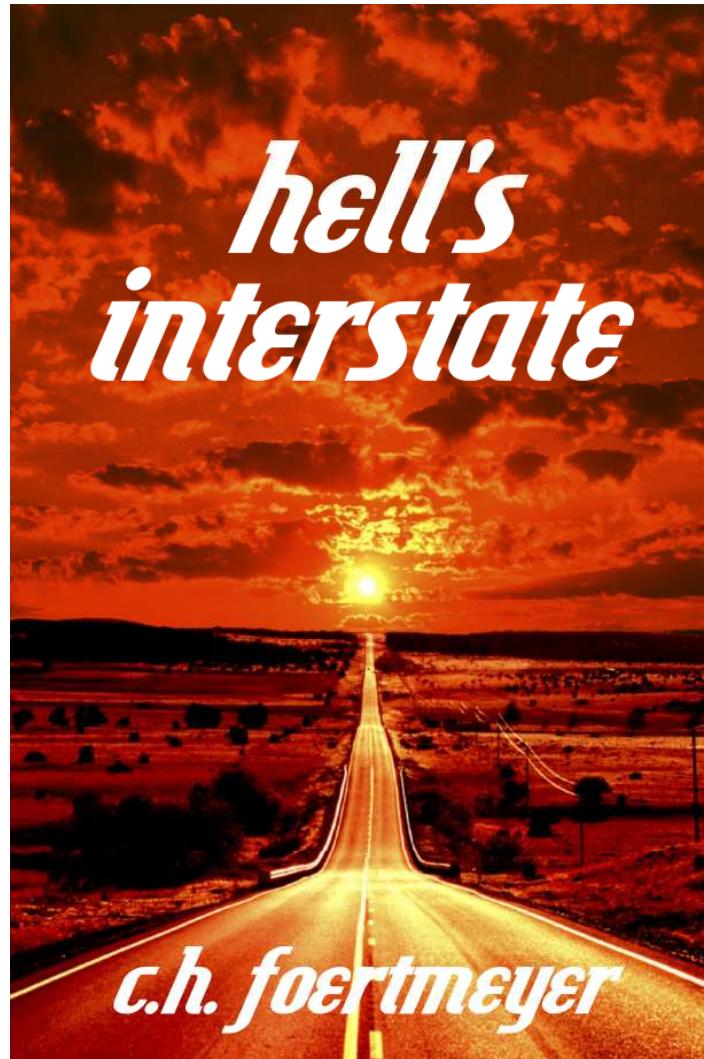


Hell's Interstate



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# Hell's Interstate

C.H. Foertmeyer

## **Hell's Interstate**

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To those seeking a second chance.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Foreword

Sometimes salvation comes from outside the realm of reality. Sometimes a second chance in life comes from beyond logical explanation. Perhaps, in some inexplicable way, it is earned through a series of trials set up by mysterious forces about which we know little or nothing. That is all I am going to say here. That is all I can say here. I am just the storyteller; the one to whom the tale has been entrusted. Read the story, and then decide for yourself what lies between the lines.

C.H. Foertmeyer

## CHAPTER ONE

Cold rain, driven by gale force winds pelted the windshield of the Chevy Blazer, as it pushed up the Interstate against the wind. Vern squinted, trying to make out the side marker lines in his headlights. Having slowed to forty miles per hour, he still found it nearly impossible to follow them. He picked up a saturated rag from the seat and tried again to clear the condensation from the windshield. It was pointless.

"Maybe I better pull over," he said, "at least until this lets up a bit."

"No," Reed answered, from the passenger seat, "we don't have time to wait it out. The highway patrol sure won't."

"They're not looking for us way up here."

"Says you. I say keep movin' and don't leave that to chance."

Vern tried again to wipe the fog from the windshield, and failing that he leaned forward, trying to see between the swipes of the wiper blades.

"I can't see a frickin' thing, Reed. We gotta pull over."

"No, keep goin'. We're not stoppin' out here on the Interstate. You can take the next exit and we'll find a place to stop on some side road, but not out here."

"Fine, I just hope we get that far," Vern replied, seriously.

He raised his rag in one more attempt to clear his view of the road, and suddenly the car bucked with the impact of hitting something large. Almost immediately, something smashed against the windshield, held there momentarily, and then vanished over the roof of the car.

"Shit! What the hell was that?" Vern yelled, as he hit the brakes and skidded to a stop at the side of the road.

"I told you not to stop."

"Screw you, Haskell, I hit something. It broke the frickin' windshield for Christ's sake."

Vern threw open his door and ran back up the highway behind the Blazer, stopping some fifty feet back at the motionless body of a large man. He appeared to be about fifty years of age; a white man, with a full beard. He also appeared to be-quite dead.

Vern knelt down beside his body and studied the man's face, weathered and leathery, the sign of a hard life. He looked across the man's body and saw a worn duffel bag

lying some ten feet away, to the side of the road. He was about to stand, thinking to drag the man's body to the side as well, when suddenly he felt a hand grab him by the wrist. His eyes darted back to the open eyes of the fallen man, and the man whispered, "Help me." Vern jerked his arm away from the man's grip and stood, as the man closed his eyes, slipping away again into unconsciousness—or death.

"Is he dead?" Reed's voice came from behind Vern.

"No, or at least he wasn't a second ago. Come on; help me carry him to the car."

"Are you crazy? Come on; let's just get the hell out of here before we get company."

"I'm not going *anywhere* until you help me load him in the back of the car."

"Why? What the hell's he to you? He's just some old bum nobody's gonna miss anyway, and if we dick around here too long we're gonna get nailed. Now, come on and let's get the hell outa here."

"No, not until he's loaded in the car. So, are you gonna help me, or are you gonna waste more time standing there with your thumb up your ass? I'm not going anywhere until he's in the car," Vern insisted firmly, leaving no doubt in Reed's mind that he was anything less than serious.

"Crap Sanger, what's your frickin' problem? Why take the chance of being caught with him in the back of the Blazer, us tryin' to explain him away to the cops? If they pull us over later, and we're lucky enough not to get made, we'll still have him to explain. So why?"

"Because *I* hit him, not *you*, that's why. So, do we sit here 'til daylight, or do you help me?"

It was not now, nor had it ever been Reed Haskell's nature to take orders from anyone. He saw red at Vern's refusal to follow his orders, and he suddenly reached out and grabbed Vern's face in his left hand.

"I said, come on!" he yelled at Vern, but Vern slapped Reed's arm away, breaking his grip on his cheeks.

"No!" Vern barked back at Reed, and the next thing he knew he was staring down the muzzle of Reed's 9mm Colt.

"Go ahead," Vern yelled, "pull the trigger. Leave *two* bodies lying out here on the Interstate. That'll sure help you get away clean. Why not just mark your trail for the cops while you're at it? Might as well just give them a call and tell them which way you're headed."

Reed froze, still holding his pistol in Vern's face, and thought around his anger to what Vern had just said. *He's right*, he thought. *If we leave the old bum out here*

*they'll likely figure it was us, or someone like us, that came this way. Maybe it would be better to take him along.* He slowly lowered his gun and placed it back in his belt. A small smile crossed his lips, as he came to the *somewhat* satisfactory resolution to this first confrontation with his new partner. After a long moment, Reed replied, "I knew I should never have hooked up with a pussy like you. Okay dammit, grab his feet and I'll get his arms." Then, in an attempt at saving face, he added, "But-only because you're right about not leavin' a trail for the cops to follow."

Vern blew out a long breath, and said, "It ain't like I'm gonna nursemaid him, Reed. I'm just gonna drop him at the first hospital in the first town we come to. That's all."

"No, you're gonna get us caught is what you're gonna do. But have it your way, Vern. I'm gonna rid myself of you anyway, the first chance I get."

"Yeah, right. In a pig's eye you are. You need to remind yourself who's got the wheels."

"And you need to remember who's got the balls. There's plenty of cars out there, just for the takin'."

"Whatever, come on."

They each grabbed their end of the man, carried him to the back of the Blazer, and loaded him in, laying him out behind the folded down back seat. Vern closed the tailgate, cranked up the rear window, and turned to face Reed, who he discovered had disappeared. He walked around to the door and found Reed sitting behind the steering wheel.

"I'll drive from here on out to the hospital. You keep your eye on *Grizzly Adams* there; he's your problem. Get in."

It was very clear to Vern that Reed was dead serious, and equally obvious that he was pissed off. Vern circled the vehicle and got in, turning sideways in his seat so he could see their passenger.

"I don't think he's gonna make it," Vern said, studying the man's lifeless body.

"Like I said, he's *your* problem."

Reed stepped on the gas and pulled back out onto the Interstate. The rain had let up some since Vern had hit their passenger, and Reed took full advantage of that, running the Blazer up to seventy and setting the cruise control there. He reached over and turned on the heat, set it to high, and settled in behind the wheel.

"Keep your eyes peeled for one of those blue hospital signs," he told Vern. "The sooner we rid ourselves of this guy, the better."

Vern turned back in his seat and did as Reed had told him. He began watching, carefully, for the sign that would indicate a hospital off one of the next few exits. It wasn't that he was in a hurry to rid himself of the man, like Reed was; he wanted to get the guy to a hospital for all the right reasons. After all, it had been him that had mowed the man down. It wasn't that he minded killing a man; he didn't, or at least he didn't believe that he would. He had almost done it before, in a bar fight. That ass had it coming though, and he'd have probably done it had an off-duty cop not broken up the fight. But, in his opinion, killing a man had to be for some sort of reason. If the man was a cop, trying to arrest him, he wouldn't think twice about killing him, or so he had often told himself. But, as that situation had not yet arisen, he'd not had the opportunity to find out exactly how he would react if cornered. But, the man in the back of the Blazer was just some poor slob who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and for some reason that bothered him.

As Reed sped east, Vern kept watch to the side of the road for the blue sign that would signal their exit. The rain picked up again, pelting the windshield without letup, but it didn't slow Reed down at all. He had set the cruise control at seventy miles per hour and he wasn't about to release it, apparently, until Vern saw a hospital sign. Vern, who had the guts to knock off an armored car and then break out of prison, was fast becoming a nervous wreck over Reed's breakneck pace through the driving rain.

"Hey, jerk. Would you slow it down a little? I can't see a damn thing, let alone a little blue sign as it flies by. If you want to get rid of that guy back there, slow it down so I don't miss the next sign."

Reed rummaged around on the floor of the car and came up with a large Styrofoam coffee cup.

"You'll see the sign, chicken shit. Don't give me that line of crap."

He tossed the cup to Vern.

"And, before you piss your pants, use this."

"Screw you, Reed. Just slow it down so I don't miss the sign. Is that so damn hard for you to understand?"

Reed ignored Vern's plea, and kept the Blazer pegged on seventy. Disgusted, Vern went back to his vigil, squinting through the blowing water droplets covering the windshield. To make matters worse he was developing one hell of a headache, straining his eyes to check each sign they passed. With his head now throbbing it seemed much longer, but ten minutes later a small blue sign came into

view. As Reed blew by the sign, Vern barely made out the large white H in its center.

"There! There it is, man. Hospital, next exit!"

Reed tapped the brake pedal and began to reduce his speed for the upcoming exit ramp.

"Keep an eye out for which way we go off the ramp," Reed ordered, but as he said it, Vern had already seen the next sign.

"Go right, man."

"Sure?"

"Hell yes I'm sure. I'm looking at the sign now. Go right."

From that point on, Reed followed Vern's directions without question, and finally, after at least four turns, they pulled into the hospital parking lot. It was a small hospital, to say the very least, designed to service a farming community of moderate size. But, Breshup County Hospital *did* have an emergency entrance, and after Vern spotted it Reed pulled the Blazer up near, but not directly in front of the entrance.

"Okay," Reed said, "go around back and drag that bum out onto the sidewalk. I'll blast the horn a few times and then we're out of here."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, just like that. I ain't stickin' around to hold his hand, fool. It's either that, or I drive off now, and dump him along the highway."

"You're a real son-of-a-bitch, Reed. You know that?"

When Reed ignored Vern's last comment, Vern got out and did as Reed had instructed, moving to the back of the Blazer. He opened the rear window and tailgate, and froze.

"Reed."

"What?"

"You better come back here."

"Why; what for? Just pull him out and let's get goin', dammit."

"He ain't *here*, Reed."

"What?"

"He's gone. He's not here anymore."

Reed spun around in his seat and stared into the empty back of the Blazer.

"What the hell? Where'd he go?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"You were supposed too be watchin' him."

"No, I was watching for the hospital sign, like you said."

"Well, shit. Just get in and let's book. Who the hell cares where he went, anyway?"

Vern rushed back into his seat, as Reed hit the gas. Five minutes later they were back on the eastbound Interstate, destination still unknown. Several minutes of silence prevailed after getting back onto the highway, and then it was Vern who interrupted the silence.

"Where do you think he went, Reed?"

"I don't know-I don't care-and I don't want to talk about it."

"But..."

"I said-I *do not* want to talk about it," Reed yelled.

"Okay man, sorry. You want me to drive now?"

"No, I got it."

As confused and concerned as Vern was over the disappearance of their passenger, he could sense that Reed was even more unnerved by the experience. He didn't want to talk about it because he couldn't bring himself to admit that he was plain spooked by *Grizzly Adams's* improbable, if not impossible escape from the Blazer. Reed didn't like much what he couldn't explain, and Vern understood exactly how he felt. He was just as spooked, and maybe even more so. He was certain of one thing though; dead men don't crawl out of the back of a moving vehicle. A living man might try it, but at seventy miles per hour, he wouldn't be alive for long.

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Reed had driven through what remained of the night, and as the sun peeked over the horizon, he pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped.

"You take over for awhile. I can't keep my eyes open another minute. Just head for the first out-of-the-way motel you can find and we'll check in. I gotta get some serious sleep."

"I got some sleep. Do you want me to keep driving while you do?" Vern offered.

"No, I want a frickin' bed for a change. Just find someplace off the main route and we'll chance it."

The first thought that occurred to Vern was that this was completely out of character for the Reed Haskell he knew. Granted, he hadn't known him all that long, but still, this was a first. Reed never needed the comforts of life, nor did he ever seem to want them. "Just keep movin'," was Reed's credo. Come hell or high water; "just keep movin'." *Why now?* Vern wondered, but he had a good

idea. Grizzly Adams, vanishing like he did, really had Reed by the short ones.

They crawled over one another, trading places in the front seat, Vern taking the wheel again. He pulled the Blazer into gear, checked his rearview mirror, and pulled back onto the Interstate. A little less than a mile down the road he saw a sign that listed Medosh, ten miles ahead. *Sounds small, and out-of-the-way, he thought. Perfect, if they have a motel.*

Vern drove through Medosh on its main drag, Main Street, looking for a small motel, preferably on the outskirts of town. He had seen none entering Medosh, but as he was pulling out of town, on the north side, he spotted the Stardust Motel. *Jeez, I wonder how many of those there are in the country, he thought, thinking of the Route 66 type name and style of the motel.* But, despite the all too common name, or at least common at one time, it was perfect for their purposes. It was off the Interstate, small, probably cheap, and judging from the parking lot there was only one current guest. The neon "NO" in front of the printed "VACANCY" was not lit. *Looks like they've got room for two more.*

Without bothering Reed's slumber, Vern pulled into the parking lot and drove up under the portico in front of the office. When he walked into the office lobby he was shocked to see that time had pretty much stood still at the Stardust Motel. The décor was vintage 1955, the furniture too, and there was a black payphone hanging on the wall with three coin slots on top and an actual dial. *Jeezle, he thought, looking around the empty room, this place is creepy, creepy like old, and creepy.* He walked over to the counter, maroon Formica with yellow binkies, and spun the guest register around to where he could read it. The only guest that had registered in the past week was a Melvin Meadows, who had checked in earlier today. *Perfect, Vern thought, thinking of the privacy this place would afford them.* He looked to his left, spotted a small bell on the counter, and popped the small button on top. As he waited for a response from the room behind the counter, he noticed a brochure rack on the left wall. He sauntered over to it and laughed silently, noting the lack of interesting places to visit in this all too boring state.

Suddenly, "May I help you?" came a man's voice from behind him.

Vern turned to face the counter and nearly pissed his pants at the sight he beheld.

"Ah...no...I was just...just looking for a...a map of the state, yeah...a map of Kansas, but there doesn't seem to be one here. Thanks anyway," Vern replied, stammering, and backing away. He spun on his heel, exited the motel office, and ran to the Blazer, where he flung open the door and jumped in to find Reed staring at him from the passenger seat.

"So, are we registered?" Reed asked him. "What room, no let me guess-27, right?"

Vern started the engine, yanked the gearshift, floored the gas pedal, and dumped the clutch. The Blazer's rear wheels squealed, as it slid out from beneath the portico, across the lot, and back onto Main Street.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Reed yelled. "You want to bring every cop in the county down on us? What the hell's your problem?"

Not choosing to go back through Medosh, Vern had turned left, and was now gunning it north on County Road 107, away from town. He had the pedal nearly to the floor and the Blazer had accelerated to nearly sixty, before Reed yelled at him again.

"Slow the crap down! What the hell is goin' on? Talk to me fool! Was there a cop in there, or what?"

Vern looked into the rearview mirror, and satisfied that they weren't being followed, he eased off the gas. When the car had slowed to thirty-five, he turned his head to face Reed, and said, "Damn, that was freaky."

"What?"

"That guy we ran over; either he's a frickin' ghost, or he's got a twin brother. I wasn't waiting around to find out which."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"The guy running that motel back there was the guy we ran down last night, or his frickin' twin brother."

"You idiot. It was pitch black out there last night, with rain pourin' down, frickin' wind blowin' like crazy, and you're tellin' me you got a good enough look at that old fart to recognize him again today?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm telling you. I'm telling you, *that* was him, or his twin."

"Fat chance, man. His twin, maybe, or even his brother, but *not* him. You hit the son-of-a-bitch goin' what, forty miles an hour? And now you think he's up runnin' a motel the next day? Who's the fool in this car? I'll tell you; look in the mirror."

"You're right, I probably didn't get that good a look at his face last night, but I got a damn good look at his hand."

"His hand?"

"Yeah, his right hand. It was all curled up, like a birth defect, or something like that. The guy at the motel had the *same* hand."

"So, that could mean he's an identical twin, I guess, but he still ain't the same guy you hit. *That's* impossible. Gettin' hit at forty miles an hour, he'd have broken legs, internal injuries, and prob'ly a fractured skull to boot. He sure wouldn't be up and runnin' a motel today. You can take *that* to the bank. Now, turn this damn truck around before you get us lost out here in East frickin' Jesus."

Vern pulled to the side of the road, made a U-turn, and headed back toward Medosh. As the Stardust Motel came up on the right, Reed was the first to spot the man, out by the road, watering the flower garden beneath the motel sign. As Vern drove past, the man waved his twisted right hand at them and smiled a friendly smile, a common enough country greeting. Reed's jaw dropped all the way to his chest, as he stared at the all too familiar face.

"Holy crap, that *does* look like him," Reed said, just above a whisper.

Vern stepped down hard on the gas, and asked, "So now who's the fool in this car?"

## CHAPTER TWO

Monday morning was just another day at the office for Vernon Sanger and Reed Haskell. It had begun when they had left the Trail's End Motel, in the sleepy little town of Morgan, and had become interesting, as they had entered the Quick Pix convenience store on the south edge of town. The forty-two dollars and thirty-five cents that they had obtained from the now dead clerk, Jeremy, would finance another day on the road. Life, for Reed anyway, was simple and good. For Vern, it wasn't so clear-cut; simple and good would *not* be his choice of words in describing their current situation, or lifestyle.

As Vern drove out of town, and hit the Interstate again, this time headed north, Reed reached beneath his seat and pulled out a green metal box. He then unloaded his Colt and began dipping his cleaning brush in a small bottle of powder solvent.

"Why do you do that?" Vern asked.

"Do what?"

"Clean that damn thing every time you use it?"

"Damn thing? This *damn thing* is what keeps us goin'. This *damn thing* is what'll pull your fat out of the fire when you're cornered. I do *this*, because *this damn thing* is our friend. A ditch-digger has his shovel, a janitor his mop, and we've got *this damn thing*. Any more stupid questions?"

"Yeah, where'd you get it?"

"Do you remember that truck stop where you first met me; where you picked me up?"

"Yeah, of course; how could I forget that?"

"I got it there, from a trucker."

"You bought it, or stole it?"

"Negative, very negative."

"Well?"

"Let's just say I borrowed it."

"So, you stole it-Did you kill him?"

"With his own gun? No, of course not. I actually stole his truck; hijacked it, so to speak. I found the pistol under his seat when I got to the truck stop where we met."

"What about the trucker?"

"What about him?"

"Where was he while you were boostin' his truck?"

"He kinda got in the way when I was pullin' outa the lot. What a mess. Do you have any idea what an eighteen-wheeler can do to a man if he gets in its way?"

"Was that the first man you've ever killed?"

"No-you?"

"Me? I never killed nobody."

"Yet."

Vern was silent, not wanting to go there.

"So, where did you get this Blazer?" Reed asked him, changing the subject.

"From a dead friend."

"Huh, you'll have to tell me that story sometime. And, so?"

"So, what?"

"So, what were you doin' at that truck stop when I met you?"

"I told you that before."

"No, you told me what you wanted me to believe. Now tell me what you were *really* doin' there."

Vern hesitated over the answer to that question. He didn't like airing his private life with a near stranger, even one he had partnered up with four days ago and had already committed several robberies and murders with. No, he hadn't pulled the trigger, but he had been there when Reed had, and he had participated in the robberies. Even though he had been nothing more than the lookout and driver, so far, in the eyes of the law at least, he was now a murderer.

"Running," Vern finally answered.

"From what?"

"Prison."

"You busted out? Holy crap, from where?"

"Carson."

"No shit. What were you in for?"

"Armed robbery, and murder."

"Well I'll be slicked up and bent over. So, you are a killer, after all."

"No," Vern replied, emphatically, "I was the wheels; the getaway driver."

"So, what did you hit, a bank?"

"I wish. We did an armored car, Wells Fargo. *That*, was a mistake."

"Why? They're not so tough to take down."

"This one was. When the job went down, somehow the driver made me sitting in our getaway car. I don't know how he knew that I was a part of it all, but he figured it out somehow, and he stepped on the gas, yanked the wheel around, smashed into me, and crushed my wheels. He almost killed me too. My buddies were a month in prison before I could even go to trial. I was *that* long in the hospital."

"Rough break. Ever think about goin' after that bastard that ran you down?"

"Every day."

"Wanna do it?"

"You mean you and me?"

"Yeah, sure. Sounds like fun to me."

"What's in it for you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Satisfaction, maybe. Maybe just to do somethin' different. Take your pick."

"Would we kill him? I mean..."

"Nah, man. He didn't kill you, did he? I always say, an eye for an eye. We just put him in the hospital, where he put you. Maybe for a month or more."

"Try six."

"You were in the hospital for six months? Okay then, six it is. I'm with you on this one. But, I don't know-six months is a long time to have your life all messed up like he did you. Maybe we do kill him, after all. Let me think on that. Where does he live?"

"I don't know, but we hit the armored car in Topeka. I guess he lives there, or somewhere near there."

"You know his name?"

"Yeah, but you won't believe me when I tell you."

"Try me."

"Brinks, Edward Brinks."

"No shit? You're right, I don't believe it. That's too much. A guy named Brinks, drivin' a Well Fargo truck? What a hoot."

"It wasn't so funny when he was driving that Wells Fargo truck over me."

"No, I guess not, but we'll fix him up right. You'll see, and then he'll be laughin' out the other side of his face. You know, our meetin' must've been fate."

"Yeah, how do you figure?"

"Look at the map, man. This highway we're on goes from here straight to Topeka. You don't s'pose he's in the phonebook, do you?"

"Life's not that simple, Haskell."

"No, I s'pose it's not, but you never know. Today could be our lucky day."

Whether it was fate that had hooked them up, or perhaps just dumb luck, Vern wasn't sure. His life was in the toilet anyway, and had been ever since the armored car robbery had gone amuck. He had been a lifer at Carson, sentenced to life because one of his buddies had panicked, *after* their means of escape had been plowed over by the Wells Fargo truck. When Wesley had seen that take place, he

had panicked, and he shot and killed one of the guards wheeling the moneybags out of the K-Mart store. A stupid mistake, in as much as they had nowhere to run at that point anyway, and no hope of pulling the job off to its successful conclusion.

His escape from Carson had not been bold or daring; it had just been clever. He had been bunked with another inmate, Carl Johnson, who by chance looked remarkably like him. They were the same height, weight, and build. All Vern had needed to be his "twin brother" was a pair of black frame glasses, a black mustache, and a black wig, easily enough obtained with the proper trade items. The only other item necessary to pull off his escape would be a little chloroform; and again, easily obtained for a carton of Camels. All items in place, Vern had simply to wait for the twenty-sixth of the month; Johnson's release date. At five that morning, Vern slipped his bunk, chloroformed Carl, much to Carl's disapproval, and then, first donning his disguise, he traded bunks. At seven that morning he had simply walked out of prison, a *free man*, processed out as Carl Johnson, while Carl *slept* through it all.

Now fate, or perhaps dumb luck, had brought him together with Reed Haskell. Better to run with company than to run alone he supposed, even if the company was a bit unsavory. But then again, he was no angel either. The only difference between them, as far as he could see, was that Reed was a cold-blooded killer, and he was just a common, everyday criminal. But now, even that might be changing. He suspected, if he could find Brinks, he too would become the killer that Reed is. One way or the other, it was probably only a matter of time before they would become one in the same.

The drive to Topeka was uneventful, not even seeing a state trooper, county mountie, or local yokel, anywhere along the way. As they entered the suburbs, Vern pulled off the Interstate and entered the outskirts of Topeka via the local highway system. It was now mid-afternoon and traffic was still light, rush hour not yet upon them. Vern spotted a Conoco and pulled in for gas, some refreshments, and hopefully, a payphone with a phonebook. He parked by the furthest pump out.

"Okay, you fill her up while I go in and check for a phonebook. Give me some money."

Reed smiled at Vern, and replied, "We're on pump seven, here's thirty bucks to pay for the gas, and get me a sandwich; ham and cheese, if they have them. Here's another five bucks for the food."

"Right, ham and cheese. Anything else?"

"Nope, just a Coke; diet, and be careful. The cops have had time to work up sketches of us by now. They may even have our names, since we've both been in prison. They may have made the connection, so be careful. But, look around while you're in there and get the layout. We might hit this place on the way out of town. It's close enough to the highway. Oh yeah, get me a bag of chips too."

"Right, anything else? Maybe a T-bone, or a New York strip?"

"Just go, smart ass."

By the time Vern had finished shopping, Reed had finished pumping the gas. Vern paid for their purchases and then hurriedly took his leave of the place. Back behind the wheel, he looked at Reed, and his face told it all.

"They have our sketches in there, don't they?"

"Worse-Just a sketch of you, but they have *my* mug shot. They *have* made the connection."

"Were you made in there?"

"Ha! No, the jerk behind the counter was an old Chinese fart, with glasses thicker than Coke bottle bottoms. He didn't bat an eye."

"So, they've made us then; the cops I mean. They've figured out who we are."

"Yeah, and I know what you're thinking, but there was no mention of my Blazer on the poster."

"Good, then we can finish our business here. Did you find a phonebook in there?"

"Yep."

"And the address?"

"Life, my friend, is that simple."

Reed smiled.

"What a fool. But then again, I don't reckon Brinks ever figured you to be on the loose again. Was there a map in the phonebook? Do you know where to go?"

"Yep, I got it all up here," Vern said, pointing to his head, "and it isn't far away, either."

Vern pulled out of the Conoco station and began following the mental roadmap he had stored away. Eight blocks later, they cruised slowly past Edward Brinks's house, at 327 Edgewater Drive, for now, just to check it out. Their business here would wait until well after dark, after the household was sleeping.

Having several hours to kill before their business would be at hand, Reed suggested Vern drive out of the suburbs and into the country, where they could find some out-of-the-way spot to park and get some rest. Vern found

an old dump road, which looked perfect, pulled to the end of it, and pulled over.

"So, how's this seem to you?" Vern asked.

"Looks good. Shut the engine off, and we'll get some shuteye."

"What about planning out what we're gonna do tonight at Brinks's house?"

"We'll figure that out when we get there. I figured we'd just go in-and you'd shoot the bastard."

"He's an armored car guard, Reed. He'll be armed, or at least have a gun in the house. If he hears us coming it could get hairy."

"So-we're goin' in after he's gone to bed; he'll be sleepin'."

"In order to shoot him *after* he's gone to bed, I've got to find out where he sleeps, slip up on him and shoot; all before he wakes up. That's risky, not to mention the neighbors might hear the gunshot. It's summer and there'll be a lot of open windows in the neighborhood."

"Okay, Vern. I get your point. I guess we'll just let ourselves in, see what the situation is, and then decide how to do it. Okay?"

"I don't know."

"You gettin' cold feet?"

"No."

"Okay, then. That's how we'll do it. Now, get some damn rest, or at least let me get some."

Reed dozed off quickly, but there was no way Vern could sleep. He had much too much to think about, and besides, he felt someone should keep a lookout up the dump road; just in case they got company. By dark, there had been no visitors down the dump road and Vern was getting very anxious, and restless. This was his big night. By morning, he will have done exactly what he had been promising himself he would one-day do, but had never before ever figured out how, when, or where. Now, the day was upon him, and he still had no idea how he would pay Brinks back. He decided to try to think like Reed, and just take things as they came. "You take your opportunities, as they present themselves," Reed had said, upon several occasions. Maybe he was right.

Vern reached over to Reed and shook his shoulder.

"Come on, man. Wake up. It's time to go."

"What time is it?" Reed asked.

"Almost ten o'clock. By the time we get back there, he should be going to bed. He's a working man, so he won't stay up late."

"Okay, go. Don't let me hold you back."

When they pulled onto Edgewater Drive, Reed advised Vern to drive by slowly and look for lighted windows. Then, if all looked peaceful in the house, they'd park on the next block behind the house and slip into Brinks's backyard through a neighbor's yard.

"We'll enter through the back door," Reed advised, "which prob'ly, on these old houses, goes directly into the kitchen. Once inside, we'll evaluate the situation and go from there. Sound okay to you?"

"You have no idea what we're going to do when we get in there, do you?"

"Oh, I have a very good idea. That's why I brought these," Reed replied, handing Vern a pack of matches, and a candle.

"We're gonna burn him out?"

"No, that takes too long, and if he has smoke alarms, leaves too much to chance."

Vern pulled to the curb of Beekman Street, directly behind Brinks's house, and turned off the headlights and engine.

"Okay, come on, you follow me," Reed ordered.

They slipped silently up the neighbor's driveway, through the backyard, over the chain link fence, and to the back door of the Brinks house. Reed tried the doorknob, turning it slowly, until the door popped open.

"Dumb fool," he whispered, grinning at Vern.

They slipped into the kitchen and Reed took a quick look around, before whispering to Vern, "You find the dining room. If there are candles on the table, light one. If not, light the candle I gave you and anchor it on the tabletop with dripped wax."

"What are you going to do?" Vern whispered back.

"I'm gonna find the basement door. I think that's it over there," he said, pointing. "After you light the candle, slip back outside and wait for me at the back of the yard, by the fence."

Reed tiptoed over to the door he believed to lead to the basement, opened it, and discovering he had been correct, he slipped down the stairs and stopped at the bottom. He flicked on a small penlight and began looking for the washer and dryer. He spotted them right away, in one corner, and walked over to the electric dryer, grinning as his light beam fell on what he knew he would find behind it. He reached behind the dryer and turned the valve on the natural gas line, which at one time had provided the fuel source for a long ago replaced gas dryer. *Just like in*

every old house I've ever been in, he thought, as the smell of gas began filling his nostrils. He backed away, turned and headed back upstairs, stopping long enough to look into the next room to be sure Vern's candle was burning. It was. He then slipped out the back door, closing it tightly behind him.

Vern saw Reed coming across the back yard and got ready to run.

"Is it done?" he asked, when Reed arrived at his side.

"Not yet, but you'll sure as hell know when it is. Come on, we'll wait in the car."

Vern got behind the wheel of the Blazer and started the engine. He left the headlights off.

"Won't be too long now," Reed said, grinning a devilish grin Vern's way.

"What'd you do in the basement?"

"You haven't figured that out yet? Think about the candle."

Vern turned his thoughts to the candle he had lit in the dining room, and then to Reed's trip to the basement. For the next twenty minutes he tried to imagine what Reed could have possibly done down there that had anything to do with his candle. Then suddenly, his eyes widened, as he came up with the answer. He turned in a panic to Reed, and asked, "But, what if...?"

His question was interrupted by the sound of a terrific explosion, the rocking of the Blazer, and a flash of light nearly as bright as daylight. Vern's jaw dropped, as he finished his question, "...if he has a family in there?"

"Floor it ass. Who the hell cares if he has a family in there? Let's get out of here."

Vern pressed down on the accelerator, flicked on the headlights, and turned the corner onto Ridge Road, the most direct route back to the Interstate. Reed put his hand on Vern's arm to get his attention, and when Vern turned to face him, Reed said, "So much for Brinks. Score settled, but you can thank me later when you've had time to appreciate my ingenuity."

### CHAPTER THREE

"Hey! You there! Stop!"

The man stopped short of the yellow caution ribbon, turned, and Ray saw immediately, a look of anguish on his face.

"I was afraid you were gonna cross the caution line," Ray said to the man. "What's your business in there?"

"That's my home," the man answered, in a dead and hollow tone.

"Oh Jeez, man; I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"My family?"

"Yeah, your family. Ah, I can't say. I wish I could, but they haven't found anyone in there yet. Come on, sit in my car and we'll talk," Ray offered.

"Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry, my name's Ray LaCosta, Topeka PD, Homicide."

"Homicide?"

"No, it's not like that. I live in the neighborhood and I heard the explosion, so I came over to see if I could help out, that's all."

"Do you know how it happened?"

"The Fire Marshall just told me that it was a gas explosion, which of course was followed by a fire. Beyond that, he can't say for sure yet; he's not sure what caused the gas leak. So, can you tell me your name, please?"

"It's Ed Brinks. My wife was in there, and my kids; Tommy and Sarah."

"Damn, that's rough. I'm sorry. I can't imagine... So, where were you?"

"I should have been here."

"Yeah, well, if it's any help to you, it probably wouldn't have mattered. They believe the leak was somewhere in the basement, and they think the ignition source was a candle in the dining room. You'd have never smelled the gas either had you been upstairs in bed. So-If you don't mind my asking again, where were you?"

"I was at work. I'm an armored car guard for Wells Fargo."

"In the middle of the night? I didn't know you guys made runs in the middle of the night."

"Sometimes we do, but I wasn't on a truck tonight. I also do security at the main office one night a week; I was on duty there tonight. Did you say a candle in the dining room caused the explosion?"

"Yeah, they think that's what ignited the gas."

"We don't use candles, ever, unless there's a storm and the power goes out. Did the power go out around here?"

"No, not that I'm aware of."

Interrupting their conversation, one of the firemen yelled, "Hey, Ray! Can you come here a minute?"

Ray nodded to the fireman, and then said to Ed, "Please wait here a minute, Mr. Brinks. I'll be right back, okay?"

Ray walked over to the fireman, and asked, "What's up, Miles?"

"I found your gas 'leak'. It was an open valve."

"Gas valve?"

"Yeah, an *open* gas valve. The old gas line that used to run to a gas dryer in the basement. Someone opened the valve."

Ray looked back at Ed, who was still staring blankly at the smoldering ruins of his house.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Could it have, like blown open in the explosion?"

"No; it was opened, *intentionally*, and that's what eventually caused the explosion."

"Thanks, Miles. So, it's arson then?"

"It sure looks like it; and murder, if we find anybody in there."

"Still no bodies then?"

"Not yet, but it's a mess in there. We may come up with someone eventually, as we sift through the debris."

"Well keep looking, because Mr. Brinks over there says his wife and kids were home; two kids, a boy and a girl."

Wincing at the thought, Miles replied, "Oh great, just what I wanted to hear."

Detective Ray LaCosta now had a problem on his hands. He had only been here because he lived two blocks away and had been awakened, like everybody else in the neighborhood, by the explosion. Now though, it appeared his business here may well become official. He walked back over to Ed and placed his hand on the grieving man's shoulder.

"So Ed, do you work alone at your security job?"

Ed looked at Ray, and replied, "No, there's two of us nights. Why?"

"Can your partner account for your presence there all night, say up until at least midnight?"

"Yeah, he can, but why? You don't think I had anything to do with this, do you? What makes you ask a question like that?"

Ray explained to Ed what Miles had just told him and Ed's knees buckled, as he asked, "Then it wasn't an accident? Someone did this on purpose?"

"It kinda looks that way--as of now...but listen, Ed...have you got a place to stay tonight?"

"Yeah, my brother lives a few blocks from here. I can stay with him."

"Good, then in the morning, and it doesn't have to be too early, get in touch with your partner and the two of you come down to the Sixth District on Wabash. I'll take your statements and then you can look into the important stuff, like the arrangements for your family. Will you do that for me? Just ask for Ray LaCosta."

Ed nodded his head.

"Good. Can I give you a lift to your brother's house? There's nothing you can do here right now."

"Have they found my family yet?"

"No, not yet. Now, what about that lift? You don't really want to be here when they do, Ed. It's better you're not here then, if you know what I mean."

Ed nodded again, and Ray helped him walk to his car. Ed Brinks was obviously in shock and grieving deeply, so Ray asked him no more questions about the tragic event. There would be time for that come morning. And come morning, he'd find out more about who might have wanted Ed and his family dead. Based on what Ed Brinks and Miles had already told him, this was likely to develop into a triple homicide.

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Ed's eyes opened to a sunlit bedroom. At first, he was at a loss for where he was, so deep had been his escape from reality. He knew from the bedside alarm clock that he hadn't been asleep even two hours, but that's *all* he remembered, at first. Then, the horror of the previous night came swooping down on him, like a hawk on a helpless mouse. He sat up, pulling the covers up around his neck, and bawled. No morning before had ever greeted him with so much pain. Not only had he lost his entire family, but also, if the fireman was to be believed, he had lost them through an intentional act...*an act of what though?* he wondered. *Hate? Revenge? A mischievous prank gone awry? Had whoever was responsible known the house was occupied? Was my family killed intentionally, or by oversight?* A million questions swam through his mind, as he tried to make sense of the previous night's tragedy.

When he finally gathered himself together, he dressed and went downstairs. He found his brother sitting at the kitchen table, ready to console him with whatever kind and appropriate words he could find. Ed wanted no part of it though, grabbed a Pop-Tart, and went outside. He walked the four blocks back to what remained of his house, where he had left his car the night before, and stood again in anguish, as he stared at the ruin of his home and his life. The scene of the tragedy was still cordoned off with yellow caution tape, but all involved in the search and investigation had departed. Ed had the place to himself; apparently Annie, Tommy, and Sarah had already been discovered and removed. He fought back the tears again, as he stumbled through the charred remains of what had been Annie's dream house, his children's haven from the world, and his life's major accomplishment. There was simply nothing left of his life now, save time to think back on what used to be-what could have been.

To all outward appearances, it would look to the casual passerby that Ed was rummaging aimlessly through what had been his home, perhaps collecting memories, perhaps trying to understand what had happened here. But although they would be correct in their assumptions, they would not be completely correct. There was another purpose in Ed's visit here this morning; there was something he needed to find amid the burned out timbers and ruined possessions of his life. He knelt down in the wet ashes and began digging with his hands, shoving an occasional obstruction out of his way before digging again. Finally, he sat down on a large charred beam and pulled from the rubble, a metal, fireproof box. A small smile crossed his lips as he raised the lid and found undamaged, all the photos he had cherished of Annie, Tommy and Sarah; the photos he had deemed too precious to risk placing in the family photo album. He was glad he had saved these photos aside, as they were now, all he had left of his family.

Ed stood and placed his precious cargo in his shirt pocket, and tossing the box aside, he began walking back to his car. Sitting behind the wheel, he took another look at his photographs, placed them back in his pocket and was about to pull away from the curb when a face appeared in his passenger side window.

"I got to worrying about you after you left," his brother said. "I figured you might be coming here; you okay?"

"Should I be?" Ed replied, tersely.

A tear ran down Carl's cheek, and deposited itself on his shirt collar. Ed noticed, and said, "Sorry, Carl. It's just..."

"I know, and I just want you to know that I'm here for you. *Whatever* I can do to help, you've only to ask."

"There *is* something," Ed replied. "See if you can find out where they took Anne and the kids after they found them. See if you can begin making arrangements for them, you know..." Ed choked back a large lump in his throat. "...the funeral arrangements," he finished, fighting back still more tears.

"Sure, Ed, consider it done, but where are you going?" Carl wanted to know, concerned over his brother's bereaved state of mind, and worried about his well-being on this first, critical morning after.

"I've been asked to show up at police headquarters this morning to give a statement. It seems that the explosion was not an accident. They say a gas valve in the basement was opened intentionally, and a candle was lit in the dining room. Apparently, I need an alibi, so I'm supposed to take Steve with me so he can corroborate my whereabouts last night."

Carl was flabbergasted, and it showed.

"They can't possibly think..."

"Oh, but they apparently do," Ed said, cutting Carl off in mid-sentence. "They apparently do."

"I'll get my lawyers working on this right now," Carl blurted out. "Which station are you going to?"

"No, Carl, it's okay. Steve was with me the whole time at work last night. I'll be fine with the police after we both talk with them. You just take care of the arrangements, please. Let me know, as soon as you know, where I can visit my family. I'll be at the Sixth District on Wabash. You should be able to reach me there. If I get done there before I hear from you, I'll go to your house."

Carl nodded his head, and replied, "Okay, I'll be in touch," and he headed back home to follow up on Ed's request.

As Ed pulled away from the curb, he suddenly realized that in his haste to leave Carl's house, he had totally forgotten to call Steve about meeting him at the police station this morning. He decided to swing by his house, and with any luck, catch him before he left for work. If not, he'd pick him up at work and take it from there. Under the circumstances, he was sure their boss wouldn't mind. He had been scheduled off today anyway. It was Steve who had pulled the double-shift this week.

He turned off of Elm Street and proceeded down Thirty-Third Street, toward Steve's house. As he approached the intersection of Thirty-Third and Maple, the traffic light suddenly turned red and a man stepped off the curb, directly into his path. Ed hit the brakes hard, skidding to a stop, as the man vanished beneath the front of his car. He had felt the heavy thud, as he struck the man, and he now feared the worst for him.

"Damn!" he yelled, as he flung open his door and started for the front of his car. He rounded the front and looked down to see a large man of about fifty, lying beneath his front bumper. He knelt down to where he could see the man's face.

"Hey, are you okay? Are you hurt badly?" Ed asked, at a loss for anything intelligent to say.

Ed turned to a gathering bunch of bystanders.

"Someone call an ambulance!" he barked, at the dumbstruck witnesses.

Turning back to the man he'd hit, he said, "I'm so sorry. The light just turned from green to red. I didn't even see it go yellow in between."

The man turned his head, and looked at Ed. A smile crossed his bearded face, and he replied, "It's not bad. Don't worry, you barely bumped me. I mostly just lost my balance and fell."

Ed wasn't so sure the man was being completely honest with him; he had felt the impact. *But, why say you're not hurt if you are?* flashed through Ed's mind.

"Can you get up then?"

"Sure, I think so," the man replied, with a smile.

As the man rolled out from beneath the bumper, Ed noticed his crumpled hand, and couldn't keep himself from staring at it. As he stared, the man couldn't help but notice the look on Ed's face.

"Cheer up, you didn't do this to my hand," the man said, smiling. "It's been this way for years. So many years, I can't even remember anymore."

Ed sighed with relief.

"Good, for a minute there I thought...So, what's your name?" Ed asked, as the man gained his feet.

"Michael."

"Got a last name, Michael?"

"No, just Michael, if you don't mind."

"No, suit yourself. What made you step off in front of me like that?"

Michael answered Ed with a question of his own.

"Can you give me a lift to the hospital?"

"Hospital? Oh, yeah, I guess it would be wise to get checked out."

"Well, since I work there, perhaps I will," Michael answered, "but I wouldn't worry, I'm fine, I'm sure—Now, about that ride?"

"Oh yeah, sure. Get in. I'll have you there in no time."

Michael took a seat next to Ed in the front of his car and Ed pulled away, turning right toward Mercy South. This would take him about ten miles out of his way, but under the circumstances he felt it was the least he could do for his passenger.

About a minute down the road, Michael asked, "So, what's your name?"

"Oh, sorry, it's Ed Brinks. I didn't think to..."

"That's okay...so, it was your house that exploded last night?"

"Jeez, it's in the papers already?" Ed asked, but not really surprised.

"I don't know; I haven't seen a morning paper yet."

"Then...how...?"

"You know, when people put in electric appliances to replace old gas ones, they should have the old gas lines securely capped. It's too easy for a kid, or anyone for that matter, to open those old hand valves."

Ed hit the brakes, and skidded to the curb. He turned to Michael, a look of bewilderment on his face, and asked, "How in the *hell* did you know about the gas valve?"

"I just *know* things," Michael replied, unemotionally.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Just a friend. What you need to do, Ed, is look back into your past—closely into your past."

"No, what I *need* to do is take you to talk with Ray LaCosta, down at the Sixth District."

Ed turned his head, glancing into his side mirror before pulling away from the curb, but when he looked back, his passenger was gone.

"What the hell? Where'd he go?"

He looked in every direction for any sign of Michael walking away, but he had vanished, as quickly and completely as money in the hands of a politician. He was simply, gone.

Visibly shaken, and totally confused over what had just transpired, Ed turned the car around and resumed his drive to Steve's house. He arrived just in time to catch his partner backing out of his driveway, headed for work. He blocked Steve's departure by pulling into the drive

behind him, explained his situation to him, and the two of them then left for the Sixth District station in Ed's car.

Needless to say, Steve was shocked by Ed's tragic loss, but fascinated by his story of his encounter with the strange man, Michael. Not comfortable with dwelling on Ed's loss, Steve tried instead to help him probe his memory for a possible clue to what Michael had meant by telling him to look closely into his past for the answers that he sought. His efforts, however, proved fruitless, as Ed's mind was fixed on his family's tragic fate. Steve finally dropped the issue of Michael and rode along in silence, letting Ed think his thoughts without further interruption.

When they arrived at the Sixth District station they were directed to Ray LaCosta's office, where they found the detective going over the fire report from the previous evening. They took a seat, as Ray looked up over his reading glasses.

"Thanks for coming in so quickly, Ed," Ray greeted him. "And is this your partner, who was with you last night?"

"Yes, Steve Jones," Steve replied.

"Well thank you for coming, Steve. So, what I need to know from you is whether or not Ed was out of your sight last night, say between eleven, and midnight. The details we discussed last night, Ed, have been confirmed. The gas valve in the basement was open, and a candle was lit in the dining room. They tell me it would have taken about thirty minutes for the gas to reach the dining room from the basement, and we know the house blew at just about midnight. So?"

"Ed and I work in the same room," Steve replied, "monitoring two sets of security cameras. Ed left the room once, to go to the head. That was at about ten p.m., and he was gone less than five minutes. Our shift ended at seven, but since I had to return to start a day shift, I left at six to go home and freshen up. Other than that hour, we were together continuously throughout the whole night."

"Okay, then. That pretty much clears you of all suspicion, Ed. So, that leaves us with just one big question; who would have opened that valve and lit that candle?"

Ed's first inclination was to tell Ray about Michael, but their meeting had been so weird, so strange, as to be totally unbelievable. He elected to remain quiet about Michael, for now, and look for evidence he *could* explain.

"I don't know, Ray. Anyone who knows me also knows that I work Monday nights, all night. Anyone who knows me

also knows that my family would have been home. So, if it were anyone who knows me, it would have been my family, or one of them, that they were trying to hurt, not me. That leaves me with a total blank. I can't think of anyone who would want to hurt my wife, or my children. Are the fire investigators *sure* the valve was opened intentionally? There's no way, in their opinion that it could have been just an accident?"

"No, Ed, it was definitely intentional. *Someone* wanted to hurt or kill somebody, or at the very least, destroy your home."

"Then it must have been a random act, just some crazy bastard wanting to see an explosion and fire; a pyromaniac, maybe. There's no one in this world who would want to hurt my family."

"Okay," Ray replied, "what about you? Is there anyone who might want to see you dead; maybe someone who might not have known that you would be at work?"

Ed thought back again to his strange encounter with Michael. *Look into my past*, he thought, as had been suggested to him, but he still came up with nothing. Again, he was reluctant to mention Michael to Ray, not wanting to look like a crackpot in the eyes of the detective. *He'd think I'm crazy*, he thought, and he sat in silence, continuing to think back into his past for an answer.

After a minute or so, with no response from Ed, Ray asked, "Ed? Did you hear my question?"

Ed shook himself out of his thoughts, and replied, "Yes, but no, not that I can think of. I don't have any enemies, either personal, or from work."

Ray thought about that for a minute, and was about to speak, when his telephone began ringing. He picked up the receiver, and as he listened a broad smile crossed his face.

"*That is good news*, Rollie. Send them in, please."

Ray placed the receiver back in its cradle and smiled at Ed.

"Looks like you've got company," he said, pointing to the office door.

Ed turned, as his wife and children entered LaCosta's office. He was up out of his chair before they could get all the way through the door, hugging each in turn, and mumbling, "How, how, how?" Finally, when at least a dozen hugs and kisses had been exchanged with each member of his family, a policewoman escorted the children out of the office so the adults could talk. Ed waved goodbye to his children, as they left the room, and then turned to Anne.

"You weren't home when the house blew up?" he asked.  
"I don't understand."

Anne sat down and took Ed's hand in hers.

"We left the house at about nine thirty, when the neighborhood was evacuated."

"Evacuated?" Ray asked, hearing of this for the first time.

"Yes, a fireman came by the house and said the neighborhood was being evacuated due to a gas main leak. We left for my mom's house immediately."

Anne turned to Ed, and said, "I left you a note on the kitchen counter telling you where you could find us if you returned before we could. Then, I went back home this morning and saw the house the way it is, and so I went straight to Carl's house. He told me I could find you here. He also told me what you thought had happened to us, so we rushed right over here."

Ray picked up the phone and placed a call to Miles Wilson. When he finished talking with Miles, he looked straight at Ed, and replied, "There was no evacuation." He looked over to Anne, and said, "Tell me about this fireman. Did you get his name?"

A little confused, Anne answered, "No," and then began describing the fireman who had evacuated them.

"He was an older man, fiftyish, with a full gray beard. To tell you the truth, with that yellow raincoat he was wearing I though he looked more like an old fisherman than a fireman. Anyway, his face was weathered and leathery looking and, oh yeah, he had a deformed hand; his right one I think. It was all twisted, like maybe from a birth defect."

Ray's gaze traveled slowly away from Anne, and focused on Ed. He saw the expression on Ed's face, and asked, "Something wrong, Ed?"

"Yeah, she just described Michael," he muttered.

"Michael? Who's Michael?" Ray asked.

"I don't know his last name; he wouldn't tell me, but I met him this morning. It was a freak thing, to say the very least. As I approached the light at Thirty-Third and Maple, it just turned straight from green to red, and this guy, Michael, stepped right off the curb in front of me. I hit him pretty hard, but he wasn't hurt at all, just a little shaken. Then, he asked me to take him to the hospital."

Ed paused, thinking.

"And?" Ray asked, suggesting Ed continue.

"And-he *knew* about the gas valve being open in the basement, and he told me to look carefully into my past. When I told him I was taking him here to talk to you, LaCosta, he vanished right out of my car-into nowhere."

"Vanished?"

"Yes, vanished. I looked in my side mirror to check traffic, and when I looked back he was gone."

Ray thought for a minute and then picked up the phone again. He arranged for both Ed and Anne to see two of his best sketch artists. He wanted independent sketches of this Michael, done from the couple's individual memories of him, and without collaboration between them. Ray wanted two separate artists to do the two sketches, so that the first sketch couldn't possibly influence the second. When he finished making the necessary arrangements over the phone, he turned his attention back to Ed.

"So, why didn't you tell me about this Michael when you first got here?"

"Because it's too unbelievable. I was afraid that you'd think I'm nuts," Ed answered.

"I'll tell you what's nuts. Not telling me about this is what's nuts. This Michael guy could very well be the same person who blew your house up." But as Ray said that, clouds were forming in the back of his mind, gray storm clouds the likes of which only formed when he smelled a rat.

Two hours later, Ray sat at his desk studying the two images before him. *If that's not the same man, I'll turn in my shield*, he thought. Staring at the bearded faces lying on his desk, one in the same, the obvious question became, *If this guy set the stage for the explosion and fire, why did he clear everyone out of the house first? And, if he knew there was no one home, what was his motive? Not murder. Revenge maybe?* Ray had a lot to think about, but finding Michael had just found itself at the top of his list of to do's.

"Meeker!" he yelled into the squad room. "Come in here!"

Meeker came promptly into Ray's office, an inquisitive look on his face.

"Take these sketches and run them through the system. Show them around to all personnel. This guy's name might be Michael, but that may be an alias. I want to know who this guy *really* is, and I want to know *yesterday*. Make copies, and make sure there's a copy in every squad car. Go!"

*So far, this makes about as much sense as baseball in December*, Ray thought, as he leaned back in his desk chair

and folded his hands behind his head. *It doesn't even make that much sense.*

He had released Anne and Ed after they had met with the artists, so that they could go talk with their insurance agent about the replacement of their home. They had lost everything except their automobiles, each other, and their children. There was no point in detaining them any longer anyway. It was this Michael fellow he wanted to focus on now. He started to stand to go out to the squad room, when his phone began ringing.

"Hello, LaCosta here."

"Ray, sorry to bother you, but I just remembered something Michael told me," Ed said.

"What's that, Ed?"

"Michael told me he worked at the hospital. That's why he wanted me to take him there."

"Which one?"

"Well, after he asked me to take him to the hospital, I headed for Mercy South since it was the closest, and he didn't stop me, so I assume he meant there. We never got that far before he vanished."

"Thanks, Ed. I'll follow up on that. Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. Thanks for asking."

"Sure, and I'll let you know what I find out at Mercy South. I'll be heading out there shortly."

Ray hung up the phone and leaned back again. *I'm not going to find him at Mercy South*, he thought. *Not in a million years.* The storm clouds were brewing again in the back of his mind. It had suddenly hit him, and he wasn't sure why, that Michael might well be a product of imagination. Sure, Ed had been at work with Steve as his alibi, but Anne could have turned on the gas, and Anne could have lit the candle. Sure she went to her mother's house, afterward. Ray was beginning to smell an insurance scam.

"Meeker!"

Meeker came running from the Xerox, and peeked his head through Ray's door.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want a full report on Ed Brinks's financial position. How much debt he has and how many late payments he's made over the past year; the usual stuff."

"I'm on it, sir."

Ray pulled his service revolver from his top desk drawer, tucked it into his shoulder holster, and thought, *Time for a quick trip to Mercy South.* If he found no

Michael working there that looked anything like his sketches; it would be time to dig a little deeper into the lives of Anne and Ed Brinks. Somehow, he believed, this investigation was heading in that direction.