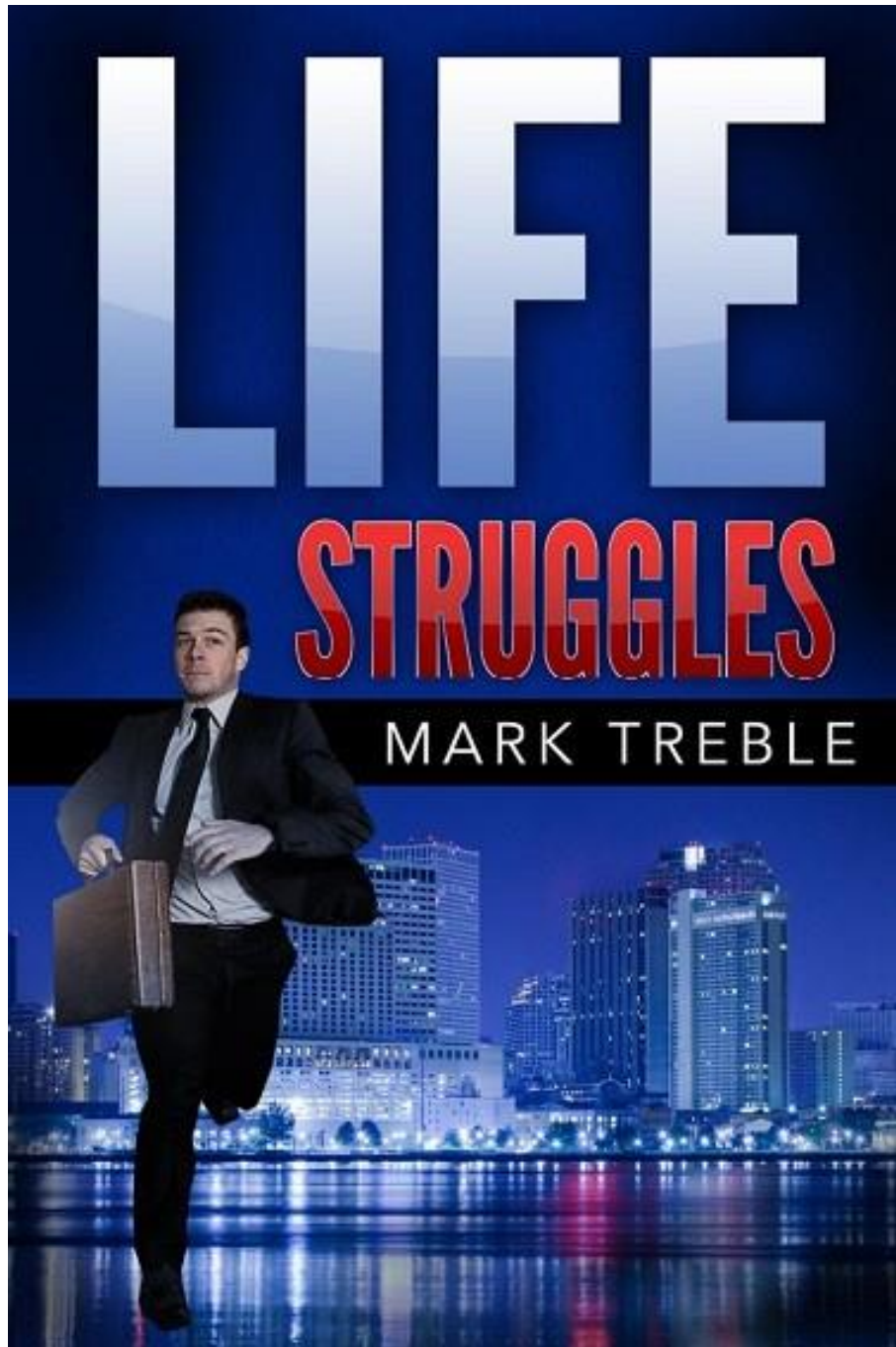


# Life Struggles

Volume 1 of the *Life Stories* series



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*SAMPLE*

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## Life Struggles

*Ethan McQuade is a recently-widowed investigative reporter for a New Orleans newspaper. Thirty-one year old Ethan and his step-son of eighteen, Alex DeLauder, live together in a fragile truce that is broken and repaired at least daily. Unfortunately, the glue is running out as the relationship deteriorates.*

*Then Alex mysteriously disappears and his clothes are found at the curb. Ethan's search for his step-son is fruitless. Frantic, he calls the police with little hope of any assistance. He is happily surprised when Detective Danny Flint shows up quickly with reinforcements. The reason the police are taking this seriously, though, is frightening. Alex is the tenth young man to have gone missing without explanation in the past year.*

*The police and the FBI's profilers can find no pattern. No one knows who is responsible, why this is being done, or where the young men are. As the police conduct a search Ethan enlists the help of his own confidential sources to navigate the danger-filled underworld of New Orleans crime. He looks for explanations in sex, drugs, murder and elsewhere. Each step into this cesspool brings Ethan one step closer to his own death. An avaricious Motor Vehicle clerk, a convicted murderer and a gay graphic artist are only a few of those who lend a hand. Ultimately, though, Ethan is on his own. And he's running out of time. Before Alex can be found Ethan is left for dead. Finding Alex just removes the top layer of a very deep archaeology dig.*

*Simple kidnappings rapidly evolve into a medical mystery. These young men all have something the kidnappers want, but for what purpose? Where are the young men, who are the perpetrators and who is behind this? Every time a layer is peeled back another, more complex, one is revealed. And, the final questions are not answered until the last page – if then.*

# Chapter One

Holy shit! What the fuck was Alex doing? He was supposed to be mowing our lawn. Instead, he was next door mowing the neighbors'. I set down my coffee and bolted to the front door.

“Alex, get your ass in here. What the fuck do you think you're doing?” The boy had been a handful for some time, and his mother's death a year ago had made him pretty much out of control.

Alex didn't move, just turned and put his hands on his hips. “Ethan, you stupid douchebag, I'm mowing the lawn.”

I knew that, and this wasn't getting me anywhere. So, I took a different tack. “Why are you mowing Marcus's yard? I can't get you to mow ours.”

“Marcus is paying me. He used to mow the lawn as part of paying rent, and now that he's got some income he's outsourcing.” Alex stopped, and evidently getting in the last word beat out common sense. “And you don't pay me to mow the lawn.”

We could have a pissing contest for the next twelve years, and I decided to end it. “Finish up the mowing and come see me. We have to talk. And by ‘we’, I mean I have to talk and you have to listen.”

Alex flipped me the bird and continued mowing. I had no doubt I would talk, and lots of doubt that he would listen. That was nothing new.

Alex's father had died when he was a small child. Dana was my guide to the underground music scene in New Orleans. We met when I was researching a column on small venues showcasing limited-appeal music genres. I never did write the column, but I kept seeing her.

She was in her early forties, more than ten years my senior. Her husband's death in Afghanistan early in that conflict had left her with a youngster, a mortgage, a broken heart, and a need to survive. She not only survived, she thrived. Her off-Bourbon Street store-front in the French Quarter became more successful than she had hoped. She never became rich, but Dana's DaLounge was SRO seven nights a week. The acts she introduced to the music scene returned whether successful or not. More were successful than otherwise, and the fans were insatiable.

We had been married less than a year when she called from the lounge and asked me to come get her. Her stomach pain was bad and she couldn't keep anything down. I took her to the hospital emergency room. That was Wednesday.

Thursday, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer and by Monday she was dead. God, I miss her so much. But so does Alex, and he's my responsibility.

I sat in the chair and re-opened the latest police procedural I was reading. Some dickhead civilian was trying to help the police investigate an assault. Fucking civilians. I'd never do that.

The hero had a bad relationship with his daughter. I felt for him. Dana and Alex had been by themselves for about ten years before I showed up. Her life revolved around her son and his life was centered on her. They had a comfortable routine and I interrupted it. Alex was devoted to his mother and quite protective. I admired that and hoped he could accept me as someone equally devoted and protective.

Alex and I got along fine right up to the point where we told him we were getting married. The seventeen-year-old didn't want to share, and I understood completely. If I'd had Dana to myself for more than a decade, I wouldn't want to share either. Alex and I used to go to basketball and football games together, and my press credentials gave us access he could never have gotten on his own. He was stunned when his favorite

band came to town and I used my credentials to get us back stage. As his mother's boyfriend, I was quickly becoming one of his favorite people.

"Alex, Ethan and I are getting married." Dana had announced it matter-of-factly over dinner one night. The boy and I had been laughing and joking right up to the announcement. The stricken look on his face said everything.

"Fuck you, douchebag." He gave me the finger and ran out the back door. I started after him but Dana stopped me.

"He's probably going to talk to his Uncle Luke next door." Luke Dupree wasn't really Alex's uncle, but he and Dana were close and he had served as Alex's male parental figure growing up. "I've already told Luke about us getting married and he's happy about it. He's been trying to get me to date more. Let's just let Alex try to sort things out for a bit."

The book dropping to the floor woke me up. Fuck, it was noon, and Alex wasn't back. I looked out the window and couldn't even see him. I knew that this time I was going to strangle the little prick, and was sure it was justifiable homicide.

I strode out the door loaded for bear. "Alex! Where are you? Alex!" Yelling wasn't getting any results. I saw something white near the curb at Luke and Marcus's house. When I got to the curb my heart nearly stopped. It was Alex's T-shirt and his cut-offs. Where the hell was he?

I rang the doorbell, but nobody answered. I went back inside and called his girlfriend's house. Monica's mother said she was going to some sort of party with her cousin upstate. I tried three or four of his friends with the same results. Nobody had any idea where he was.

## Chapter Two

I sat and stewed. Alex had failed to show at the wedding rehearsal last year but Dana told me not to worry. I worried anyway, of course. Luke had told him that his mother deserved some happiness and he was sure I would help bring it to her. Alex never apologized for his outburst at the dinner table, but he had started to come around until the rehearsal.

He showed up at the rehearsal dinner dead drunk. I took him aside and he broke down crying. Alex sobbed as he eventually got out what was bothering him. "This means it's real. I won't have her to myself anymore." I sent Dana a quick text and took Alex back to her house. He went into his room and slammed the door. When Dana got home I told her about our brief conversation.

"He'll come around," she said. And he did.

For one glorious year Dana and I loved each other and Alex too. We resumed going to games and band concerts together, and I introduced him to the paper's technology writer. Alex wanted to become a computer programmer, and Sid took him under his wing, introducing him to the various pieces that make up the Information Technology industry. Alex warmed to me, not just appreciating what I did for him but what I did for his mother as well.

The day of Dana's funeral Alex disappeared. He showed up that night at Monica's house. Her parents called me and I picked him up. Alex didn't want to leave with me. "She was OK until you came along. You killed her." That wounded me almost as deeply as her death.

Alex had a choice that night. Monica's parents made it clear he could leave with me or with the police. When we got home he went to his room and slammed the door again. Over the next six or seven months things had thawed a bit, but he stopped calling me 'Ethan' and only called me 'douchebag.' The last few weeks some of the venom had disappeared from his not-so-affectionate nickname for me, and I thought we'd been making some progress. And today he fucking disappeared again.

By now it was nearly one o'clock. I dialed 911. My "emergency" didn't get their attention. He was eighteen and had been missing for only three hours. The fact that he was probably naked or nearly so made no difference. The operator promised to file a report at the end of his shift. Fuck.

I'm a journalist and have contacts and sources. So do my coworkers. I called the crime beat reporter, and hit paydirt. Will had a police contact who would listen. I hung up and watched the phone for what seemed like six hours. It was probably more like two minutes, though, and Will's contact was on the line.

"Mr. McQuade, this is Henry Ligam with the New Orleans Police Department. Will said you needed some help." Short, professional and courteous. Maybe he should get a job at 911.

"Mr. Ligam, my step-son is missing. I last saw him at about ten o'clock this morning mowing a neighbor's lawn ... Yes, he's eighteen, and I know it's too short and he's too old, but it doesn't feel right. I found his T-shirt and cutoffs by the curb ... Yeah that was what he was wearing."

Ligam asked me again about Alex's name and age, my cellphone number and address, and said somebody would call me in less than an hour. I was frantic, so I went back outside and yelled again. No luck. If he wasn't kidnapped and beaten to death, then I was going to kill him when he got home.

My cellphone rang just a few minutes after Ligam had hung up. It was some detective who was in a car on his way to my house. I owed Will big time for this.

A few minutes later a beat-up blue Ford pulled into the driveway. A somewhat overweight man and a slender woman got out. The guy looked like a detective out of central casting. The woman's pinched face and surgically-installed frown pegged her for a harridan. I was not disappointed.

"What have you found out?" I had grabbed the guy by the arm, which he extracted in order to show me his credentials. I didn't bother to look. He introduced himself as Detective Danny Flint, then introduced me to Assistant District Attorney Myra Hartag. I knew enough about real police procedure to know that detectives did not ride around with Assistant District Attorneys responding to calls about an adult missing for three hours.

I related that to the detective. "What brings the two of you here so quickly? What's going on?" Hartag looked at the Detective and shook her head no. The detective sighed, turned his back to the lawyer, and told me. "There has been a series of suspicious disappearances of men between seventeen and nineteen in New Orleans. We're not sure what it means. Your son's disappearance may not be part of that pattern. This is the first time we've found clothes left behind. I want to ask you some questions and then call in some reinforcement."

"Detective, this is not for public consumption. I forbid you from revealing any more details to this civilian." Yup, harridan for sure.

Detective Flint turned to Hartag but his words were addressed to me. Sort of. "Mr. McQuade, *your son is missing*. This is serious business, and you will be the best source of information about it right now. This is the first time we've had more than one day's notice on a disappearance, and I'm not going to fuck around with protocol. Understood?"

Hartag looked ready to inflict physical harm on Detective Danny, then thought better of it. "You detectives need to start listening to me," she called over her shoulder as she stomped off to the car. She got in and slammed the door behind her.

"She's had a rough time of it," the detective told me. "She lost her first case when a detective failed to show up to testify. She lost the next one when somebody in the evidence room couldn't find a necklace. She figures the police are out to sabotage her."

I decided not to worry about her for the moment. "May I come in and ask you some questions?" Detective Flint had apparently dismissed the dustup, and so did I.

That turned into an hour before a team of three others showed up, one in civilian attire, the others in uniforms. Detective Danny parceled out assignments to them while Hartag fumed. Finally, she got out of the car and walked up to the house. She was going to be part of this come hell or high water. Well, OK.

One of the uniforms came back carrying Alex's clothes in a plastic bag. He handed it to the guy I finally figured out was the crime scene tech. The uniform e-mailed him a set of photos, and he said thanks.

"Nobody's home next door. House is registered to Luke Dupree, work address is the same as home address. No priors no warrants. I'm assuming it's the artist. I didn't see any signs of a struggle. Front door is locked. A peek in the window showed nothing out of the ordinary. Do you want a warrant?" The uniform was all business. I had never had much contact with the local police, and I was quite impressed.

Hartag stepped up. "That's my department. Officer, I'll need a recorded statement from you and then I'll get a warrant. Please come with me."

The officer - Wilson? - walked away with Hartag and spoke into a recorder for a while. I looked back at the detective.

"A young man's clothes found outside the house of a gay celebrity, especially under suspicious circumstances, raises some unpleasant possibilities." He stepped aside and spoke into a radio for a couple of minutes.

Things became a blur. Yes, Dana DeLauder was Alex's mother. The cop offered what sounded like sincere condolences. Everybody had loved Dana. A taxi pulled up and disgorged a thirty-or-so black man who got out

keys and went to Luke's front door. That was Marcus, Luke's roommate. He was intercepted by a uniformed officer and escorted to the door.

Whether Marcus had authority for a search turned out to be moot. From the car, I heard a printer whine, and Hartag came back with a faxed copy of the warrant. She might have a bad attitude, but it didn't interfere with doing that part of her job well. The detective put me under the supervision of the crime scene guy and went quickly to next door. The crime scene guy took me around the house and asked stupid questions. But, I guess when you're worried about your son, stupid questions are better than stewing.

In short order, I could hear a siren, then a police cruiser pulled into Luke's driveway. A uniformed female officer, Luke, and some white guy got out of the cruiser. I tried to get to Luke, but the crime scene tech held me back. "So, what kind of underwear does Alex use?"

I was ready to snap at the guy, then realized this might be all that Alex was wearing. We went into his room and inventoried his clothes.

The investigator saw a laptop and asked to go through it. Have at it, of course. When he opened the desk top, he saw an icon that grabbed his attention. It was for an online game. He pulled out his own tablet and with a few keystrokes he was into the competition.

I watched as blood and gore filled the screen. The investigator (his avatar's name was 'Spadely Sammy,' perhaps a step too cute) navigated to the chat and scrolled down through everything from ten o'clock on. He slowed at noon when two new names popped up. I read over his shoulder.

KINGDORK: last 1 no fite.

PRINCEDARK: nope 2 EZ nuther 1 2morrow? KINGDORK: OK, but wate 4 my brake @ 12 boss is pissed.

PRINCEDARK: he looksed ridickilus without his cloz

KINGDORK: LOL LMFAO

PRINCEDARK: sending fotos 2 creechur we R leeding this month

KINGDORK: boss here bye

After that it was just guys talking shit. Investigator Samuel (last name, I think) scrolled through that until he got to an entry about 30 minutes ago.

CREECHUR: Nu fotos KO game nu twist no cloz go 2 usual

This was followed by a bunch of LOLs, ROFLs, LMFAOs, and so forth, in the midst of which was a notation that CREECHUR had exited.

"This is disturbing. We know about the Knock Out games connected to this site, they run a competition. All the logons register to a masking site in Bulgaria, and tracing past that is out of our hands. We asked for some help at the federal level, but it looks like they're too busy reading citizen's emails to bother." The guy was disgusted.

I could see the detective call Luke up to the house. The white guy was standing with the female police officer. Standing too close and comfortably to be a suspect. In fact, standing in a pose that indicated some sort of connection.

Eventually everybody disappeared into Luke's house. The near-hour they spent in there gave me time to think. I'm pretty sure I could find CREECHUR on my own. The police do what the police do. I don't enforce the law, but I do gather information. When they came back Myra Hartag cornered me and I offered to help.

## Chapter Three

“Ms.Hartag, I can help the police.”

She was regarding me with a look that said, “Oh, good, another numbskull who thinks he needs to get involved in a police matter.” Then her look shifted to “Stock Speech number 17-D about letting the police do their work, let me quickly personalize this shit in my mind.”

“Mr. McQuade, Ethan, I appreciate your offer to help. The police have dealt with many disappearances before and they know what they are doing. There is no proof of foul play involved in Alexander's disappearance, you know. Yes, it's unusual, but that doesn't mean suspicious. Please let them do their jobs.” She was following protocol, but I was less interested in protocol than in finding my son. Dana's son.

Myra Hartag was an Assistant District Attorney in New Orleans. A fairly new member of the prosecutor's office and about my age (31), she was moderately attractive in a mauve pantsuit. Although, since Dana died, my standards had slipped significantly. “Moderately attractive” included most women with two ears and one nose.

“Ms.Hartag, I agree. I am a journalist with access to confidential sources across a wide variety of groups, not all of which are law-abiding.” I hoped she was actually listening.

“OK, then give their names to the officers and they will take care of it.” Hartag had me pigeon-holed. This pigeon bites.

“You did hear the part about ‘journalist,’ right? Louisiana Revised Statutes Sec 45: 1451-1459.” This pigeon also had done his homework. “You have no grounds to compel me to reveal the identities of confidential sources.”

“Mr. McQuade, do you want to stand on ceremony or do you want your son back?” Miss Empathy had just lost her crown.

“Ms.Hartag, obeying the law is not standing on ceremony. The statute requires that revealing the names must be necessary to protection of the public interest. Neither you nor the police has any idea why I want to contact these sources, let alone what information they might provide about which aspects of this case. Now, please get the lead investigator over here and we'll talk about how to proceed.” Mr. Empathy never had a crown to lose.

“Mr. McQuade, you need to cooperate with the police if you want them to find your son. Quit trying to play lawyer, Mr. McQuade, and just talk to the police.” She knew she had beaten me.

Sometimes things we know don't turn out to be correct. “No. I'm going to call the paper's lawyers now and let them know a prosecutor is trying to get me to reveal confidential sources. Or, you can let me talk to the detective.” Ms.Hartag was looking angry. Tough shit. Then I remembered she was just trying to do her job. “I'll talk with the chief investigator about how to proceed when he's available. And, if he and you conclude that I can help, I'll do so.”

Hartag seemed somewhat mollified. “Detective, Mr. McQuade has some information for you.” Detective Danny Flint joined us.

“Do you have something you want to tell us?” The “us” evidently included Hartag, and I could see he was trying to humor her.

“Detective, if this involves foul play then someone with ties to illegal activities knows something about it. The police have multiple informants in narcotics, sex trafficking, gangs, vice, contract killings, kidnapping for ransom and a dozen other unpleasant fields. Each of these informants works for a different handler. I have contacts in all of these fields and can cross-reference in my head immediately. Let me give you a hand.” I watched his face soften.



The detective started to explain why this was not a good idea, then stopped himself. Rinse and repeat until he finally caved.

“OK, I've got kids too. But you have to agree to our conditions. First, use the panic button I'll give you to call for help if it turns to shit. It will emit a locator signal and we'll see it on GPS. Second, you'll tell us in advance the illegal activity on which the source can provide information. Third, you'll listen to my briefing on disappearances of kids Alex's age. Fourth, you'll be under surveillance.” He had obviously given this speech more than once.

“One, OK. Two, OK. Three, I can't wait to hear. Four, no. That is tantamount to revealing my sources' identities. If you won't withdraw that one, what do you take in your coffee? I'm not going anywhere.” This pigeon also had resolve.

Flint turned to a uniformed officer. “Greg, get me an M-3 Panic Button, call in the ID to central and register it to me.” Flint then spoke to me. “You do know you may be betting your son's life on your journalistic skills?”

I had already considered this before I offered to help. “I acknowledge that. You've read my columns. Either I can get criminals to open up, or I've made up a whole load of shit. I'm confident that I can get my sources to open up.” More resolve.

Hartag actually helped. “I read your column. The police use it sometimes to identify trends in criminal activity, and when they do we usually get results.” Maybe the harridan wasn't a hopeless case.

Flint spoke softly. “You have forty-eight hours and your results come to me and only me. Call me every hour. In the meantime the police will conduct their own investigation, using tools you do not have.

Agreed?” I nodded my head. Now it was time to get my ass in gear and try to find Alexander. But first, the briefing.

“Mr. McQuade – OK, Ethan – Alex's is the tenth unexplained disappearance of men his age in the last thirteen months. Victimology is all over the board. White, black, Asian, Hispanic, and any combination you can imagine. Rich, poor, students, unemployed, the whole gamut. Every part of the city. No common clubs or groups, few common interests, common schools doesn't look promising. No common churches. No common online stuff except porn, but what can you expect out of a guy seventeen to nineteen?”

“We've done a complete workup and shipped it off to the FBI's profilers. They're stumped. It can't be coincidence, but we cannot find any pattern. That means we don't have motive. And that means we don't really have a starting place.”

I asked to see the profiles. Danny checked with Ms. Hartag and then made a call. He said it would be a few minutes. I could read them from his laptop but not make copies. I couldn't even make notes. I was welcome to point out patterns that the police and FBI had missed, but I shook my head. Not my specialty, and experts had already done the work.

I spent an hour reading the two-page profiles twice each. Nothing jumped out at me. I had this frustrating feeling that something should, but it didn't. They were all males between seventeen and nineteen. Not a lot to go on.

As I was finishing my reading Danny's phone rang. He took it into another room and came back in a few minutes. “Good news, the first suspect is eliminated. Some dickwad at Luke's made a suggestive remark to Alex this morning and Luke kicked dickwad's ass. We tracked down dickwad and our new interrogation consultant broke him. Actually, he talked a female uniformed officer through how to break the guy.

“She put him in an interrogation room with his hands cuffed behind him. She told him he had raped and murdered Alex and when the body was found, dickwad would be booked. Other than that, she asked no questions and

refused to let the guy say a word. Took two minutes and nine seconds. He demanded that there *not* be a lawyer and that he be allowed to talk right now. Alibi checks out, it's not him."

Danny looked quizzically at my smile. "Danny, it's the principle of the source's need to impart information. Tell you about it later. And give the consultant a raise. Applying that to police interrogation just had never entered my mind."

A uniformed officer came over and handed me a small device not unlike a car's keyless entry fob. "Push this button to call for help." That was the whole instruction.

"Can you go over that again?" The officer looked at me like I was crazy. Then I grinned, and he grinned back. No matter how dismal the situation, without at least some levity it was going to be grim.

## Chapter Four

I got in my three-year old baby-shit brown Malibu and drove away. First stop was my mechanic, who put it up on the lift. Sure enough, a tracking device was attached to the frame. He removed it and looked at me with a number of questions in his eyes.

“Bart, you've got my credit card. Please give this to one of your employees who's getting off work and promise him \$200 if he'll drive aimlessly around with it for two hours. After two hours put it in a trash bin near the Lake.” This part was easy.

“Ethan, are you doing something illegal?” I used Bart because of his ethics. I could trust the Nigerian immigrant with anything. The flip side is that he would not under any conditions help me do something against the law.

“My son is missing. I have to go talk to confidential informants who may have information. The police can't force me to tell them who the informants are. But, if the police follow me they find out without my telling them. Their lawyer already acknowledged that it was illegal to force me to reveal their names. This is just a technical way to force me to do something against the law.

“Can you help me with this?” I know I sounded pleading, but shit, I was pleading.

Bart was indignant. “I don't hold with any illegal shit, even illegal shit done by the police. Saw too much of that back home. Fuck 'em. And, keep your money. I'll give the thing to somebody to take up to Baton Rouge and then attach it underneath a semi at a rest stop.” Bart was indignant, but he was also smiling.

And, now, so was I.

Next step was to move about three miles then pull into a fast food restaurant. While in the drive-through lane I dug out my supply of burner cellphones and cash. There were only three cellphones left, but I still had \$800 in twenties. I hoped it was enough. I picked a cellphone at random, plugged it into the charger and dialed.

“Hello.” No name. Good. I recognized the voice.

“You know who this is?” We had agreed not to use names on the phone. He knew me.

“You got a few minutes? Need to talk now. It's important.” I didn't want to spook him, but I also didn't want to wait until tomorrow.

“Where we met time before last. See you in an hour, and I can keep talking as long as you're buying the beer.” Got it. Smoking patio for a dive bar outside downtown.

I got my food, ate it in the parking lot, and then drove the three miles to the bar. I stopped on the way to get him two packs of cigarettes. I called Flint from the payphone in the convenience store. Yeah, some of them still have payphones.

“Flint.” The answer invited me to speak, so I did.

“First visit is to an internet fraud source. Hitting the highway, gotta go.” I hung up.

I parked a block from the bar and walked up to the smoking patio. I could see Shorty sitting by himself nursing a beer. In the bar. I ordered a pitcher of beer and a coke. I shoved a twenty-dollar bill between the packs of cigarettes and joined him.

Shorty's eyes lit up when he saw the beer. He'd been a decent programmer until the booze got him. Lost his family, his job, his house and his self-respect. He did some odd programming jobs for shady clients, but his skills were aging and he couldn't keep that up much longer. I had no idea what would happen to him when he couldn't get any work. I tried to convince him to go to AA, no joy. He had finally accepted a burner cellphone from me and used it judiciously. A good guy done in by his addiction.

“Hey, man, good to see you! Ah, do you mind pouring the beer? I ain't had enough to drink yet today to steady my hands.” I first passed him the cigarettes. He took a peek between the packs and smiled. “What can I do for you?”

“My son is missing.” Might as well start with the punchline. Shorty did not react at all. “And you may be able to help me find him.”

While he downed half of his mug Shorty scratched his head of wiry black hair. He had started losing his hair maybe a year ago, and combing over the tightly-wound strands was not an option.

His skin was a color that could be anything. It was darker than mine, but so were most Italians'. It was lighter than Marcus's, who himself was a relatively light-skinned African-American. Mottling from the alcohol abuse didn't help. I once asked him what his race was and he said, “Kentucky Derby.”

“How am I suppose' ta help?” he asked. “I'm just a fucking drunk.”

“You ever do any programming for on-line games, you know, special programming they don't want people to see?” I stilled the hand ready to bring more beer to his mouth.

“Yeah, do it from time to time,” Shorty allowed. “A couple a months ago I done somethin' for that “Real Housewives of Orgy City” game. Ya know it?” Never heard of it.

“It's kinda like, ya know, the Simpsons?” Still no help.

“OK. Well, they got this buncha big-boobed mostly naked sluts runnin' around. The purpose is to track em down and fuck em. It's online with a buncha players at the same time.” He looked as though that should explain it to me. It did not.

“So, OK, like, they was wantin' to let the guys pick how big their dicks was gonna be. The game was open to anyone over eighteen. Or, anyone who could click a box sayin' he was over eighteen. Same difference.” Shorty wanted more beer and wanted it now. I could handle that. If he got too much booze in him he wasn't going to be any help. This was going to be a careful balancing act. Just like life. Ya know?

“So, I did what they ast. I didn't tell em how fuckt up it was gonna be, just did what they wanted. They was back in a week because all the sluts was pinned to the players. Every slut had a four foot long dick stickin' out of her and nobody could figure out howta separate them. It was hilarious. Beer, please.” I was beginning to doubt that Shorty was going to be much help, but he was on a roll.

Interviewing 102 is about knowing how much the source needed to tell you. Almost everybody has a need to impart information about what they think is important. Until the source has met her or his need to impart information the interviewer's agenda had to wait. Otherwise, the other guy or girl was answering your questions but really just thinking about what they wanted to say about their own topics. That didn't help with accuracy or completeness of the information.

To sum that up, I allowed myself to complain inside, but outside I had a smile and all the patience in the world. Shorty smacked his lips. I liked beer. This guy lived for it.

“Where was I?” The alcohol had destroyed enough brain cells that Shorty got lost from time to time. Such as from Monday through the following Sunday most weeks.

I mentioned the sluts and the players pinned together with four-foot long dicks.

“Oh, yeah. So, I did what I knew I shoulda done the first time and put a limit on how big a player could make his dick. They was real happy and they paid me twice. Life don't get no better than that, except with beer. Speaking of which....” I poured him some more.

“Then they came back and wanted me to fix it so that the game could sneak through parental controls on kids' computers. I don't do that shit and told em so. They offered more money and I still refused. I got no job, no house, no family, almost no brains and zero self-respect. But I still got some standards.” Shorty was looking proud of himself. I didn't want to know the answer, so I didn't ask him how hard it would have been to penetrate parental controls on kids' internet access.

“How do you get these jobs?” At last, I could start moving the conversation closer to what I needed.

The one-time programming whiz beamed. “I been movin' up in the world and got me a agent.” Getting closer.

“Who's your agent, Shorty?” Shit, I knew that expression. I had moved too quickly away from what he wanted to tell in the direction of what I wanted to hear.

“Need some more beer. Can't talk when my throat's so dry. Ya know?” Shorty lit a cigarette and leaned back. Patience, Ethan. Journalism 101. Shit, Life 101. Patience.

I came back with more beer and “accidentally” dropped another twenty on the ground.

“I think you dropped this.” I picked up the twenty and handed it to him. He grinned and put it in his pocket. This was going to be one of Shorty's better days if I could just keep him sober long enough.

“So, I was tellin' ya I gotta agent. Big ugly motherfucker, Japanese or something. Barfus or Doofus maybe.” How Shorty could remember programming commands when he couldn't remember his own name most days stumped me. But, it wasn't relevant here.

“Rufus?” I knew who Rufus Yardley was. For the first time, I hoped I was wasting my efforts in talking to Shorty. I knew who Rufus was. I knew *what* Rufus was. And who and what Rufus was scared the crap out of me.

“Yeah, that's it! Rufus.” Shorty was beaming as if he'd thought of this all by himself.

“So, Rufus brings you jobs for underage online fuck games. Is that it?” Please let it be yes or no, just not ‘I can't remember.’ If it was yes, then deadly Rufus wasn't part of this. If it was no, then maybe I hadn't been wasting my time. If he couldn't remember I'd have to follow the lead a different way, and I wasn't looking forward to that.

“A coupla months ago I made amaze for some fuckin' video game. It had a triple log-in and two failures froze the whole thing. If someone got in there was a maze to follow before you could really see anything. I made it too complicated, though.” Shorty paused and reached for his mug. I let him take it.

“What do you mean too complicated? I thought the more complicated the better it was to secure something.” I showed my ignorance immediately.

Shorty asked me to pour more beer. I let him have half a mug out of the pitcher. Never stupid, just drunk, he realized I wasn't going to let him inebriate himself before I got what I came for.

"Yeah, the lady said that she couldn't never get through that shit. So, she had me put in a back door where she could go in and fix things." Shorty guzzled the beer. "Dumb cunt had me put the same back door into the rankings and the photos. Even I know how stupid that is, but that's what the animal wanted." He was dismissive of less technology-savvy people than himself.

"Who was the lady?" The mention of photos and rankings had piqued my interest. I wasn't sure the lady was the next step in the chain, but wasn't about to pass her up. And an animal is a creature.

"Doan know, some Chinese or Japanese woman. Rufus brought her to me, said she was one dangerous animal. Now, gimme some more fuckin' beer, OK?" I half-filled his mug again; it was empty in seconds.

"Do you remember the back doors?" I needed some information yet, and needed to prioritize. "Yeah, they was all the same." He asked me for pen and paper, which I immediately supplied. "Here it is." I read the code.

'tnucbmudamai321'

"Read it backwards," he said. I already had. '123 i am a dumb cunt'

"She must really have been stupid," I observed.

"Yeah, and so was her video game. All people hittin' and killin' each other, stabbin' and knocking down and kickin' and shit." Shorty held up the mug, and I gave him another half. He now had enough alcohol in him that our productive time together was approaching its end.

"Shorty, another twenty if you tell me the video game website and the addresses for the photos and rankings, and another twenty if you tell me how to get ahold of Rufus." Those were all the pieces I figured I could get from him. And he gave them to me.

"Rufus ain't nobody. He does enforcement for somebody, don't remember who. His last name starts with a Y. He's Oriental. He's gotta office at the Pussy Willow. That's all I know." I gave Shorty another forty and poured the rest of the beer for him.

"Be safe, and thanks, man. Please like always, don't tell anybody about our talk." I found it necessary to remind some of my informants of this. Several were drunks or addicts, and a few were just plain stupid.

Shorty waved absently as he lit a cigarette before lifting the mug one last time.

I went to an internet café where they let you use their computers for a charge. I searched for descriptions of the video game. Yeah, that sounded like it. The descriptions were all from people with names like “Lord of Darkness.” I found one from KINGDORK.Bingo.

A couple of the reviews talked about taking the game into RL (real life I assumed) and getting points for pictures. That was all I needed to know.

I called up a free internet phone service that allowed one two-minute call at a time for free. After that you had to pay. I didn't expect this to take more than two minutes. I typed in Flint's number.

“This is Myra Hartag, how can I help you?” Shit. Why was she answering Flint's phone?

“Counselor, this is Ethan McQuade. I need to talk to Flint immediately.” I was watching the seconds go by.

“Mr. McQuade, you can tell me and I'll give him a message when he's available.” Maybe she's just trying to be helpful here, but I didn't have time to find out.

“Ms.Hartag, there's only a minute and a half before the connection turns into a pumpkin. I need Flint immediately. Please.”

I heard her yell his name along with a string of expletives. I was trying to humor her as best I could, but her attitude just wasn't conducive to a good relationship.

“Flint, what do you have?”

“Get ready to copy, detective. Website is the one the investigator found.” I rattled off the addresses of the photo site and the rankings site, then gave him the backdoor password.

“Do not let anybody detect entry through the back door or my informant dies.” I paused. Confirmation is the lifeblood of journalism. “You know any big ugly Oriental motherfuckers named Rufus other than Rufus Yardley?”

“Ethan, stay away from Yardley. When Alex comes home freshly laid and totally shit-faced I don't want to have to tell him his step-father's dead.”

I paused while he shouted an order. “Next call let me know if Alex is on the photo site.” Seventeen seconds left.

“Bye.” Time had run out.



It's getting darker. This is Decadence, the country's largest gay gathering of the year. Bourbon Street was always a circus, but now it was a circus with an overflow of testosterone and an underflow of clothing. In maybe an hour I'd have to brave the river of ribaldry to get to the Pussy Willow. I had a bit of time to kill, so I drove to another internet café.

First, though, I called Bookie. He was the paper's archivist and had everything on file, and most of that in his head. He couldn't tell you shit about tomorrow, but he had the entire history of the world up to this morning at his fingertips. Or so it seemed.

"Bookie, it's me. Is there anywhere in the world with a market for human sex trafficking involving late-teen boys?" Thank god Bookie had the good sense never to ask questions he didn't want answered.

"Yup, Belarus. Also known as Byelorussia or White Russia." Didn't have to consult a single reference. Actually, that kind of bothered me.

"Thanks, bye."

Fortunately, Bookie was accustomed to dealing with out-of-left-field questions and didn't bother inquiring about their purpose. If the story wound up in print he'd have all of his answers anyway.

Some people are faster, but I'm more than fast enough. The basics became clear in minutes. I ruled out air. Sea shipments to Belarus mostly went through Klaipeda in Lithuania. Nothing direct from New Orleans. Nothing in the last 24 hours from anywhere in the western hemisphere; in another two weeks there was one from Houston. Nothing from Mexico in the next six months.

Most freight from the Americas to Klaipeda actually went through Rotterdam for transfer between ships. Nothing from the U.S. or Mexico today, Houston in five days, Vera Cruz, Mexico, in four days. Cargo from Houston would spend nine days in Rotterdam before connecting, so I could scratch that. Vera Cruz had a one-day transfer. That was just possible.

Call for help time.

"Flint." Thank God it wasn't the other dumb cunt. First things first. "What did you find out about Alex?"

"Alex isn't on the photo site. Photos were uploaded just before noon from the Lower Ninth Ward, a young African American boy in boxers. No other photos uploaded since yesterday.

“We found the rankings and photos. Some of the pictures are of sexual activity with minors. We've sent everything to the Feds. Come home, Ethan, it's not the video game. And, thanks. This is a huge help.” Flint sounded relieved. Well, I didn't feel that way.

“We got nothing on Alex, but there is a tiny dollop of good news. The Feds were so grateful for the sex- with-minors lead they offered some help. Tell me what you need.” Flint sounded genuine.

“First, fuck you for the GPS tracker. By the way, don't try following this phone, I'm done with it. “Second, whatever you can get me in four minutes or less on the MV Ouagadougou out of Vera Cruz in four days.”

“Ethan, I'm sorry. The tracker wasn't a police idea.” Evidently Myra Hartag thought she could get away with putting me under surveillance if she did it through her own office. I sighed.

“Query off to the Feds, promised response in two minutes.” I was flabbergasted. They can get me whatever I want on an obscure ship out of a small port in two minutes or less. But they can't catch the Boston Marathon bombers even with a warning from the Russians. I love government efficiency.

Flint paused. “Ethan, the Superintendent of Police is meeting the D.A. right now. Ms. Hartag told me a bit ago that you were in Baton Rouge. I asked her how sure she was since that's not part of your normal beat. She said 100% sure. That only left mind reading and GPS.

“One of the DA's investigators is a former cop, and I called him. Yeah, one of his colleagues was following a GPS that had stopped briefly in Baton Rouge, then started west towards Houston. The colleague gave up Hartag. Ethan, she's fucking toast.” Flint actually sounded happier than I felt.

“Thanks, detective. Anything from the Feds?” We're looking for Alex, not toast.

“Just came in. Entire ship was chartered by a European version of Wal Mart. They own everything on it. Getting Alex on and off that ship would be more work than I would want to do.” Danny sounded proud of himself. Well, he should.

“Danny, we haven't found Alex yet, but with Hartag out of the way we have a better chance. Look, I'll call you in an hour.” Time to toss the latest phone.

I parked in a city lot and took a taxi to the Pussy Willow. Fortunately, it was close to Canal so navigating the great sea of gay sex wasn't going to slow me down.

Word was that you could get any age of pussy you wanted there, but nobody was talking. The police had been trying to bust the place for years without success.

I paid the cover and walked in. Two naked women of probably legal age were gyrating on the stage, flirting with the customers. I wondered one more time what awful things had to happen in a woman's life to lead her to prostitution. There was little chance that these girls weren't putting out, because there were few singles in their wristbands.

I looked over the crowd and saw a guy with detective written all over him. He saw me walk in and suddenly looked away. Coincidence? Possibly, maybe even probably. I mean this place had daily police presence, despite law enforcement's inability to make anything stick.

Standing at the end of the bar surveilling the crowd was a monumentally ugly six foot five Oriental man. I filed that away for later.

I sat at a table and was immediately accosted by a Hispanic woman wearing a fake smile and little else. "You want table dance mister?"

I started to wave her away, then had another idea.

"Yeah, I want table dance. After the dance can I buy you a drink?" I sure hoped to shit this worked.

The dance was uninspired and, if truth be told, actually decreased my libido. A desperate woman pretending to be interested in a desperate man pretending to pay attention was just depressing. Finally, the table dance was done.

"Forty dollar for table dance mister." I gave her sixty. It went into her wrist band as she sat down. On my lap. No fucking way.

"Ah, do you mind getting off my lap?" She didn't mind, apparently. She did want champagne.

"Something cheaper, honey. Gotta save my money for the big show later. Understand?" She probably understood because, when the waitress came by, I ordered a beer and she ordered some sort of tequila concoction that was a small fraction the price of the champagne. I paid and girded my loins. Or whatever you're supposed to do before stepping painfully on your own dick.

Dancer (or maybe Comet? Or Vixen? Who cares?) rubbed up against my body paying particular attention to places that might hold money. I turned to face her.

"How much ..." I never finished the question.

"Two hundred dollar one hour good time party." This was said with all the enthusiasm of a thermal underwear inventory in July.

"No, I have a friend..." Cut off again.

"Two men one girl \$400 one hour, good time party. Two girl discount." If I could get her to shut up for a minute I could get the offer out.

"I want two girls for ten minutes to pay attention to my friend." I pointed at the detective. "What mean pay attention?" She was calculating in her head, which was a good sign.

"You and another girl pull him up on stage and embarrass him as much as possible for ten minutes. Can you do that?" The question was actually rhetorical. I had heard about the girls embarrassing a guy on stage here, and this was clearly within their capability.

"Two hundred dollar two girl and friend on stage, yes?" Sold.

"How about two forty and you come back and see me after the show. It's his birthday and I want to play a joke on him." Too much information? I thought not. If I'd told her the guy had just been elected Queen of Lithuania and I wanted to wish him happy faalaghua she wouldn't have paid any more attention.

Dancer called over Prancer, a slightly older and significantly more well-worn Hispanic lady of the night. I spoke just enough Spanish to understand that the offer to the second woman was eighty dollars. Well, why not? Dancer was a business woman after all.

I watched while the reindeer tried to pull the guy out of his seat. He resisted until a rush of female flesh in his direction hid him from sight. He reappeared a few seconds later on stage quickly losing his shirt. The poor guy was terrified. Well, he should have done a better job of blending in.

With Dick Tracy occupied I walked up next to Rufus and ordered a shot of tequila. "Here, this is for you, Rufus."

"How you know my name?" He was quite belligerent, but this was my son and I didn't give a shit. "The same way I know a lot of things. Like you're moonlighting with other clients, something the Capelletis would not find attractive in an employee." I winced when he grabbed my arm in a hand as big as a cantaloupe.

"What the fuck do you want? Do you know how dangerous it is to threaten me?" His face was inches from mine, and I refused to flinch.

"I want one piece of information and if I don't get the police here in thirty seconds. No, you can't stop me. And, give it to me and I don't tell the Capelletis you're stepping out on them." I kept my breathing as steady as I could.

“What piece of information?” My heart soared.

“Who is the Oriental woman you've been helping out under the table with odd illegal jobs?” I had one shot, and hoped he didn't have two hundred female Oriental clients.

“I tell you and you leave now. If you say anything I will find you. I will kill you.” There was little doubt about his sincerity.

“Agreed. Now, who is she?” I got out pen and paper and held my breath. “Korean lady, Kyung-sook Kim. Now, get the fuck out.”

Back to the internet café. I searched for her and found that she sometimes went by Animal or Creature. I had my target.

Last call from this burner.

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