child. Cash registers chirped, spat out paper degradation, the wages of sin. The deep fryer sizzled, the sound reminiscent of burning souls. It lacked only the wailing.

When it was his turn, Uriel stepped to the counter, one hand on the hilt of his flaming sword. The teenaged girl with mild acne and a dark soul did not fake a smile, though her eyes widened slightly.

"Uh...welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

The nametag on her breast proclaimed her to be Emmanuelle. Uriel frowned at the casual use of the holy name.

"The manna extra-value meal," he said.

She nodded and punched a few keys on the register. "Super-sized?"

"No," he answered, thinking of the obese woman. "The third deadly sin is gluttony."

The girl's expression birthed a question. He hoped for a moment that she would lay aside her vestments and ask him for absolution, for a way to escape the demons and enter The Kingdom. But her flesh, bound to the world, kept its grip on her soul and instead she asked what drink he wanted.

Uriel looked at the selections on the menu-board behind the counter. "Milk. Diet milk."

She nodded, completed his order, and told him the price. He paid her in blessings, for which she gave halting thanks, then took his food and found a seat at a plastic table in the dining area.

Once seated, he praised God for nourishing the flesh he inhabited. When he finished the meal, he folded his paper napkin into the shape of one of the Lord's mansions and left the other humans behind to feed their flesh with French fries while their souls starved on the world.

Outside, the cool night breeze carried the smell of cigarette smoke, gasoline engines, and the fishy stink of the nearby riverfront. Cars crawled up and down the asphalt, radios spouting not hallelujahs but vile music, the teenaged drivers and passengers spewing not praise but cold stares. Lost men and women walked the sidewalk like the living dead, unmindful of their souls. They watched their feet, taking solace in their shared iniquity.

Uriel threw up his cowl and lingered on the sidewalk for a time, bathed in the lurid, unholy glow of the McDonald's signage. He adjusted his oversized cloak, walked a short distance, and sat on a bench whose back advertised a cosmetic procedure for larger breasts. Pedestrians passed him, eyeing him only in sidelong glances.

A handful of skyscrapers rose into the bruise-colored sky, blotted out the stars, supervised the sin. The music of a live band carried from somewhere nearby. Some kind of festival was going on, some worldly celebration.

Uriel eyed the mortal passersby from under his cowl with the same pity and anger that the Father must have felt for Lucifer and the rest of the Fallen. The Devil's legions had so subtly shaped human perception of the world that most of humankind was lost to quiet diabolism before reaching their teenage years. By then the dark seed in the well of their soul – the seed they owed to Adam's failure— had found purchase in the soil of their sin and turned the silver of their souls a dull gray, unfeeling and unfelt.

It was but a small step from there, a minor exercise of the free will granted them by God, before the flesh became a ready vessel for possession. Lucifer's demons prowled the world like wolves, looking for the spiritual stragglers, the wounded souls, amplifying their weakness until the humans mistook it for strength.

And there *were* demons in Detroit. Many. Uriel could smell them in the aether.

“Daaamn! Muthafucker stinks!”

Four young black men in sports jerseys and baseball caps stopped before his bench. Their souls, darkened by violence, flared feebly in response to the fuel of his regard.

A tall, thin boy with a diamond earring, his eyes as dark as Belial's, asked “You homeless, Stinky?”

His fellows laughed.

Uriel *was* homeless, at least for a time. He still saw the bright mansions of God in his memory, the golden corridors lit by the luminescence of grace and love, but nine millennia had passed since he had stood in those halls.

Earring advanced a step. His tone sharpened. “I asked if you was homeless, bitch. You speak English?”

Uriel rose, unfurled his wings, threw back his cowl, and spoke to their souls.

“Let him with ears to hear, hear. My home is in Heaven. I am Uriel, the harrier of God, sent here to hunt, bound until my work is done. Repent, sinners, or endure the wrath of God.”

At the blinding sight of his glory, the four teenagers backed up a step, one tripping over his own feet and stumbling.

"Away with you," Uriel said.

Surprise faded and the fear on the boys' faces turned to nervous laughter. Earring shoved the one who had stumbled and the rest laughed more.

"Pussy," Earring said to the other.

"That's a crazy fucker," the boy who had stumbled said, and pointed his chin at Uriel. "You a crazy fucker."

Most of the passing pedestrians nearby looked on and then away, but one, the obese woman from McDonald's, still carrying her bag of food, stopped in her tottering and shouted to the boys.

"You boys leave that man alone. He goes with God. Go on about your business, now."

Uriel blessed her. She was among the flock, astray perhaps, but not lost.

"Mind your own shit, grandma," Earring shouted at the old woman.

"C'mon, Dwayne," the smallest of the group said, and took Earring by the shirtsleeve. "Leave 'em alone. He's just a bum."

"Look at those teeth," said Earring. "Damn. No wonder the fucker's homeless. You hear that? Them teeth is nasty."

Uriel stood his ground and replied only with righteousness, his wings blazing.

Earring's cell phone rang, the tone some wretched music. He answered the phone while walking away, pulling his companions along behind him like goslings. The small one looked back, his gaze on Uriel, guilt and regret in his eyes.

"Nothing," Uriel heard Earring say into the phone. "Fuckin' with a bum. You comin' to the joint?"

Uriel let his flames die and started to sit back down when God put prey before him.

Across Jefferson Avenue, a few blocks down, stood a demon.

"Praise the Father," Uriel whispered.

The demon wore the flesh of a middle-aged, potbellied man in a dark t-shirt and faded jeans, an oversized suit of flesh that could not contain the diabolism leaking through the seams. A pimp, Uriel assumed, and wondered when and why the man had invited a demon into him.

The pimp stood at the mouth of a garbage strewn alley, arrogant in his stance, saturated in his sin, surveying the vice of the street.

Uriel lifted his cowl, masked his glory, and moved to the nearest crosswalk. His wrath grew as he walked toward his prey. The humans parted before him. Automobile horns spat curses.

“Get out of the fuckin’ road!”

Uriel ignored them all, intent on the hunt.

“I see you, Mammon,” he said softly, able now to name his foe from the slitted eyes and vermilion aura bleeding from the pimp’s flesh.

A harlot in tight denim pants and heels swaggered up to the pimp, exchanged words and money, and then strutted away. She was not possessed, merely lost, a Jezebel who sold her body and soul for paper.

Uriel stepped over the curb, his eyes on Mammon, his hand on the hilt of his blade. Pedestrians gave way, muttering. The harlot walked past Uriel, a contemptuous sneer on her face. He looked out of his cowl and returned her contempt a hundredfold. Her gaze faltered and he blew past her.

The pimp saw him coming, drew up. Uriel pulled his blade, accelerated his stride.

“What the fuck—“

Uriel unveiled his glory, showed the fire of his wings, the purity of his soul. Mammon cowered within the pimp, whining, screaming.

“I cast you out,” Uriel pronounced. He shoved the pimp’s body back into the alley and cleaved it with his blade. Mammon’s screams lasted only a moment before he exited the pimp. Uriel watched the demon flee into the night air while the pimp’s corrupted soul suffered judgment.

Uriel tore open the pimp’s shirt and scrawled The Words on his corrupted flesh. He stood and looked down on the cooling body.

“Let those with eyes to see, see.”

He had done the Father’s work.

A scream erupted from behind him. The harlot, or some other passerby.

Uriel took wing and left that place.

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Heart still racing from the dream of Cook, John checked the clock – 10:09. He rolled out of bed and staggered to the hall, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and the memory of Dominick Cook from his brain.

Wearing boxers and a University of Michigan t-shirt, he headed down the stairs to the kitchen.

Lindsay sat at the small table, the Arts Section of *The Detroit News* in her hand. The coffeemaker burred a greeting. Freya, curled up under the table, beat her tail on the floor.

“Morning, babe,” he said, trying to chase away Cook with affected cheerfulness. He went to the cupboards for a mug. “Oh, and you too, Lindsay.”

“Ha, ha,” Lindsay said, a smile in her voice. “Grab me a pen, will you?”

He filled a mug as large as a soup bowl with Starbuck’s French Roast. The digital clock on the coffeemaker showed 10:13.

*No temptation has taken you except what is common to man. Corinthians 10:13.*

“Freya,” he called.

The shepherd-mix lurched to her feet and came to his side. She smelled like serious dog. He needed to get her to the vet for a nail trim and a bath. She had been having stomach problems anyway.

“Sit,” he said, and she did.

He opened her yellow treat jar – shaped like a cartoon canine – and it said, “Snausages,” in a battery-powered voice. Her tail played Sousa on the hardwood.

He took out a treat, held it under her nose. “Leave it.”

She obeyed, watching his eyes, tail thumping.

“Leave...it. Okay.”

She snatched the Sausage, and he rubbed her head.

“You spoil her,” Lindsay said over her shoulder.

“I spoil all the women I love.”

“Why am I still driving a '99 Nissan, then?”

He took a pen from the junk drawer, returned to the table, and handed it over.

“Because you won't let me buy you something new,” he said.

She looked up at him with her green eyes, her short, stylish blonde hair lovely with a morning muss. He suspected all of the men in her Master's Program must watch her enter and exit the classroom with more than social work on their mind.

“Meds, John,” she said, all seriousness.

He felt himself redden. “Right. Right.”

She was sensitive about the meds. She'd seen him off of them.

“Top off, too, please,” she said, and held up her cup. “And your vitamin.”

He bent and kissed her on the small Hello, Kitty tattoo inked on the back of her neck, a reminder of the wild Lindsay who had played bass in the all-girl band, The Pussy Farm.

He went to the counter and opened his pill bottle. Freya watched him closely, hoping for another Sausage.

“Lithium does a body good,” he said and dumped the small red-orange pill into his palm. He grabbed the Centrum, dropped that horse pill into his hand, too, and eyed Freya.

“Another?”

Her tail thumped.

“Sausages,” said the jar, and he gave her another treat.

He chased the Centrum with a sip of Lindsay's coffee, topped her mug with the Starbucks, and sat back down at the table.

“What's the plan for today?” he asked.

“I've got to shower and get over to my mom's. Then the U for a few hours. I've got some reading.”

He nodded absently, still troubled by the dream. He stared out the Pella windows at his well-tended lawn, which he paid others to mow and edge, the in-ground pool, which he paid others to clean. His mansion sat between the homes of a CEO on one side and a surgeon on the other, accomplished men who made a sandwich of a hack writer.

“Cool in the house,” he said. “Thanks for starting the coffee.”

Lindsay nodded on both counts, engrossed in her crossword.

John had lived in the house for over a year but he still felt like a visitor. Six thousand square feet with a lake view out the front door felt not so much affluent as obscene. How he had earned the money to pay for it did not help.

He sipped his coffee while Joel spoke in his head.

*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions.*

John did not want visions, but he got them. *Parable* haunted him.

Correction, *Cook* haunted him.

He had lived Dominick Cook for six months while he had written the book. The second anniversary of the release date had just passed. John could recall with perfect clarity the police photos of the confessional Cook had mocked up in the rectory's basement, where he'd forced his victims to confess their sins and do their penance in blood.....

“Seven letter word for ‘remit, as of a sin,’ Lindsay said, tapping her cheek with the pen.

John came back to himself, considered. “Absolve.”

She checked its fit, smiled. “Absolve. Perfect.”

He tried to talk away his dark thoughts. “What are you and your mom up to today?”

“Breakfast at the diner then shopping. Probably Somerset Mall. I need to find something for Dad. His birthday's in two weeks.”

John grunted.

“Don't start, John.”

John swallowed his words with another drink of coffee. He did not understand Lindsay's willingness to cater to her father. The old man had emotionally and physically abused her as a child, especially as a teenager, locking her in her room, calling her a slut. The back of Lindsay's hand still bore a puckered scar from a Marlboro's kiss. Eventually Roger Cunningham had proved too much even for Lindsay's mom, Esther, who was herself about as soft and pleasant as a machine screw.

"You could come with us," Lindsay said, placing her scarred hand on her lap and out of sight. "Mom would like to see you."

He forced his lips to smile at the lie. Lindsay's mother had started to read *Parable* once but promptly declared it unreadable. She was an old school Catholic who called John "Johnny" and did not understand how he could write about a monster like Dominick Cook the Blood Priest, seeing as how it reflected so poorly on 'God's Church.'

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I need to do some research today."

Her eyes and tone of voice both put on a veil. "Decided on your next book?" A pause, then, "Still true crime?"

An accusation lurked in the question, but he chose not to acknowledge it.

"Yes, true crime. No, I haven't decided, but I've narrowed it down to a few possibilities."

"That's progress," she said, and studied her crossword.

It was also a lie. John watched the news everyday, scoured the internet for stories, but nothing felt right, nothing grabbed him. He needed not only a crime – which mankind supplied in abundance – but a hook. *Parable* had been not merely about the sensational nature of Cook's crimes, but the media's role in glamorizing the bloodshed. John told himself that his critical take on crime coverage gave the work social value, rather than merely furthering the glamorization he purported to condemn. He *needed* it to have social value. Writing it and promoting it had made him feel as dirty as a televangelist.

"Lawrence left you a voicemail," Lindsay said without looking up, and spoke aloud the answer to another crossword clue. "Neap."

John already knew what Lawrence had to say and when he made no move for the phone, Lindsay asked, "Why doesn't he help you decide on your next book? Does he think true crime is the way to go?"

"Agents just sell books, sweets, not plan them."

"Well, I bet he'd be able to help you. He's a smart guy, at least when he stops swearing."

John's patience with praise for Lawrence and opinions about what he should write ran about as deep as a kiddie pool.

"Linds, just leave the writing to me, all right? I know what I'm doing."

She looked up from the crossword. "I'm just trying to help you."

He flushed. "Yeah."

"Yeah? That's what you say?"

He pretended to sip his coffee, pretended not to care, and failed.

She said nothing either, content to let guilt do its work while she did her crossword.

In the end, he at least kept his apology half assed.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

She eyed him with the affected patience of an angel, the eyes of the social worker she would be. "I think you did. Listen to me, John. Don't write if you don't want to write. Or write something else. You don't have to do true crime. It's..."

He looked across the table, suddenly angry. "It's what? True crime is what?"

She did not meet his eyes.

"Nothing. It's nothing." She sat back down, fiddled with her pen. "You had nightmares last night. They woke me. Cook again?"

He ignored the fork in the conversational road. "Why would I do something else? This is what I've done. It's why I'm rich."

She jumped the berm and came back to the main thoroughfare. "Yeah, and being rich allows you to do anything now. Travel, read, learn to ski. Write fiction. Write non-fiction. Whatever you want. You're a good writer. Hell, why

not school again? A creative writing Master's program or something. You could go back now that...things are controlled."

He winced at the oblique mention of his episode, shook his head.

"College for me was Dungeons and Dragons and skipped lectures. Then I got sick. You're the scholar. I'm just a dumb writer."

"You're not dumb," she said, and he heard something half-hearted in it. She seemed on the verge of saying something more, but let it go.

He read in her expression what she'd left unsaid. She was disappointed in him for not returning to school, for settling for writing true crime. He tried to imagine the day when Lindsay Cunningham, MSW, took her college dropout husband to work gatherings. What would he say? That he wrote hack stories that sold more copies out of Wal-Mart than Borders?

He had trouble picturing the moment and realized that their conversation did not seem the only thing forking in different directions.

Neither said anything for a time and the morning slowly dissolved the tension, as it always did. He wondered when one of them would admit aloud to the obvious and call it quits. She pretended at normalcy first.

"Jazz Festival is going on. You want to go downtown tonight?"

"Yeah, maybe." He rose for a refill of his coffee.

Freya trailed him, still hopeful for another Sausage. "Did the mail come?"

Lindsay pointed vaguely with the pen. "On the counter."

He filled his coffee and started in on the mail. A flyer from Gardner White Furniture, a Val-Pak of coupons, Discover Card bill, a credit card offer, and what appeared to be a fan letter, with John's name and address printed in precise block letters.

He frowned. Professional inquiries went through Lawrence and he no longer gave out his address on his website. Too many strange folks. Instead he used a P.O. box, though he was still listed in the local white pages. Going unlisted felt too much like surrendering to his fame.

"Fan letter," he said.

Lindsay looked up. "Here? Someone you know?"

John knew almost no one, or at least no one who would write him a fan letter. The return address did not have a name, just an address.

“I don’t know anyone in Kalkaska.”

“Kalkaska? That’s the sticks. Drove through there with the girls on the way to a Farm gig in Saugatuck. Not too many people to know. Ah!”

She scribbled something onto the crossword.

The envelope appeared to have been opened and re-taped shut. John tore it open, pulled out the single sheet of college ruled paper, unfolded it. On it was written a short note.

*I enjoyed Parable. But you missed the big picture. We should talk before it is too late. My doctor has approved us meeting (and has read this before it got to you, no doubt). I’m afraid you will have to come see me as my situation is circumscribed.*

It was signed by Simon Barber.

The name sank into John, hit him like a slow motion punch in the stomach. He stared at the words, pored over each letter, rechecked the return address on the envelope.

“This can’t be right.”

“What is it?” Lindsay asked.

John put the letter down, looked out the window at his pool, his mind racing. “It says it’s from Simon Barber.”

The name had been all over the news a few years earlier. John remembered a photograph of Barber from the time of his crime. John had been writing *Parable* at the time. An amateur photographer – probably just one of the Barbers’ neighbors with a cell phone camera – had noticed the hubbub on the day of Barber’s arrest and photographed the police shoving Barber into a cruiser. That picture later made the cover of USA Today. John recalled the beige, well-to-do, three thousand square foot house in the background, the garage door wide open, as if screaming at what had happened within.

Barber, pudgy and unshaven, had been wearing the suburban father's uniform: cargo shorts and a blue polo. Shorts and shirt sported ugly brown smears – the blood and brains of his wife and daughter.

In the photo Barber appeared to be grinning, or maybe just baring his teeth, as a burly Rochester city police officer steered his head into the cruiser.

Lindsay turned in her chair, brow furrowed, her mind half on John, half on her puzzle. "How do I know that name?"

"He's the Father's Day Killer," John answered.

That brought her thoughts all the way to John and she turned to him, eyes wide.

"Jesus. Are you sure it's from him?"

Not waiting for an answer, she rose from her chair, came to his side.

"No. No, I'm not."

Both of them stared at the letter. Lindsay examined it, the envelope.

"Precise printing," she said, as if the fact were significant. "Why would Simon Barber contact you? How did he get your address?"

"I don't know."

"It's fucking creepy." She studied the letter as if it held some secret she could discern if she stared hard enough.

John agreed. "I've got to check with Lawrence."

She put a hand on his arm, held the letter before him like a Bill of Particulars.

"John, no. If this is Barber...."

He wanted to say again 'Leave the writing to me.' Instead, he said, "Linds, if this is really Barber, then I may have my next book."

John glanced past Lindsay to the clock on the microwave – 11:19.

*And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore shall they be your judges.* Luke.

"I'm not sure it's good for you, John."

And in those words John understood why Lindsay had not surrendered to the slow death of their relationship. It would not be good for him.

“It’s the right thing, Linds.”

She looked into his face, closed her mouth into a tight line and turned away, giving him a great view of her tattoo.

Goodbye, Kitty.

## Chapter Two

John called Lawrence while Lindsay showered. As usual, the call went to voicemail.

“Answer the damned phone once in a while,” he muttered.

John drummed his fingers on the counter and stared out the window while the message played. Lawrence on voicemail sounded only slightly more nasal and robotic than the man himself. All the message was missing was the fuck faucet. Maybe the beep obscured the profanity.

“Lawrence, it’s John. It’s a little after ten. Listen, I got a letter in the mail today from a Simon Barber, maybe *that* Simon Barber. Did you know anything about this? Call me right away.”

He disconnected and tried to fill the time. He let Freya out the sliding glass door and she bolted into the backyard and started sniffing. She wobbled a bit, looking as unsteady on her feet as his lithium sometimes left him. He reminded himself again to get her to the vet. Eventually she’d wander around to the front yard to watch the cars pass on Jefferson Avenue. An Invisible Fence kept her from wandering into the road or into the CEO’s wife’s tulips.

John held his phone in his hand, paced the kitchen, and re-read the letter.

Damned if it did not look legitimate.

He went into the first floor library that served as his office – the wall shelves lined with books he’d bought at estate sales but never read, the fireplace in which he had never built a fire – and keyed his computer out of sleep mode.

Pictures of his three smiling Ghanaian ‘daughters,’ all Save the Children adoptees, adorned the old schoolteacher’s desk he’d bought at an antique store. Lindsay called the girls his angels and John thought of them the same way. He had grown rich writing about the worst things in men, and had adopted the girls because he felt obliged to give some of his wealth back. He confessed his sins to the Postal Service every month, in the form of a mailed check.

The computer played a Windows tune and the screensaver vanished. The cover from the fifth printing of *Parable*, which he used as his desktop background, stared out at him from the screen. Blood spattered his name.

### **The Parable of Violence**

#### **The blockbuster true-crime account of Father Dominic Cook, the Blood Priest.**

**By John Carpenter**

John opened his browser to hide the desktop and Googled ‘Simon Barber trial.’ The internet disgorged over a million hits.

John skimmed the pages. He already knew quite a bit and little tidbits floated out of his memory as this or that story triggered a recollection.

Barber’s crime and trial had dominated magazines, CNN, and Court TV for months. CNN had interviewed Barber’s classmates from Rochester High School and colleagues at the accounting firm at which he’d worked. A snippet from one of the interviews had found its way to Youtube.

A balding, pudgy man in a cheap shirt and tie said, “Simon seemed like a normal guy. We had him and Jill over for barbecues. I never saw anything like this coming.”

“No shit,” John muttered and closed the video. He opened another, read an interview, and on and on.

He could saturate himself in it, he knew, just as he had with Dominic Cook. He resolved to get less involved this time, to keep some auctorial distance, to give his readers nightmares but give himself none.

‘Didn’t see it coming’ accompanied by headshakes and sighs seemed to be the theme among those who had known Barber before the crime. Not unexpected. Atrocity rarely announced its intentions before spilling blood.

John found summaries and news clips of the actual trial. Barber’s lawyer, a careworn, overweight man with circles under his eyes so dark he could have been a raccoon, claimed that his client suffered from a previously undiagnosed case of paranoid schizophrenia. John knew all about schizophrenia.

Dueling psychiatrists had taken the stand and left everyone confused. Finally, against the advice of the raccoon, Barber had taken the stand. A sketch of that scene – Barber in an orange prison jumper, manacled hands resting on the stand, eyes as wide and bright as halogens – had featured on the front page of every daily in the country. John found it online and stared at it while Lindsay's footsteps on the floor upstairs announced her exit from the shower.

There was something in the sketch that bothered John. He pored over it until he realized what it was – Barber was still wearing his gold wedding band. Could that be right?

“Jesus.”

Barber had worn his wedding band to his trial for the murder of his wife and daughter, wore it while he'd calmly stated that he had killed his family because they were possessed by demons and he'd been trying to save their souls.

In the end the jury had agreed with the raccoon and found Barber not guilty by reason of insanity. Barber had been placed in the tiny Kerwell Institute in Kalkaska, Michigan, the city where he had been raised. His wife and daughter, of course, had been placed in the dirt at Mount Olive Cemetery, also in Kalkaska.

John could not blame the jury. Barber showed the typical signs of schizophrenic behavior – religious fixation, hallucinations informed by past religious experience. Hell, during his own episode, John had lived on the street and quoted Bible verses at passersby. He'd had no proclivities to violence – unlike Barber – but he knew how overwhelming the illness could be.

John clicked on video footage of the raccoon, dressed in a wrinkly suit, flapping his paunch and calling the verdict justice. There'd been some protests, but after about a week the media forgot all about Simon Barber and his victims.

Why? Because the successful insanity defense had destroyed the story's sex appeal. There was no dark secret in the Barber family's past, no sexual abuse, no infidelity. Barber was just a crazy yuppie with bloodlust. Move on. Nothing more to see.

But John saw an angle he could take and a sudden sense of purpose elicited the same warm glow he'd felt as a kid when he'd eaten cinnamon oatmeal, the same glow he'd felt when *Parable* had come together in his mind.

He could sex the story back up. Barber was not just a crazy accountant. He was an everyman who cracked under the pressures of an average life. The lack sexiness was the point. The purposelessness was the point. Maybe Barber had been crazy, maybe he hadn't. John could finesse that. But Barber's sanity was not the issue. His ordinariness was. The Father's Day killings could happen to anyone.

To anyone.

"We're all monsters," John said, trying out a tagline for the book forming in his mind. Saying the words sent the oatmeal glow scurrying. He felt as if he'd just asked an old lady for money to save her soul.

Was it the right thing?

Lindsay's footsteps thumped across the ceiling.

It was the right thing. It was the *only* thing. And if the letter was real, John would make his point not through thorough research, as he had with Cook, but with Barber's own words, in the form of an exclusive interview.

The book would fly off the shelves.

John noted Barber's lawyer's name, and tried to find him online. He did, in an obituary.

Ronald Curry, Esq., died in his sleep of a heart attack three months after keeping Barber out of prison. John wondered for a moment what the lawyer had been dreaming about at the moment of death. Madmen tended to stick with you.

John lingered over the obituary, seeing not Curry, but Cook, and blood.

He returned to the sketch of Barber testifying, right clicked it, set it as his new desktop background. Barber glared out of the screen at him.

Lindsay called from the top of the stairs. "Are my shoes down there?"

"At the back door," he called up.

He started up his email just as his phone played the Michigan fight song in ringtones. He checked the time while the muzak did its best *Hail to the Victors*.

The caller was Lawrence. John picked up before the clock ticked to 12:24.

*But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man does not cast out demons, except by Beelzebul, the prince of the demons."*

"Matthew," John said into the phone.

"John? It's Lawrence. Who's Matthew?"

"What? No one. You got my message?"

Lawrence's voice rose several decibels. "Hell yes I got it! Simon fucking Barber! Are you shitting me? I didn't know anything about it. How the fuck did he find you?"

Excitement, for Lawrence, meant a veritable sleet storm of expletives. Lindsay called it the fuck faucet, and once it was on, the fucks flew. John held the phone slightly away from his ear to spare his eardrum. He cruised to CNN.com to check the daily news while Lawrence spoke.

"That is God damned crazy. I Googled that bastard after I heard your message. Killed his wife and daughter with a hammer. Kept their bodies propped up on the couch in front of the TV for four fucking days. The mail carrier called the police when she smelled the decay. Fuckin' nuts. You should have thought of this guy months ago. You can turn it into a fucking great story, John. Nothin's been done on this guy. This is *the* book. You ready to write it? You get this done in six months and I guarantee you two million. John, you fucking hearing me?"

John put the phone against his ear, tentatively, lest he get swept away in an unexpected resurgence of the fuck deluge.

"I hear you, but we don't know if this is legitimate. I need you to—"

"I've already put in a call to the administrator at Kerwell. I'll let you know when I know something."

Lindsay appeared at the bottom of the stairs in jeans and a Wayne State t-shirt. The jeans, slightly faded, showed off her legs, the curve of her hips.

"Off to my mom's."

"See you, Hon," John said. "Love you. Where's your watch?"

“What?” Lawrence asked.

“What?” Lindsay said.

John tapped his wrist. “Your watch. Gotta have a watch.”

“What?” Lawrence asked again. “My watch?”

“Oh. In the kitchen, I think.” She pursed her lips. “You all right?”

“Fine.”

“This Barber thing...?”

“Fine,” John said, smiling, putting his body between Lindsay and the desktop image of Barber. “I’m fine. It’ll be fine.”

Lindsay nodded through her concern and said, “I’ll call you later. We’ll hit the Jazz Festival.”

“Okay.”

“Fine? What’s fine?” Lawrence asked. “You’re not off your meds, are you?”

“Fuck off, Lawrence. Lindsay’s here. Well, she was.”

“Oh. Tell her I said hello.”

“I will,” John lied. “When do you think you’ll hear from the administrator?”

“Hopefully later today.”

His email program rang a note to indicate new mail. John minimized CNN in favor of his email and for a moment could not breathe.

The email was from Barber, Simon. The email suffix was Kerwell.org.

“Holy shit,” John said.

“What?”

John opened the email. Outlook did not fill his entire screen and the sketch of Barber peeked out from around its edges, eyeing John while he read.

*By now you have received my letter. Please come up to discuss it. There is little time. You are being hunted and I am being killed, a little more each day.*

“This is fucking unbelievable,” John said softly, testing the water of the fuck stream.

“What?” Lawrence asked. “You know how health care workers are.”

“Not that. Barber sent me an email.”

The fuck faucet went silent for a moment, the valve turned off. “You are shitting me. Say you’re shitting me.”

“I’m not. How did he get my email address?”

“What does it say?”

John read the email aloud, the address. He checked the time stamp:  
12:30.

*Then certain of the scribes and Pharisees answered, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." Matthew again.*

“Hunted?” Lawrence said. “What the fuck. He’s nuts, John.”

“Yeah.”

“Listen, I think this is real,” Lawrence said. “I’ll badger that administrator’s assistant until she goddamn well fucking calls back. And then I will get you time with Barber. Are you up for that?”

“Yeah,” John said, still eyeing the email, feeling a little dizzy.

What did that mean, ‘hunted’?

“This is different than *Parable*, John. You’ll actually get to interview the killer. You sure you can handle it? I can call in some favors, get a professional to sit with you, maybe help plan the questions—“

John shook his head, closed his email, stared at Barber’s face on his screen. His voice sounded dull, even to himself.

“No. This should be organic. He’s an everyman, Lawrence, that’s the angle. No professionals. Just him and me, talking. An everyman.”

The line was silent for a moment, then, “I like it, John. Fuckin’ A, I like it.”

John heard Lindsay’s car door slam, heard the Nissan pull out of his circular driveway. He jumped up from the chair, hurried to the window, and watched her pull onto Lakeshore Drive. She didn’t look back and didn’t go east, toward the highway and her mother’s, but west.

Where was she going? What the Hell?

“Call me when you hear something, Lawrence,” John said, pressing his face against the window to follow Lindsay’s progress.

“Damn right. Pack, John. You might want to stay up there a few days, depending on how things go—”

John disconnected and dialed Lindsay.

“Hey, Hon,” she said. “Did you forget something?”

“No, I just....”

His fumbling effaced her light tone. “What is it? Something wrong? John, are you all right? Really, I can turn around.”

“No, I’m fine. This Barber thing has me creeped out a bit.”

“Me, too. You sure it’s the right thing?”

He dodged the question. “Where are you going, Linds?”

“My mom’s,” she said, and he caught something evasive in her tone. “I told you that.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.”

Concern crept back into her voice, as sweet and false as saccharine.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine, Lindsay. Don’t mother me. Bye.”

“Goodbye, John.”

He regretted his words and hurriedly added, “Love you,” but she was already gone.

“Damn it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

John spent the morning regretting his parting with Lindsay and researching Barber, pacing, thinking, cruising the internet news sites and blogs, vanity searching his own name, waiting for the call from Lawrence that would confirm the letter’s authenticity and put everything in motion. He called the vet to make an appointment for Freya, then decided to call in a favor. He dialed the non-emergency number for the Rochester Police.

The voice of the operator answered. “Rochester Police.”

“Lieutenant Bishop, please.”

Paul Bishop’s assistant answered the transferred call. “Lieutenant Bishop’s office.”

“Jessica, it’s John Carpenter. Is Professor Bishop available?”

“Hello, Mr. Carpenter. I’ll check.”

Before transferring to the University of Michigan, John had taken a community college class in ethics taught by Paul Bishop. John had sent him autographed copies of *Parable* when it had hit the Times’ bestseller list. Since then, they’d had lunch and cigars – the Professor had started John on the habit – once or twice a year.

The Professor’s wood rasp voice sounded through the line.

“John? How are you?”

“I’m fine, Professor Bishop.” Bishop hated bullshit so John cut right to it. “Listen, I’m doing research for a new book and would like to see a file. Today, if possible.”

“Which file?”

“Simon Barber.”

A long pause. “Barber. Yeah. It’s pretty graphic, John.”

John hesitated, thought of Lindsay, of Cook and said, “Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll have it pulled. You owe me lunch and an Ashton. Give me an hour.”

“Done,” John said, thinking he’d have time beforehand to hit his home gym. “See you then.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### Chapter Three

John parked the Porsche in the Main Street parking structure, set the car alarm, and walked down a stone stairwell that stank of piss and managed to be damp, though there had been no rain for over a week.

Main Street in downtown Rochester featured the same stores found in every affluent white enclave in the Midwest -- Starbucks, Caribou, Moosejaw, Jos. A Bank, Trader Joes, Mongolian Barbecue. Soccer moms and businessmen returning from lunch walked the sidewalks under faux Victorian light fixtures. It might as well have been Grosse Pointe.

John was vaguely tired of the uniformity. It had never bothered him much before, but the prospect of the Barber police photos made him irritable. He smiled vaguely and nodded at the pedestrians, all the while thinking – we're all monsters.

The municipal building that housed the police department was a former church, a fifties job with a box shape and unremarkable architecture. Only the bank of arched windows in the front hinted at its former purpose. John figured it was Unitarian once, or maybe Presbyterian. One of those 'weak tea' faiths, as his father had called them.

John found it fitting that the church had died and been resurrected as a municipal building filled with the priests and pastors of modernity – government bureaucrats. The world killed all faiths eventually, including John's. He'd left its corpse two decades in the past.

His parents had raised him in a Pentecostal Church in Livonia. He'd memorized the New American Standard Translation of the Bible by thirteen, attended church every Sunday until he was sixteen. Christianity had been the guiding star of his life.

He'd been anchored in Jesus, all right.

Then God and Jesus had seen fit to allow the murder of his parents in a burglary gone wrong. John had been away, a peer counselor at Vacation Bible School. They'd driven him home alone in the passenger vault of the big bus, so

his pastor could tell him in person. The bus driver had refused to tell him anything.

His mother, as sweet a soul as John had ever known, had been wheelchair bound with multiple sclerosis. His father had been weak from a chronic heart ailment. They would have been easy prey for the burglars and both had died of suffocation from duct tape designed to keep them quiet. That the killings had been inadvertent made it worse, not better.

John imagined the police report. Murder weapon – duct tape.

He unclenched his fist, unknotted his jaw.

If he had been home, he could have done something. He'd been a big kid even at sixteen.

Pastor Brookings tried to steer him away from blaming himself. God has a plan for everything, the pastor had told him. Keep faith. Trust in God. We're all here for you.

John had told both Pastor Brookings and God to go fuck themselves. He had not set foot in a church since, nor would he. John left the ruined site of his dead faith barren, just to spite God. The police had never caught the burglars, which John assumed to be God spiting him.

Men might all be monsters, but God was a fucker and then some.

John entered the church cum municipal building and followed the signs to the offices of the police department. He entered, noting the time – 2:22.

*He reveals the deep and secret things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. Daniel.*

Paul Bishop, graying, overweight, and dressed in a blue Sears button down that was escaping the confines of his overtaxed belt and pants, greeted him and gave him the nickel tour. John turned over a fist full of Ashtons and tried to be interested.

Men and women in crisp blue uniforms or cheap suits sat in front of computer screens, answered phones, completed paperwork, ate bad food and drank bad coffee. If not for the uniforms, it could have been a telemarketing boiler room.

“I considered a career in law enforcement while I was in college,” John said, back in Bishop’s office. He had wanted to avenge his parents and catch bad guys. Now he just wrote about them and tried to make sense of the world, or at least to illustrate its lack of sense.

“Why didn’t you?” Bishop asked, his chair squeaking under his weight.

Professor Bishop did not know of John’s mental illness. John never would have passed a background check.

“Not cut out for it, I guess.”

Bishop nodded. “Pay and hours stink. You went the right way with the writing.” He put a fist to his chest, burped silently. “Cheesy fries,” he said, by way of explanation.

“Cheesy fries sound good right now.”

Bishop’s face fell and he looked out his window, his chair squeaking. “Probably better that you didn’t eat.

John’s heart accelerated. “Is it that bad? The file?”

Bishop half shrugged. “It’s pretty bad.”

John almost told Bishop about the email he’d received from Barber, the claim that something was hunting John, but he could think of no way to say it without sounding timid. Instead, he swallowed down the flutter in his stomach and made enough meaningless small talk with Professor Bishop to avoid the suggestion of impoliteness, then asked to see the file. Bishop grabbed his phone, pushed four numbers, put it on speaker so that John heard the ring.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” said a female voice, Jessica’s voice.

“The Barber file?”

“Interrogation one,” she said.

Bishop killed the connection and rose to his feet.

“Follow me.”

He walked John through the squad room to the door of one of the station’s two interrogation rooms. A third door between them presumably opened onto the observation room.

“Notes are fine,” Bishop said. “But no pictures and do not take anything. No copies either, I’m afraid.”

John nodded, acknowledging the rules.

“Good seeing you, John. I’ve got to pick up Ellen from soccer, so I probably won’t be here when you’re done. She’s fourteen now. You should see her play. She’s good.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

“Let’s have that lunch soon. Cheesy fries on me. I know a great place.”

They shook hands, John entered the interrogation room, and Bishop closed the door behind him. The latch clicked and the phones and voices of the Rochester police station went silent, severed clean by the closed door. The windowless room must have been soundproofed.

A rectangular wooden table sat in the center of the gray room, three chairs in orbit around it. A thick manila folder sat on the table, the ends of yellow and pink post-it notes sticking out of it like toe tags.

He stood alone in the quiet, conscious of the sweat that dampened his armpits under his wrinkled Brooks Brothers polo. The hum of the room’s florescent lights – for some reason a staple of police stations and doctor’s offices – made the room feel like a morgue. The closeness of the walls made it feel like a confessional, and that turned his mind again to Cook.

He remembered the stone-walled tomb in the dungeon of the Detroit Police Station where he had first seen the police photos of Cook’s confessional. He shook his head to dislodge the memory. He had to clear space for yet more horror.

He stood there a long while, torn, thinking of Lindsay. He *could* do something else. He needn’t expose himself to this again. He’d written exactly one book, which did not exactly make him an old hand. He could write fiction, walk away from writing entirely, do nothing.

But he knew he would not. Writing about men who did monstrous things was John’s way of reminding God that he was a piss-poor Creator, John’s way of saying ha-ha instead of hallelujah.

He walked across the room.

A “DARE” poster, some leftover from an anti-drug initiative in a local school, hung unevenly on one wall, opposite the requisite one-way mirror. John tried to smile at that, thinking that anyone being interrogated by the police was too far gone for a DARE poster to do much good. A closed-circuit camera hung from the ceiling on one corner, its relentless eye fixed on the table. He checked to ensure his cell phone was on, that it still linked him to the outer world. It was.

He stared down at the folder and steeled himself for blood. He hated blood. The thought of even giving to the Red Cross made him weak-kneed.

The air smelled faintly of ammonia. Someone must have cleaned the table recently. John looked at the folder, knowing what lay within, and thought the cleaner had missed a spot.

He pulled back a chair and unslung his ragged backpack – the same one he’d had back at U of M, the same one in which he used to lug his Dungeons and Dragons rulebooks – laid it on the table, and sat. He took a yellow legal pad and pen from the backpack and placed them to the side of the folder.

Indecipherable pen marks gouged the table’s surface, the scars of past interrogations. Random doodles marred the folder’s flap: the faded remains of a jotted phone number with a Kalamazoo area code, stars, spirals, some yellow highlighter marks with no obvious purpose.

“**Closed**” was stamped across the front of the folder in large block print, the red of the letters a prophecy for what lay within. A printed label adhered to the filing tab – **Barber, Simon**, it read, with a case number.

A hard knock on the interrogation room door gave him a start and a welcome interruption. He turned in his chair as the door opened to reveal a uniformed cop. The officer walked in, all smiles, blue fabric, and pant creases sharp enough to cut meat. He brought with him the sounds of the station beyond the door.

“Jonathan Carpenter,” said the policeman, shaking his head and walking forward, hand extended. “I can hardly believe it. I recognize you from the book jacket. I just got back to the station. Roger Lawson. I’m a huge fan. I loved *The*

*Parable of Violence*. The Lieutenant said you wouldn't mind if I stopped in for a moment. You and him are old friends?"

From long habit, John easily fell into his professional-author mien.

"We are. He taught me a class in college. And please call me John." He stood, clamping his arms against his chest as best he could to hide the pit stains, and shook the officer's hand. Not too hard and not too soft – the authorial grasp, he called it.

"And thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed *Parable*."

"Good stuff," said the officer. "Well written. And nice that that sick bastard got shanked in Jackson at the end. Probably took a few shanks up the Hershey highway before that, if you know what I mean. He was a priest, after all. I don't care if he was abused himself as a child. That's a bullshit defense, anyway."

The officer's sentiment was typical when it came to Cook. John was past feeling it himself. Cook was just a man, and men were often monsters. Cook did not make John angry. He made John feel dirty, as if being human was a failure.

"How long will you be here?" Lawson asked. "If I pick up another copy of *Parable* on my lunch, will you sign it? My wife'd love that. I can get one at Walmart."

John forced a smile and a nod. "Of course." He looked at the Barber file. "I'll be here a while yet."

"Working on your next book? Simon Barber, I see."

John nodded.

Officer Lawson frowned. "Now that was a crazy bastard. A friend of mine knew him before...everything. The guy seemed normal one day then started on about demons. At first my friend just thought it was a religious thing, but...it didn't turn out that way. Crazy or not, I'd shoot that sonofabitch myself. No way he shouldn't be in prison." He shook his head then brightened as another thought took him. "Hey, you ever consider writing fiction? I'll bet you could tell a helluva story."

"I have," John said, and left it at that.

"Must be hard, writing about the bad in people all the time."

“Sometimes.”

The silence stretched until John said, “Nice to have met you, Officer Lawson”

Lawson shook his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carpenter. Wait until I tell my wife.”

Lawson left, closing the door behind him. The sounds of the station died. John was alone with Barber. He turned, sat back down, and without pausing flipped open the folder to see the blood on Barber’s hands and the demons in Barber’s head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Plastic seats like church pews lined the interior of the bus, their surfaces coated in a sheen of grime and patties of chewing gum. The faint stink of stale vomit occasionally penetrated the otherwise metal-tanged discharge of the diesel engine. Brakes screamed like the damned at each stop. The small lights that lined the bus’s aisle flickered on and off with the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Uriel sat in the rearmost seat, the bus’s pulpit, trying to hear the voice of God in the beat of the engine’s pistons, the turning of the flywheel, the thrum of the street whirring past. He watched the handful of other riders, measured them, judged them in accordance with God’s instructions.

Sinners all, he determined. Infected by the world. He pitied them. They would never know the glory of the Father.

He stood and slid into the aisle. The floor, sticky with filth, grasped at his worn shoes.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

“Amen,” someone said.

A few passengers half-turned but none made eye contact. The uniformed driver’s glance flicked over him by way of the slab of mirror that hung over the steering wheel.

“Down in the back, sir,” the driver said.

The bus pulled over at its next stop in front of a Seven Eleven.

Oh, thank Heaven, Uriel thought, and eased back into his seat.

Air brakes exhaled and riders stood. The doors opened and let in the sounds and smells of the street, cars, exhaust, horns, pedestrians, vice. Passengers started to exit, a woman with groceries from the Save-Mart, a man with a worn green duffel bag. A few new riders stepped aboard. Uncomfortable glances flitted to and away from Uriel as the sinners moved to distant seats. A middle-aged man wearing a suit and sweating adultery nodded at Uriel as he passed. The soggy matches of world-dulled souls answered Uriel's presence with fitful flares.

Uriel stood, prepared to give voice to God's words, when the faint rhythm of a hymn carried from the street drew his attention. He followed the sound of the faithful and bounded out the doors just before they closed.

"Repent," he said to the bus as it pulled away.

Furtive eyes watched him from the bus windows as it moved down the street, the rumble of its engine temporarily overwhelming the sound of the hymn. When it had gone, Uriel sought to pinpoint the source of the music. He soon spotted the church, a tiny makeshift assemblage in the strip mall next to the Seven Eleven.

Nestled between a Dollar Store and a Payday Loan, probably the church had once been a tattoo parlor or a party store, but humans who still longed for God had converted sin to virtue. A handmade sign hanging from the window had thick stenciled letters that read:

**Bride of Christ**

**T. Jackson, Rev.**

**All are welcome to worship.**

Cardstock blocked the windows that once had sported neon signs. Through the door, held ajar with a cinder block, came the sound of an electric guitar, the beat of drums, and voices singing *I'm anchored in Jesus*.

Uriel drew up his cowl and marched through the parking lot of the Seven Eleven. He eyed the loiterers hovering by a pay phone. Demons often lingered near those seeking God. Most humans sought the Father out of weakness, which made them prey for Lucifer.

But he saw no demons, only sin.

A bulb or three in the Seven Eleven sign audibly popped.

"Damn!" someone exclaimed.

The hymn fell silent as Uriel reached the church. The voice of the reverend, clear and strong, thanked the choir.

"There is an anointing on these your sheep, Father," said the reverend, his voice, rhythmic and sonorous, a four piece band unto itself.

"Amen," said the worshippers.

"Yes, Lord."

"Let the Holy Spirit descend here, Father," said the reverend. "That we might see your grace and your gifts. Anoint this congregation, Lord."

"Praise, God."

"Yes."

Uriel stepped into the doorway.

Thirty or forty black men, women, and children sat in folding chairs, facing a raised dais on which stood the balding Reverend Jackson, shrink-wrapped into a purple suit a size too small and a hue too sharp. He wielded the microphone in his hand like the trumpet of Gabriel. The guitarist and drummer perched beside the dais, an amp before them.

The Reverend halted his sermon and stared at Uriel. The drummer's sticks fell with a clatter to the snare. The congregation followed their gazes and turned in their chairs. A feedback loop caused the amp to shriek for a long moment. Uriel heard God's voice in the cacophony.

"Lord a' mercy," said one woman.

The Reverend lifted the microphone to his mouth slowly, his breath loud from the speakers.

"Welcome, brother. Have you come to praise God?"

"I have," Uriel pronounced. "I am come at God's command from the City of the Saint. His work is to be done here."

No one spoke. The Reverend dropped the microphone to his side.

Uriel held out his arms, unveiled his wings, and spoke to them in a tongue of fire.

\* \* \* \* \*

The crime scene photos stuck in John's memory, black thoughts clinging to the flypaper of his mind. He felt the same spiraling sensation he'd suffered after seeing the Cook crime scene photos for the first time, a dizzying fall into the darkness of human capacity, a fall at once frightening and revelatory.

Merely hearing about violent crime did nothing to communicate its impact. One had to see it, to see the house in which the Barbers had raised their daughter, eaten dinner, made love, a house darkened by slaughter....

John's Porsche strayed with his thoughts, eliciting a honk from the Camry to his right. He ignored the irritated look the woman in the Camry shot him, turned up the radio of the Porsche to crank Audioslave, and accelerated away from Rochester, away from the photos.

The Carrera didn't start to breathe heavy until John passed ninety. The car channeled the feel of the road through the wheel, the tires and suspension a ditto machine that copied the texture of the road to his hands. But speed did not outrun memory, and driving and singing did not exorcise the images of two nude corpses, their bodies yellow and blue like bruises, propped on Barber's couch in front of the TV. Distended stomachs made mother and daughter look pregnant, fat with the horror of what Barber had done. Brown blood and brain matter traced jagged paths down their faces from the holes in their skulls.

John blazed under a viaduct. A stenciled sign hung from the chain links that fenced the overpass walkway. Rain had faded its lettering but John could still make it out.

*Jesus wept.*

John blew past it.

"Nailed through my head, for my Creator," he sang, louder. He broke one-hundred. The cars in the right hand lanes turned to ghosts, flitting past and seen only out of the corner of his eye. "You gave me life, now show me how to live....."

No good. Nothing shook it.

The daughter's eyes had been open, watching. John imagined her dying moments, aghast at what was being done to her by her own father.

"Fuck!"

He stared straight ahead, not seeing the cars, not seeing the road signs, seeing only the bloody betrayal of Simon Barber, a father who murdered his family, a man worse than Judas, who'd at least had the courtesy to murder only his rabbi.

But it wasn't just the murder, as bloody as it was. It was the post-act indifference – keeping the bodies in the house, wearing the wedding ring, watching TV beside them *for days*. Madness did not make it comprehensible. It was inhuman. No one should be able to stare such a deed in the face for day after day and live. The guilt should have devoured Barber, consumed him with an irresistible suicidal impulse.

Disgusted, John kept one hand on the wheel and reached for his bag with the other. He took out the legal pad and its pages of notes, still blazing down the highway, and powered down his window.

The wind howled into the Porsche's cabin. A car honked at him as he drove past. He crumbled the pad as best he could, made as though to cast it out of the window.

But he stopped, unable to do it. The pad was glued to his fist. Wind whipped at the pages but he was unwilling to release it. He'd have to cast himself out to rid himself of it.

"Fuck," he said, more softly.

He powered up the window, slowed down the car, turned down the tunes.

What time was it? The 5:12 on the Porsche's dash clock clicked to 5:13.

*Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst.* Isaiah.

"Damn it," John said, and looked away from the portentous numerals.

What had caused Barber to snap? At what point exactly had an accountant decided to murder his own family?

He had to speak to Barber.

He was terrified to speak to Barber.

Knowledge. He feared it but craved it, like Adam and Eve.

*Eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and you shall surely die.*

Acid plagued his stomach and he tasted bile in the back of his throat. He swerved a bit reaching for one of the many empty Mountain Dew bottles that littered the Porsche, got it, cleared his throat and spit into it. The brown Tahoe beside him honked and the driver, a fat, goateed man in a Tiger's cap, matched vectors and flipped him off.

John started to return the gesture when the man's face sank into itself until the skin was pulled taut against the skull. Slitted, reptilian eyes glared out of the dark holes of sockets as deep as cups. His mouth distended with a pugnacious jaw, stretching the skin of his cheeks. A forked tongue rolled over the man's lips, which peeled back to reveal fangs.

John gawped, his foot suddenly limp on the pedal. The Porsche veered toward the Tahoe. The creature driving the Tahoe leered at him, swerved the Tahoe at the Porsche.

"What the fuck?" John shouted, whipping the Porsche so hard to the right that its tires skipped over the pavement like skipping stones over a lake.

The Tahoe did not relent. The man – the creature -- veered rightward, the enormous black form of the Tahoe like a mountain of steel falling toward the Porsche.

John swerved halfway onto the shoulder, the rumble strips causing the CD player to skip, turning the Porsche's compartment into bouncing amusement park ride

*Nailed through my head. Nailed through my head.*

The Tahoe fell in behind him, the creature at the wheel gesturing cryptically with a clawed hand, as if casting a spell.

John wheeled the Porsche back into its lane. The Tahoe loomed in his rear view mirror, closing. John slammed the pedal to the floor and the Porsche fishtailed as it pulled away.

To his relief, the Tahoe could not keep up. He opened some distance but did not breathe easier until the Tahoe exited at the next off-ramp. John swore the driver's head – now that of a normal, paunchy white guy with a Tiger's cap – was thrown back with laughter. .

"What the fuck was that?" John said, his voice shrill. "Seriously, what the fuck was that?"

He tried but failed to dislodge the chill stabbing his spine as his mind recited the words of Barber's email.

*And you are being hunted.*

Weak and shaking from the adrenaline dump, he got off at the next off-ramp and sat in the parking lot of Marathon gas station, still not quite able to catch his breath.

He had imagined it. He'd had to. The photos, a prolonged lack of sleep, stress over Lindsay.

After taking time to gather himself, he returned to the highway and dialed Lawrence.

"John," Lawrence answered. "Perfect timing. It's a done deal. The administrator of the Institute is Doctor Eugene Marshall. It's a small facility. Barber's doctor is Carol Bingham. She wants to talk to you before you sit down with Barber. John? You hearing me?"

"I hear you, Lawrence," John said, still troubled by a memory of the creature and its snake eyes.

Hadn't Barber said something about his wife and daughter's eyes in one of his interviews?

"You don't sound enthused," Lawrence said.

"I am. Something else on my mind. Listen, Lawrence, I...I don't know if I can do it."

Silence from Lawrence, then, "What the fuck are you talking about? This is what you do, John. You can do it."

John shook his head. "The pictures, Lawrence."

"The pictures? What pictures?"

“From the crime scene.”

“Shit, John, did you already look at those? How’d you manage that? Listen to me...”

John channeled Lindsay and offered resistance, though he knew it was only token. “I don’t need the money. I can do something else. Something...better.”

Lawrence laughed, the sound like the cough of a baby with croup. “The fuck. You still having nightmares? Is that what this is about?”

John had once told Lawrence, when he was two Glenlivet to the good, about his Cook nightmares. He never should have done it.

“Not as often,” John lied.

“I’m glad. This’ll pass, too. You’re dealing with nasty human beings, John, but this is what you were meant to do. Someone’s gotta do it.”

John said nothing, but thought the words ‘meant’ and ‘gotta’ a bit strong for a true crime writer. Someone could be meant to be a doctor or a teacher. But a true crime writer? It was like being meant to work at Seven Eleven.

“Why does someone have to do it, Lawrence? It’s shit. It’s wallowing in shit.”

Lawrence ignored him. “You’re due up there tomorrow at two. Call me when you get there.”

John surrendered. In truth, he wanted to do it. He just wanted someone else to tell him to do it. It made him own it less.

“Why would they allow me to talk to him?”

“I don’t know. Ask Bingham. Maybe she’s a crusader, wants people to understand Barber. Maybe she thinks it will be good for him. Who the fuck knows? Who cares?”

Who knew, indeed. Who knew anything?

“Goodbye, Lawrence.”

“John, you, uh, want me to come with you?”

The offer, John knew, was as token as his own threat to do something else. Both of them were just going through the motions. Each was what he was.

“No,” John said, and hung up.

The time was 5:27, and he was hungry.

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