

# Roll Your Bones

## Neal sat on his couch, naked, with the

remote control and a bottle of hand lotion close by. He kept sucking the left corner of his mustache in between his lips, absentmindedly chewing it. He was watching a porno movie called *Bridal Whorehouse*—supposedly Her best. He'd seen it twice already, trying to figure out what was so special about Her. He hadn't seen a damn thing—just plenty of body hair and chemically tanned flesh.

Nothing to make you think you were watching a goddess.

Neal wasn't much of a skin-flick fan, but he'd caught himself thinking about it at work that afternoon—getting a little aroused, too.

*What the hell, he'd thought. I'll just use it the way they meant it. Maybe that'll do the trick.*

The best scene was next. She was in it, flushed and flustered, trysting with Her groom's closest friend.

He had to admit, She was even acting a little—biting Her nails, looking conflicted. Neal found himself liking it. Everything about the scene said that She was a woman who didn't *want* to do the wrong thing, but was *compelled*—carried away by Her own lusts. Sure there were tits and ass and dick, moaning and grunting and contorted faces, but it was the story that got to Neal. The transgression.

He also liked the fact that they hadn't made an obvious "best man" joke. Neal's hand moved faster and he stopped thinking about his facial expression, and then two men kicked in the door.

"Freeze! Or I'll—oh my *God!*" said the first one when he saw what Neal was doing. (That is, what Neal immediately stopped doing.) He even turned his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

The second man just started laughing—big belly laughs. Around his snickers, he finally managed to say, "Drop your weapon!"

Neal just froze, an icy sensation of shock running from his heart right down to his groin. Then he doubled over, trying to hide his genitals with his hands and body. Only after that did he notice the guns.

Both men were large—larger than Neal, anyhow. The first one was kind of portly, with straight dark hair and thick glasses. The second man was taller, more muscular, with dark ginger hair. He also had a beard, which was mostly covered by his surgical mask. The first man had an identical mask. Both wore rubber gloves and raincoats as well. Pistols with silencers completed the picture.

The dark-haired man walked into Neal's trailer, looking around in disdain. (It wasn't even a double-wide.) The larger man followed, closing the door behind him. Their movements were easy, but alert, and the two black barrels of their pistols never pointed away from Neal.

"Uh. . . you guys mind if I . . . ?" Neal nodded towards the bedclothes wadded at the end of the couch, opposite the pillows he'd been leaning against.

"Sure," the ginger man said, but the other shook his head sharply.

"No way."

"What? Why not?" Neal asked. A tiny part of him wondered if this was how a lot of people behaved at gunpoint.

"For all I know, you got a gun hidden under there."

"Oh, *come on!*" Neal cried. The taller man guffawed, earning him a dirty look from the dark one. Their body language said that the shorter one was in charge, but that they didn't get along. "How paranoid do you think I am?"

"Not enough," said the tall man, still snickering.

"Profile says you're one of them chaos freaks," said the boss. "Even if there isn't a gun there now, you could witch one up if I let you. I've seen your type

practically pull 'em out of thin air," he said, and raised his gun slightly to make his point.

"Well, shit, could you at least give me some underpants? Look, I'll . . ." He almost said he'd put his hands up, but he didn't really want to. "I'll keep my hands right here, you can give me some pants, and we'll just talk, okay?"

"C'mon, Bob. Give the poor bastard a break," said the tall one.

Bob just grunted, then nodded, while Neal desperately tried to figure out if they were going to kill him. If they were, why go to the trouble of covering their faces? But if they weren't, why would the tall one call the other by name? Was "Bob" some kind of *code name*? Or was the big one just careless?

"Top drawer in the dresser," Neal said gratefully.

"You get it for him," Bob said emphatically.

"Don't worry, I ain't 'fraid of no underpants," the tall man said. Neal couldn't see him grinning, but he could hear it in his voice.

The corners of Bob's mask crinkled, and when he spoke it sounded like he was smiling, too. "You haven't looked in a bachelor's drawer in a long time, have you?"

*If you want Chance for yourself, you gotta give*

*yourself to Chance.* No one had said it out loud; the phrase had just echoed through Neal's mind. *Risking your money or your reputation—that's powerful. But how much more powerful is it to risk your life?*

Neal had been taught that risk was the basis of Chaos Magick. That was why, when the tall man opened the drawer and tossed him a pair of boxers, Neal lunged across the couch, grabbing the bedclothes and flinging them behind him.

"Fuck!" Bob cried, and fired. The shot was no louder than a finger-snap, but when the bullet hit, Neal felt like he'd been struck in the ribs with a sledgehammer. He'd been diving towards an open window, covered with cheap blinds and a screen that gave way as he crashed against it. He hit the ground shoulder first. There was a nauseating pain as his brain crashed against the side of his skull, but it was overwhelmed by the torrent of sharp agony from his bullet wound, which took his breath away and left him gasping. But on another level, Neal could feel something completely different.

Power.

He'd had little tastes of it before, while gambling away his savings, riding roller coasters, playing "chicken" in a stolen car—but now he knew what it was,



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knew how to use it, knew how to use it to stretch and bend reality. It was the power of magick, the power of chaos, and through his gasps he muttered the words, "Police car."

"Little bastard!" Bob was standing in the window, pointing the gun at him. They both heard the sirens at the same time. Bob glanced up, then looked down at him and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"*Fuck!*" Bob cried out in frustration, then turned from the window. His tall friend had already jumped out of the front door and was legging it towards a Lincoln Town Car. Neal started rolling under the trailer, hoping it would shield him from more bullets.

When he was well underneath, Neal looked back towards the front yard. He could see Bob's legs pumping as the short man bolted towards the car, and he grinned through his agony and said the word "Pain."

Calling up the cop car had taken a lot out of him—the power was weaker, and the agony in his side made it hard to concentrate. He could feel the tangled strands of chance, will, and magick snarl, resist his pull, and he let it go. No parting shot at Bob; but he was alive.

"What the hell?" he heard someone say, and he rolled his head around to see two pairs of blue-clad legs ending in comfy-looking black shoes. Cop shoes.

"Help," he tentatively said.

"Good lord! Lookit all that *blood!*"

*Aurora's finest*, Neal thought. Then he found himself thinking about his mother telling him to wear clean underwear in case he had to go to the hospital.

**"Well, *that* was a balls-up," Bob said in disgust, yanking off his mask and gloves. His partner—who was called Cage—just nodded. They drove without speaking for a moment, listening to a police band scanner.**

"Sounds like they don't have a good fix on our car, at least," Cage said.

"Yeah, with a description like that they'll never find us. Pull on the freeway here."

"Which way? East or west?"

"Less traffic to the west. We can turn around in DeKalb."

They were silent for a while, then Bob spoke again.

"Thought I had the little punk, but he must have put a whammy on my gun."

"A whammy, huh?"

"Yeah." Bob turned to Cage and glared. "What else?"

"I thought you told me you have to work the slide on these guns before they shoot again. That's why they're so quiet, right?"

"I *did* work the fucking slide!"

"Really? I didn't see you do it."

"Well, I did."

"If you say so."

They were silent for a little while. Then Bob spoke again.

"I didn't see *you* putting a cap in his ass at all."

"Didn't expect him to bolt."

"Why the hell not? That whole underpants thing was a ploy. I thought so from the first."

"Oh *Jesus*, Bob, are you serious?"

"Yes! I'm totally serious! I *knew* he was yanking our chains."

"Bob, the only thing he was yanking was his dick. We could not *possibly* have surprised him more than we did. Or was he tossing off in front of a porno movie in order to trick us, too?"

Bob relaxed a little. "What a jerk."

Cage started snickering again. "Come on, you have to admit it's kind of funny."

"Yeah, I guess."

"And those cops didn't follow us."

"We lucked out."

More silence, then Cage asked "So where's the brass?"

"What?"

"You know, the brass thing off the bullet you shot him with. The, uh, casing. If you worked the slide like you said, it should have been in your hand, right? I mean, you wouldn't leave *evidence* like that behind, would you?"

Bob was silent for a moment.

"Okay, maybe I didn't eject the fucking cartridge," he said at last. "Goddamn, what a balls-up."

## Miles away, in one of his Gold Coast

apartments, Alex Abel stared down into the stone of an emerald ring. It wasn't big or gaudy—no "Mr. T." jewelry for him. A classy ring, the way only expensive things are classy. Alex found it very calming to look down into its green, cool depth.

One of his operatives had spread the rumor that Abel's emerald ring was the Ring of Solomon, giving



him dominion over the Spirits of the Air, who would devour the liver and kidneys of anyone who dared to attack him. This was, of course, utter bullshit. The ring was just a ring.

The charm that would dissolve the liver and kidneys of an attacker was made of failed lottery tickets, sandwiched between pictures of Princess Di and James Dean, cemented together with toad's blood and the fat of a murdered man. He kept it in a sealed gold case, because the smell was not to be endured.

Alex Abel was not a man to keep waiting, but here he was, waiting—waiting for the report of a southern white-trash witch who predicted the future by reading the serial numbers off dollar bills.

Really, Abel didn't mind waiting—he didn't have a lot in the way of “down time” and he'd always found it strategically valuable to step back and reassess every once in a while. Running a multi-million-dollar multinational corporation with multiple accounts, multiple investments, and multiple projects took a lot out of you; add to that the distractions of masterminding a private occult conspiracy and you got a life almost too full to bear. Still, it beat working on a road crew.

The girl—really, she didn't look any older than twenty—glanced up at him apologetically. “Ah'm sorry, Mr. Abel. Ah'll try to hurry this up for ya.”

He smiled. “No hurry. I'm willing to wait for quality.” His voice was deep, clear, and possessed of absolutely perfect diction. He'd spent a lot on voice coaches. Although he'd only admitted it to his private psychologist a month before he terminated services—that is, right after he'd stumbled across the occult underground—he'd felt more than fully repaid when, after months of bargaining for Tower Construction over the phone, he'd finally gotten fed up, completed a hostile takeover, and only then met Dale Tower, III, in the flesh. Tower had never suspected that Abel was black, and the man's cleft chin had dropped like . . .

“Okay, ah'm getting something heah.” The witch had charts and books spread out on the table, along with bills from his wallet and a yellow legal pad for her notes. “On two of your bills, the second number is two, which reflects duality and conflict and corruption. Coupled with the foah in the first position, which indicates stability in the past . . .”

“Ms. McIntyre . . .”

She looked up at him, politely dismayed. “Oh, yew can call me Violet,” she said.

“Violet, then. I trust your methods. I'm only interested in the results.”

“Oh.” She began flipping through her notes again. Abel idly wondered if she'd go to bed with him. She was pretty, but not his type—he'd always felt a vague contempt for rich black men who pursued white women. (He'd read Frantz Fanon.) He also wondered if she found it weird to work for him. Probably not; people who could wrap their brains around magickal thinking were usually too abstract to get bogged down in social conventions. (Though there were exceptions. With magi, there were *always* exceptions.) He decided it would be nice if she wasn't bothered by working with a black man, but he'd also prefer it if she wouldn't go to bed with him. It wasn't a race thing; she just seemed like a nice girl, and Abel liked to believe there were a few nice girls left.

“All right. You remembered last tahn, when ah said your position of strength was threatened?”

“By a young man.”

“Uh huh, an initiate armed with the powers of chaos and destruction, but not yet their master.”

“I remember.” Abel had compared her predictions with those of his tarot reader, who had told him that his plans would soon cross with a young man, a magician, who would come into money—probably through a game of chance. The tarot reader had furthermore told him that this man might become his ally or his rival.

“Ah foresee conflict between you and this man. He's already overcome you—you or one of your plans. The big confrontation is yet to come.”

He leaned forward. This was new.

“There's also a woman—a powerful woman, standing between the two of you. He'll pick one of you.”

“Is the woman a magician?”

“Ah can't tell,” she said apologetically. “If ah had some of her money, maybe. These nines might lead one to think that she's a so'ceress, but it could be that she's deeply religious.”

“Or both.” Abel grated his lower jaw lightly against his upper teeth, like he was chewing a thought. “A young man with the power of chaos, who's thwarted my plans once and who's interested in a religious or powerful woman?”

“Uh huh. Does that sound familiar?”

“Maybe,” he said, thinking it was definitely Neal Brinker.

**When Neal woke up in the hospital, it took him a moment to remember everything that had happened. Then he hit the nurse button. A few moments**

passed before a uniformed woman entered.

"Oh, Mr. Brinker. So glad you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Really sore, groggy, exhausted . . ."

"That's normal." She started paging through the clipboard at the foot of his bed. "The doctor said you were very lucky. Apparently the bullet didn't do much damage at all."

"I'd feel luckier if it hadn't done any."

She kind of laughed, then saw something in his chart and frowned. "About your insurance . . ."

"I don't have health insurance."

She went a little pale when Neal said that.

"Well, that's something of a problem . . ."

"Just bill me . . . I'll pay it however I can."

"Yes, well . . . we'll see what we can do. Are you feeling well enough to answer a few questions?"

"Huh?"

"There's a police officer here who'd like to talk to you."

"Please, not just yet."

Her expression softened. "Of course, Mr. Brinker." She waddled away.

Neal sat back and thought. A cop outside was good—for now. Good if those goons came back. (Thinking about the two men, he found himself blushing. He got mad at himself for being embarrassed at what two men who'd tried to kill him might think about his personal habits.) No way could he tell the cops the whole story, though, even if he knew it. First, they'd never believe his claims to be a "magician" and secondly, if he did persuade them, the rest of the occult underground would be on him like red on a baboon's butt. The one iron law followed by all schools of magical study was, "Snitches get stitches."

He sighed. Down inside, he knew who he had to call, but he didn't like it.

He reached for the phone.

## Bob Franklin and David "Cage" Kajinski

looked around the elevator they rode. It was the nicest one either had ever been in. Bob kept wiping his hands on his pants and Cage's lips kept pursing and relaxing, like he was rehearsing a facial expression.

They'd been called in to see the boss. It was the first time for each of them.

"Man, I'm going to be one pissed pilgrim if Abel thinks we dropped the ball," Cage finally said.

"Pipe down, fer Chrissakes. This elevator could

be bugged, for all we know."

"I ain't gonna pipe down. You are so fucking suspicious it's not even funny."

"I'm suspicious 'cause I've learned. Seen too many ox-eyed assholes ready to believe the best in people. They got cut down like you wouldn't believe."

"So you think Alex Abel has his elevator bugged? You think he's got nothin' better to do than spy on people in his elevator? Is that it?"

"It just pays to be careful."

"I'll show you careful. *Hey Abel! Only a fuckwit would have run when that guy ran!*"

"Shut up, you asshole!"

"Asshole, am I?" Cage put his hand on Bob's shoulder and shoved him.

"Knock it off!"

At that moment the elevator door opened, and a man was standing there facing them. The man's features were anonymous, plain, flat, immobile. He stood a little slumped, hands at his sides.

Bob's flash assessment was that this guy had at least two guns on him and probably a knife. The scars on his hands and wrists said "violence" and the crude tattoo peeking out of his shirt collar said "jail time."

Cage looked at him differently, noticing how his muscles were developed—big, but not well-cut—like a plumber or an old-time boxer. Someone who uses his body instead of building it. He stood relaxed, his weight on both feet, comfortable—and ready to move in any direction.

Mostly, though, both noticed the man's eyes. Bob had seen eyes like that over long rap sheets rife with phrases like "brutal" or "execution-style" or "chilling lack of remorse." As for Cage, this man's eyes reminded him of his dad. He didn't like it one bit.

"Gentlemen?" The man's voice was flat, empty of affect, just like his face. He gestured to his left. Warily, Bob and Cage got off the elevator and followed him towards a door.

"Mr. Abel? Robert Franklin and David Kajinski are here to see you." He held the door for them. The soul of courtesy, but each of them stepped through with a feeling that Abel's man was ready to slam the heavy oak door on his trailing ankle and then pound the hell out of him while he was limping.

"Thank you, gentlemen." Alex Abel looked shorter in real life, but he had that same nice telephone voice that made Cage feel like his shirt was untucked. "Allow me to introduce my associate, Eponymous." Bob and Cage glanced back at the man from the ele-

vator, who was standing in a prime position to backshoot the both of them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," Bob said. Cage just nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Franklin. Now. Why don't you tell me about what happened with Neal Brinker?"

Bob cleared his throat, glanced at Cage, who raised his eyebrows and nodded back at him.

"Well, sir, as instructed we approached the sus—that is, the subject, from a position of strength. We were masked, gloved, wearing raincoats as requested and carrying the, uh, ordnance we were issued. So. We'd located his residence, watched him come home from work, waited about a half an hour to let him relax and unwind . . ."

"That's when most people are most off guard," Cage added. Bob glanced at him reproachfully.

"We'd surveyed the residence beforehand and knew the subject was alone. The curtains were drawn, so we decided to proceed with caution. We kicked the door open—I was on point—and then, we . . . uh . . . well . . ."

Alex Abel leaned in. "Yes . . . ?"

Bob swallowed. Then Cage's face began twitching.

"Mr. Kajinski, do you have something to add?"

Cage shook his head. His face was turning beet red.

"The subject was, uh, not . . . that is, he was naked."

"I thought you said he was alone."

Cage was still battling to keep down his giggles.

"He was alone, sir. He was masturbating."

At the word, the guffaws that had been tormenting Cage broke free at last.

"I'm sorry, sir, but *you should have seen the look on his face!*"

Bob put his hand over his eyes in disgust, until he heard Abel laughing, too.

"So you mean you kicked the door in expecting . . ."

"Anything! Black magick, a machinegun emplacement, him gone . . . anything but him in there, roughing up the suspect!"

Abel and Cage had a good laugh, which gradually wound down.

"So . . . how did he get away?" Abel said at last—and there was nothing amused in his voice any more.

Bob was tempted to blame the whole thing on Cage, but it just wasn't his style. "We were off guard, sir. As you can maybe appreciate. I mean, he didn't seem very threatening. We talked a little bit, and then he threw his bedclothes in the air and dove for the window."



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"You 'talked a little bit'? About what?"

"The usual kind of thing—'who are you guys, what are you doing in my trailer' . . ."

". . . 'Can I put on some pants' . . ." Cage added. Bob glared again.

". . . so while we were distracted, he jumped out the window. I opened fire when he jumped and hit him in the torso."

Abel nodded. "Left side, just above the floating rib."

Bob blinked. "Right . . . so I, uh, went to the window to finish the job, and there was a police car coming."

"Mr. Kajinski, where were you while this was happening?"

"I was out the door. I meant to chase him down, but I switched when I heard the sirens. I went to start our car instead."

"So you never fired?"

"No. Didn't have a good shot."

"I see. Bob, you only shot him once?"

Bob licked his lips.

"Well, I tried to shoot him a second time, but the gun jammed."

"I think the guy may have put some kind of whammy on it," Cage added.

A voice rumbled up from behind the pair, startling them briefly. "Did you work the slide?" Eponymous asked.

Bob swallowed, looking over his shoulder for a moment. "I'm not sure, sir." He looked back at Abel. "I'm sorry he got away. It won't happen again."

"I'm sure it won't." Alex Abel stood up. "Gentlemen, I sent out three other teams this morning with similar missions—approach known area chaos magicians with messages of intimidation and attention. Only Neal Brinker resisted, which indicates that we've smoked out the man we wanted to find."

"Why were you looking?" Cage asked. Bob winced.

"We have intelligence indicating a chaos mage may soon be in a position to . . . *compete* with us. I don't like competition."

"But you didn't know which one?"

"And now I do, thanks to you gentlemen. Eponymous will show you the door . . ."

"Excuse me, sir," Bob interjected. "But what do we do now?"

Alex Abel blinked, and in a dangerously neutral tone said, "'Do,' Mr. Franklin? You go home and wait for further orders."

"You must know where he is if you've got his hos-

pital records. Why not have us finish the job?"

Abel looked at Franklin long and hard. "Finish the job?"

"If this guy's a threat, he only knows me and Cage. Why expose other agents to trouble when we're the ones he knows? If he's as dangerous as you say, anyhow."

"Our predictions indicate that he may be in a position to ally with us or oppose. Do you think you can recruit him after putting a slug in his back?"

"Sure," Cage cut in. "Scared people do stupid things. You know he's going to be a big deal, right? Does *he* know? If you send in the marines, he's going to twig to that. If he sees the same two guys, he may knuckle under before he even realizes how important he is."

Able pursed his lips, ground his teeth a little. "Very well," he said. "But if you can't recruit him, kill him."

## "You know, I knew it was you the moment

I picked up the phone and heard, 'Dan, can you come down to the hospital and see me? And oh yeah, bring some pants.'"

Neal rolled his eyes. Dan had been his mentor, taught him everything about stealing cars and chaos magick, until he'd been sent to the state pen for five years. When Dan got out, he'd seemed a lot smaller to Neal. Maybe the old man had just lost his nerve (after all, magick based on risk was much tougher on an old body) or maybe the difference was Neal's five years of high rolling, big risks, and big setbacks. Now he couldn't look on his former idol without feeling a little let down.

"How's it going, Dan? Rolled yer bones lately?"

"Shaddap, ya lil' snapperhead." For a moment, it was just like old times. "Whatcha tell those cops?"

"I told 'em that these two guys came into my house and started yelling and shooting, so I jumped out the window."

Dan nodded. "Good to know you're that smart, at least."

"Yeah, the bad thing is they're thinking these guys may have had a case of mistaken identity, so now they don't want to watch me."

"Neal, that's a *good* thing."

"It ain't all good."

"Yeah, I suppose." The old man looked idly around the room, picked at a flake of his skin. "So, they got you on any good drugs?"

“Not too bad . . . you’re not trying to score, are you?”

“No! I oughtta knock your block off for even suggesting! I’m just thinking money.”

“Since when do you have to think about money?”

“Ah, you don’t know nothin’. You get older, it’s harder to build a charge. Harder to find a risk you can do that won’t kill ya. Besides, I got some money now.”

“Enough that you won’t risk it all on a single toss, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s it, smart guy. What, you think you’ll never get that much? You think you’ll always be willing to put your whole stake on a hand of cards, when you got a couple daughters and a mortgage, huh?”

“Man, did you ever get weighed down.”

They were silent for a while.

“Dan . . . who are the Hit Squads?”

“You mean the guys who gotcha?”

“Who else would I mean? I been hearing rumors for months about armed goons in raincoats, face masks, and rubber gloves wiping out magicians. Not just chaos magicians either—clockworkers, boozehounds, a couple types of Satanist. I’ve heard they’re some new school based on fear, that they’re a secret government agency, that they’re agents of the Vatican . . . and some goofier theories than that. What gives?”

Dan sighed. “I dunno who they are, but I know *what* they are: they’re trouble. Listen, you remember Simon Linnbid?”

“The short guy? Tarot card guy? Had that, whatcha call it, the Magician card tattooed on his chest?”

“Guy had a handmade steel tarot deck—razor-blade edges. I saw him cut an orange in half with one from twenty paces. So not a guy to mess around with.”

“Yeah? So?”

“So this cop named Bob Franklin whacked him.”

“Same guy who put you in for your nickel?”

“Very same. Officer Bob had a thing about witchcraft. I don’t blame him much—I heard Linnbid did something to his wife. Some Ten of Swords thing.”

“Shit. So this Bob Franklin is some kind of badass?”

“No, the thing is he *ain’t*. At least not when he put me away. I mean, he knew his ass from his elbow, but he couldn’t have taken down a balls-out freak like Simon. Not without help.”

Dan sat back and cleared his throat, looked around.

“So I get out of the can—and let me tell you, I did

hard time, someone *got* to that judge, ’cause he put me in fuckin’ proctology school—I hear that Officer Bob is dead.”

“So some kind of superior badass killed *him*?”

“I didn’t know what to think—until I hear from this guy and that guy that Officer Bob is still around, only now he’s enforcing the law ‘unofficially.’ I’ve seen it happen—guys go over the edge, lose what they love, and get a mission instead.”

“So you think my ‘Bob’ is your Officer Bob?”

“Thick eyeglasses, you said? And dark hair? It could be. I think it is.”

“But you still haven’t told me who the Hit Squads are.”

“I know they’re called the New Inquisition. That doesn’t make me feel too warm and fuzzy.”

“So they’re just kacking magicians?”

“You know as much as I do.” Dan grimaced and looked at his watch. “Lissen, I gotta get Gracie from her ballet class or her mom’s gonna squawk. I brought you some stuff.”

Dan had arrived carrying a paper bag with the top rolled up. He glanced at the door, making sure it was closed, and opened it.

Inside, wrapped in a pair of cheap khaki pants and a t-shirt, was a chrome .38 special revolver, a box of hollow-point bullets, and a long, thin strip of metal—a car thief’s “slim jim.”

“The gun’s numbers are filed off, so I could be in big shit if I got caught with it. I brought you the slim jim ’cause I figured you’re gonna need some way to get fired up for a while. Some way that isn’t gonna get you hurt.”

“And the gun?”

Dan sighed.

“Look, you gambled your life once. You rolled for your bones and got a taste of the long juice. If *you decide* that’s the path you wanna take—well, here’s your tool.”

Neal popped the cylinder on the revolver. Inside was a single bullet.

“If *you decide* you wanna play some Russian roulette, that’s your thing. I just ask that you wait until I’m out of the hospital, all right?”

## Travelling on the elevator down from Neal’s

floor, Dan kept looking at his watch. He thought of Neal as the son he never had, and he didn’t like seeing the poor kid shot up and messing around with



things beyond his control. He'd almost cautioned Neal to play it safe, but some shred of pride had stopped him. He knew what Neal thought of him, and couldn't stand to bear out his student's most contemptuous suspicions.

"Not like he'd listen anyway," he muttered to himself.

He went into the hospital garage with his hand in his pocket, pulling out his keys. They snagged on a loose thread, and he yanked hard, then dropped them. With a muttered "Christ," he bent down to get them and that was how he happened to see Officer Bob and a big hairy guy come around the corner. Officer Bob was dressed in hospital scrubs and the other guy had on a leather jacket and steel-toed boots.

"I always drive because I'm the boss," Bob was saying. "Now would you shut up? Our source says he gets his drugs around this time. Once he's lit up, I go in and . . ."

". . . and I wait at the end of the hall, I know. Damn Bob, you act like I'm nine years old."

Dan quietly crept to the other side of a pillar.

"No, *you* act like you're nine years old. That's how come I got to keep repeating everything."

"At least I know how to work the slide on a gun."

"I worked the slide already!"

From somewhere nearby, a car sang out a cheery "bee-oop" as the alarm was activated. Bob and his tall friend immediately shut up and went into the hospital.

Dan's mind was whirling. He had to warn Neal—but then what? Neal was one gun, and no great shooter, plus he was injured. Dan would be in deep shit if he got involved in something shady, and he had to get Gracie . . .

A portly black man in a grey flannel suit came around the corner and Dan walked right into him.

"Oof," Dan said as he fell back on his ass.

"Oh my God! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Here, let me help you up."

"Naw, I can get up on my own."

"You want to come inside? I'm a doctor, I can look you over . . ."

"No problem. It was my own damn fault."

"All right. I'm terribly sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

The doctor went into the hospital, thinking he was lucky the guy wasn't going to sue him.

Dan waited a few tense seconds, then pushed a

button on the doctor's key chain. In the garage, a car went "bee-oop."

## "Hello?"

"Neal, listen closely. Don't take your meds."

"Dan?"

"The Hit Squad is in the building now."

Neal felt a cold ripple of fear. It seemed to radiate from his bullet wound.

"Now? What the . . . what do I do, Dan?"

"Listen closely. First, load that damn gun up. Then after your pill guy comes, Officer Bob is going to enter your room. He's got a partner, tall guy. He'll be by the elevator."

"Shit."

"They don't know you expect them, and they don't know you have a gun, Neal. They're expecting you to be drugged. Is there a back door on your floor? Like a staircase?"

"I don't know."

"I'm calling from a black BMW. I'll be waiting out front with the motor running."

The door opened.

"Neal? You still there?"

"Yeah mom, I'm fine. Lissen ma, I gotta go. My pill guy is here."

"I can't wait too long in a stolen car."

"Yeah, ma, uh huh. I love you, too."

"Luck loves ya, baby."

Neal hung up, smiled at the male nurse.

"Mom. She worries a lot."

The nurse grinned. "Tell her how good we're taking care of you."

"You bet I will." As the nurse leaned in, Neal pulled the gun from under the covers and pointed it at his head.

"Scream and I'll kill you," he said quietly.

## Bob padded down the hall in his comfy cop

shoes and brand new doctor's coat. No one gave him a second glance—like he was invisible. He was always amazed by the power of a uniform and a clipboard. He saw the rolling table covered with pills and water glasses—were they supposed to leave those unattended? But really, none of his concern.

He stepped into Brinker's room and gently pulled the door shut behind him. There was a very short hallway into the room—about three feet long, as wide as a

closet. Pity there wasn't a lock on the door, but there was a bracket for his clipboard. The modified pistol—the silent “hush puppy” he'd shot Brinker with the first time—was in a holster under his belly, and the silencer was in his left pocket. His rubber gloves stretched and rolled as he reached for both. Eyes wide and ears straining, he pulled out both and screwed them together. Next came the surgical mask.

Oddly, he found his attention momentarily absorbed by a piece of roast beef stuck between two of his back molars. He worked it with his tongue while assembling his gun. Then he took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

“Brinker. Don't make me finish what I started.”

The room faced south and was filled with the harsh glare of late-afternoon sunlight. Under the bed's white and beige covers, a figure lay on its side, facing the window.

“Brinker. Wake up.”

Bob began to feel a prickling sensation in his scalp. Something was wrong here. He saw that the body in the bed was shaking.

“Nothing to be scared of if you make the right choices.” He took a step closer, reached out for the covers, pulled them down to reveal a stranger in a

nurse's uniform.

The door to the bathroom swung open and Brinker stepped out, leveling a gun at him. Bob's reflexes were faster than thought, and his own weapon swung up into Brinker's face.

“So what's the right choice . . . Bob?”

Now it was Bob's turn to be scared. How did Brinker know about him? Where had he gotten a gun?

“Put the gun down, first off.” He kept almost all the fear out of his voice.

Brinker took a step closer and smiled. He looked pale and more than a little crazy.

“Or what? You'll shoot me?”

“That's right.”

“Hear that hissing?”

“What hissing?”

“They have central oxygen piped in here. I wedged the port open with a paper clip and turned on the valve. One little spark and this room will go up like a Detroit tenement. So maybe *you* better put the gun down.”

“Oh *God!*” moaned the nurse in the bed.

“Shut up!” Bob and Neal both said it in unison.

For a moment, the room was silent except for the sobs of the nurse.



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“Okay. You don’t want to put it down. Maybe I’ll call the nurse,” Neal said, reaching for the button.

“Touch it and you’re a dead man!”

“Along with you, this asshole and the rooms on either side? Your conscience wanna carry that to heaven?”

“I don’t hear any hissing.”

“I could be bluffing. I’m willing to take risks. Are you?”

Bob thought about getting caught—people finding out he was still around, all the bad news that would involve. Would Abel leave him alive, a trail right to his door? Unlikely.

“Okay,” Bob said in a calm voice. “I’ll put it down. Here’s how we’ll do this thing, all right? I’ll go to the other side of the bed, and you take a step away from the nurse button.” Neal nodded, and like careful dancers they acted out Bob’s words.

“You, in the bed. Lie flat on your belly.”

“Oh God, don’t kill me!”

“I ain’t gonna,” Bob said irritably. “Now move!”

The nurse complied. Neal watched with narrow eyes.

“Now I put the gun down on his back and let it go.” Bob did so, but kept his eyes locked on Neal and his hand close to the gun.

“So far so good. Now *you* pop open the cylinder on your gun.”

“Put your hands up first.”

“I will when you open the cylinder.”

“No!”

“Together then.”

Slowly, Bob raised his hands as Neal worked the mechanism on the gun. When the cylinder fell out to the side, Bob put his hands all the way over his head.

Both men relaxed minutely.

“You ready to talk now, Brinker?”

“Hell, no,” Neal said, and yanked the covers towards him. The nurse screamed, and Bob dove to the floor. Neal dodged towards the door, crouching, flicking the pistol closed with his right hand while picking up Bob’s gun with his left hand.

Behind the bed, Bob yanked his backup gun—a .32 snubby—from its ankle holder and glanced up at the reflection in the blank TV screen. Neal was at the door, a gun in either hand. Bob scuttled to the foot of the bed and poked head and gun around the corner.

“Freeze!” he shouted.

Neal fired the silenced pistol. Bob ducked back as the glass window behind him shattered. He waited

half a moment for the explosion Neal had promised, but nothing happened.

“Fuck. He was bluffing,” he muttered as he lunged to his feet.

Out in the hall, Neal yanked the pill cart in front of the door and sprinted towards the right. The elevators were to the left—along with the other gunman.

“Drop ’em, motherfucker!”

Neal looked back and there was the second gunman—only this time without gloves or mask. He was running towards Neal in a zig-zag pattern, holding a silenced gun with both hands.

Neal turned and grinned. “Come on then!” He pointed both guns and pulled the triggers simultaneously. The big man ducked behind the pill cart just as Bob stuck his head out the door and pulled it back in.

Nothing happened from the silenced gun—had the safety gone on somehow?—but there was a loud crash from Dan’s .38, and a picture down at the end of the hall shattered. People started screaming, and Neal felt the rush of power come into him again. He’d dared the tall guy to shoot him, and he’d won, and now Fortune loved him. He turned and ran around the corner of the hall. Under his breath, he muttered the word “Distraction.”

Cage angrily yanked the pill cart aside and lunged after Neal as Bob came out of the room.

“You chase, I’ll cut him off!” Bob shouted. Cage made no reply but raced down the hall . . .

. . . just as a door opened right in front of him. He pulled up short of flying face-first into it, then shoved the door—and the frightened woman behind it—out of his way and kept running, but by that time Neal was around the corner.

Bob ran the other direction, towards the elevators. The hospital hallway was laid out like a square, with the elevators on one interior wall. Neal was on the opposite side of the square from the elevators, and there were stairways in two corners. They were on the eleventh floor.

He hit the button and waited for what seemed like hours—but he felt sure Neal would go for the ground floor. There were no other buildings around, so the roof would be a dead end, and eleven flights of stairs would exhaust even a man in good shape (which Neal probably was) who *hadn’t* been shot (which Neal certainly had).

Neal sprinted through the door to the stairs just as Cage bobbed his head around the corner, then fol-



lowed. Neal slammed the door behind him, looked in vain for something to block it, then started down the stairs three at a time, glancing in terror over his shoulder.

Cage kicked the door open and stepped aside, expecting gunfire. He was thinking that Brinker had five bullets left in the revolver at most, and didn't seem to know how to work a hush puppy.

"That fuckin' slide, gets 'em every time," he muttered as he lunged into the staircase, eyes wide, gun in front of him. He grinned at the steel doors and cement walls of the stairway; now he could shoot without worrying about bystanders.

He heard Neal's footsteps and gasps beneath him and started running. He bobbed his head over the railing and saw Neal almost directly below. He put the gun down and fired—and immediately worked the slide. The pistol was silent, but the ricochet made a sound like an angry cat.

A floor below, Neal's body was in agony, but his spirit was still riding an ecstasy of probability. Calling an image in his mind, he said "Orderly." Just as he reached the next landing, the door opened and a slim young woman in hospital whites entered. Her jaw dropped as she saw him.

"Run down the stairs," he said, pointing the guns. She screamed—but complied. He darted through the door.

Cage arrived seconds later, just in time to see the door closing. He could hear footsteps beneath him. Was it a fakeout? Which way to go? He had only an instant to decide, and he continued down the stairs.

Entering the hallway, Neal stuck both guns under his shirt and walked quickly towards the elevators. He could still feel the surge and throb of possibility coursing through him, just waiting for him to nudge it this way or twist it that way . . .

"Elevator," he muttered, and the door to one opened. He didn't even have to push the button, because someone was getting out, wheeling a gurney. Neal stepped towards the elevator, and only saw Bob the instant Bob saw him.

Both men drew and dodged. Bob lunged towards the "door close" button—right next to the door was one of the few places to hide from a shooter outside the threshold. Neal fired, putting a hole in the back wall as the doors slid shut.

"Fuck! *Another* elevator," he said, pounding the button and staring as Bob's elevator sank towards the ground floor. When the door opened, he pointed the

guns inside and stood back. "Everyone out," he said. They hurried to obey.

## Cage caught the orderly two floors down;

she started crying when he wheeled her around by the shoulder.

"Where did he go?" he demanded.

"He got off on nine," she wailed.

"Damn!"

"Don't hurt me!"

"It's okay, I'm a cop," he effortlessly lied. "Look, stay right here and you'll be safe." He bit his lip and started racing down the stairs again, wondering if he could outrun the elevator. Probably he could if it made a few stops, but a chaos mage could maybe stop that . . . five bullets left . . .

## Bob figured hospital security would be

going crazy now that there were reports of gun-toting psychos on the elevators, so between floors he put his gun in the belly holster (an awkward fit), pulled off the mask, and put his gloves back in his pockets.

On the first floor, there were security guards pointing pistols at him. He put on a shocked, innocent face and asked what was wrong. They breathed a sigh of relief and waved him out.

He didn't even need his clipboard.

Stepping into the lobby, he looked around. Gawkers. That meant no shooting yet. There were three security types watching the elevators closely. Bob casually walked to a corner by the gift shop. He could see the front door, with minivans and BMWs idling outside, and he could see the elevators. When the elevator doors opened, he'd be in a position to fire—assuming a nervous security jock didn't do the job for him.

## Cage, gasping, pushed open the last door

and realized to his dismay that he was in the parking garage instead of the lobby. He turned towards the lobby and saw Bob watching the elevator. Something in his agitated, oxygen-deprived brain clicked; if Bob shot Neal, he'd want to get away fast. If Neal shot Bob, *he'd* want to get away fast. In either case, Cage would want to be present in a vehicle—to assist or prevent, as the case might be.

He switched his gun to his left hand and reached for his keys.

## Except for the muttering of the gaping

spectators—Bob’s old police partner called them “bullet magnets”—the lobby was silent when a slight “ping” announced the arrival of the elevator. Bob slid his hand under his shirt, and the security guards licked their lips with nervous anticipation as the elevator door slid open, revealing . . .

. . . nothing.

The guards looked around in confusion. Had someone hit the button to call the elevator? No, no one had.

There were confused mutters for a moment, broken by a loud crash from above.

Bob spun around just in time to see a shower of broken glass fall outside the window, then the billowing collapse of the awning by the driveway.

He started running towards the front door just as the guards realized their quarry must have gotten off on the second floor and gone through the window.

“Police officer! Out of the way!” Bob shouted, brandishing his pistol. He fought his way through the crowd to the door, only to be confronted by flopping masses of fallen awning. He struggled through it just in time to see Neal limping around a black BMW. Bob fired. Neal looked up and fired back as Bob ducked behind the cover of the awning. Behind him, Bob heard someone scream. One of the bullet magnets.

He looked out and saw the BMW pulling away. With a shout of rage he pointed his gun at the speeding car . . . gave it a lead . . . let out an easy breath . . . and pulled the trigger.

The car sagged and swerved as the back tire blew out—but the driver regained control and fishtailed around a corner. Bob cursed, then heard a honking horn right behind him.

“Need a lift?” Cage yelled through the window.

## Dan kept a fever grip on the wheel. The

BMW was doing reasonably well with the blown tire, but he had to be careful. He took a glance at Neal in the passenger seat.

“You okay, son?”

“I think I hurt my leg, but I’m not shot.”

“That was Officer Bob, I think. Damn good shot, too.”

“Can you keep it going?”

“Sure—but right turns are gonna be kind of a bitch.”

The old man glanced at him again and grinned.

“Guess Gracie’s gonna have to wait, huh?”

“You crazy old bastard. I knew you wouldn’t let me down.”

“Shaddap. I shouldn’t *have* to bail your punk ass out. I’m too old. Fuckin’ snapperhead.”

They both started laughing, and then the back windshield shattered.

“Damn! These guys just *don’t give up!*” Neal yanked on the seat lever and reclined it as far as it could go, squirming around so he could fire backwards.

“C’mon, Dan, can’t this German piece of shit outrun a fuckin’ K-Car?”

“It’s a Town Car, and remember we got only three tires. Lemme get on a straightaway where I can open ’er up . . .” Dan hit a button, and the windows all started to roll down.

“What are you doing?”

“The guy I stole this from seemed pretty nice—might as well spare his windows.”

Behind them, in the Lincoln, Cage was driving with his right hand and trying to get a good shot with his left. The gun recoiled and sparks flew off the beamer’s bumper. He pulled the trigger again, then pulled it back in the car.

“Stupid slide! What good is a goddamn two-handed gun?” He put his left hand on the wheel and reached inside his jacket for his regular gun.

In the back seat, Bob was sliding from the left side to the right, every once in a while firing, trying to get a good shot at their quarry.

“Who’s he got driving?”

“I dunno, but he’s *good*.” Cage gritted his teeth, slammed down the accelerator and crunched into the black car’s back bumper. It skidded, the side with the flat tire swinging wide, and for a moment the cars were perpendicular. Neal took a shot through the beamer’s empty rear windshield and might have hit Bob if the ex-cop hadn’t been flying forward to break his nose on the gearshift.

“Ow! You idiot!”

“Get down! I have a shot!”

In the BMW, Dan cursed, yanked the wheel, and gunned the engine.

“You hit him?”

“I missed!”

“We gotta get on the highway.” Dan grinned, and he sounded a little crazy when he asked, “You ready to roll yer bones?”

Both men felt the prickly thrill of danger as Dan floored the crippled car through a red light. A chorus of car horns was their fanfare as they shot towards the highway. They were going far too fast to stop. With a blasted tire, anything but the slightest change of direction would put them in a skid—probably a roll. If there wasn't a gap in traffic, they were shit out of luck—no options.

That's what chaos mages mean when they say they're going to roll their bones.

Dan crowed as they muscled onto the highway. He felt a surge of power he hadn't known for years. He reached out and grabbed the patterns of traffic—an amalgam of random chance, driver choice, and the slight modifications of civil engineers—and cracked them like a nine-tail whip, rearranging them to open up for him, giving him a straight shot away.

"Dan? *They're still behind us!*"

"I don't believe it!"

Cage had been ready to say his prayers when he pulled off the road and rumbled across the gravel shoulder, then onto the highway going *the wrong way*. Bob couldn't see a thing—his eyes were covered with blood from his broken nose and dim with tears of pain—but Cage had seen every car, heard every

honk as he gunned it towards the median strip and then *over* it, praying they'd make it. If they got stuck they'd get it from both sides and there wouldn't be enough left to bury in a shoebox. He winced as the car grated and rasped across the concrete island, and his head had hit the ceiling as the tires bounced over, but they'd made it. They were still on the trail.

Neal sighted back at their pursuers and seized all the threads of potential he could grasp. He'd been taking chances but spending his luck almost as fast, and he had little left to burn. He put it all on one shot at the tall driver, focusing everything on improving his shot, on honing his luck. He pulled the trigger . . .

. . . and missed. The Lincoln's windshield shattered and the rearview mirror fell, dropping an air freshener on the dashboard, but neither of the Hit Squad was hit. He almost wept in frustration and pulled the trigger again and again, blindly, before he heard the click of the pin on spent cartridges through the screaming wind.

Bob saw Neal crouch forward and he said "He's reloading! If you can ram him, do it now!"

"I can't! They're too fast!"

Both men continued firing, and Cage put the pedal to the floor.



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"Neal." Dan said. He didn't yell, and his voice was flat and calm. It got Neal's attention more than any desperate shriek would have. "Only put in one bullet."

Neal thought he understood. He did as he was told and closed the gun. Spun the cylinder. Put the hot barrel to his head.

"No," Dan said, still calm and flat. "My head."

"Dan?"

"Final lesson, shithead. Risking your stuff is strong, and risking your life is stronger . . . risking the life of someone you love—a friend. That's the strongest. And you're upping the bet with your own life 'cuz I'm driving." He, too, had the pedal down and the German engine was roaring full. They'd come to an empty stretch—cars were getting out of the way right and left. Their flat tire had worn through and they were trailing sparks. Four tires rumbling, the Lincoln was gaining.

"Let's roll the bones," Neal said. He put the gun to his friend's head and pulled the trigger.

Cage first saw something fly and splatter out the driver's side window, like they'd dumped a bucket of paint. An instant later he saw the car turn left but keep going straight, and his foot hit the brake with a desperate gentleness—he couldn't afford a locked-brake, four-tire blowout at 120mph.

"Awesome shot, Bob!"

"I didn't do it!"

The BMW started to roll. The doors flew open as it crashed over the side, into the ditch, rolling and tumbling.

Cage gritted his teeth and gently slowed the car. Absurdly, automatically, he put on his turn signal as he pulled to the side. Then both men jumped out of the car and began pelting down the road towards the wreck, guns in hand.

The BMW had landed upside down, and they approached it with caution.

"No one could have lived through that," Cage said, but his voice wasn't certain.

Bob cautiously squatted, looked in the driver's side.

"The driver's pulp," he said evenly. "No sign of Brinker."

"No," said a voice from the rows of corn beside the road. "I was miraculously thrown free of the wreck."

Bob stood. Cage, wide-eyed, opened fire.

Neal was laughing as he limped right at them. Bullets raced through the corn on either side of him but somehow, every shot managed to miss him. The left

side of his beard was spattered with blood, and he crackled with power. Cage and Bob couldn't see it or smell it, but they could feel it in the way their flesh crawled and their hairs prickled.

Soon, their guns were clicking on empty, and Neal continued his slow limp forward.

"Out of bullets? Here, I think this is yours." He tossed Bob's silenced pistol high in the air. Somehow, coincidentally, the slide must have been worked during the wreck. Strangely, providentially, the gun went off when it hit the pavement. Oddly, randomly, the bullet's trajectory took it through the back of Bob Franklin's right thigh.

It could have been destiny, but it was Neal Brinker's will. Bob crumpled to the ground wailing.

"Give me your car keys," Neal said.

"Yeah, okay," Cage said, making no effort to keep the fear out of his voice. He held out the keys, hands shaking.

When Brinker was close enough, Cage took a swing—a lightning-fast barfighter's punch, not a tricky karate move or anything; just an attempt to shove his fist through Brinker's face. The fact that his fist was holding a heavy pistol was just icing on the cake.

The blow was halfway between them when Brinker reacted, and his reaction was the word "Pain."

He'd hurt people with magick before, but never with so much power to put behind it. All across Cage's body, the skin sundered and popped—on his hands, his chest, in his armpits and the rims of his ears, across his eyelids, and on the bottoms of his feet he felt shock and agony as the word "Pain" was inscribed through his flesh dozens of times. He reeled back and fell.

Neal picked up the keys. He could have made any key on his ring fit the Lincoln's ignition, but waste not, want not. In a daze of power and ecstasy he walked towards the car, a slight smile playing on his lips. He'd killed Dan, but he'd think about that later. Right now he felt *good*.

The two agents of the New Inquisition groaned behind him as he started the car and changed the blinker. He looked over his shoulder and pulled onto the highway. He'd need some luck to avoid the cops, but he had more luck than most families see in a lifetime.

"Money," he muttered—and his glance fell on something sticking in the crack of the seat, next to his seat-belt buckle.

A lottery ticket.

**“Pretty posh, huh?” Bob managed a thin**

smile at Cage from his wheelchair.

“Yeah. You seen that nurse?”

“The redhead?”

“That’s the one. Wish I wasn’t so wrecked. I’d ask her out.”

“She can give me a sponge bath any time.”

“I think she likes the bad-boy type.” Cage’s body was covered with stitches and butterfly bandages. The doctor had been puzzled by the injuries—not cuts or bruises, more like the burst flesh on boils. But there was no swelling to account for the breakage, let alone the fact that the word “Pain” was spelled out repeatedly. If all went well, there wouldn’t be any scars—at least, not legible ones.

“Nah, chicks like that are suckers for authority figures,” Bob said. The bullet had broken his leg, but not shattered it. He’d have a star-shaped scar and probably a limp.

“How you figure?”

“Elementary, my dear Datsun. Where do people go? Where they can get what they want. What is there in a hospital? Lots of doctors—meaning a lot of men in authority. Therefore it follows, as the day the night, that our sexy redhead nurse wants an authoritative man.”

“Like a cop for example?”

“For example, yeah.” Both men were grinning. Both knew they had a snowball’s chance in hell with the nurse, but talking trash helped pass the time.

Cage glanced at the clock and reached for his

channel changer.

“Maybe she goes for rich guys,” he said. “Private clinic like this, right?”

“Yeah, so? You wanna suck up to the boss by fixing her up? I had you pegged for a lot of things, but a suckup was never . . .”

“Hey, pipe down a minute!” Cage was staring, rapt, at the television. “Oh nine . . . eleven . . . sixty-seven . . .” Cage’s eyes went huge. “Shit, man! Those are my numbers!”

“Huh? Come on Cage, the lottery’s just a tax on suckers who can’t do math.”

“Oh yeah? Well I just *won!* I just hit the goddamn PowerBall! *I won twenty-three million dollars!*”

Bob’s jaw dropped.

“You’re shittin’ me!” he cried, but he didn’t think Cage was that much of an actor. The big man was sitting up, quivering with excitement, biting his lip.

“I won! I don’t believe it!”

“Where’s the ticket?”

“It’s in my pants pocket, man! Get me my pants!”

Bob wheeled over and flung Cage his jeans. The big man burrowed in the pockets clumsily, eagerly, like a kid on Christmas morning.

“I just bought it! Maybe my wallet . . . ? No, I put it in my front pocket!”

“Maybe it fell out in the closet,” Bob said, turning, thinking briefly about asking the nurse to bend over and look for it. Then Cage was silent, and Bob looked over and saw on his face a look of mounting dread.

“No,” Cage said slowly. “I think it fell out in the car.”