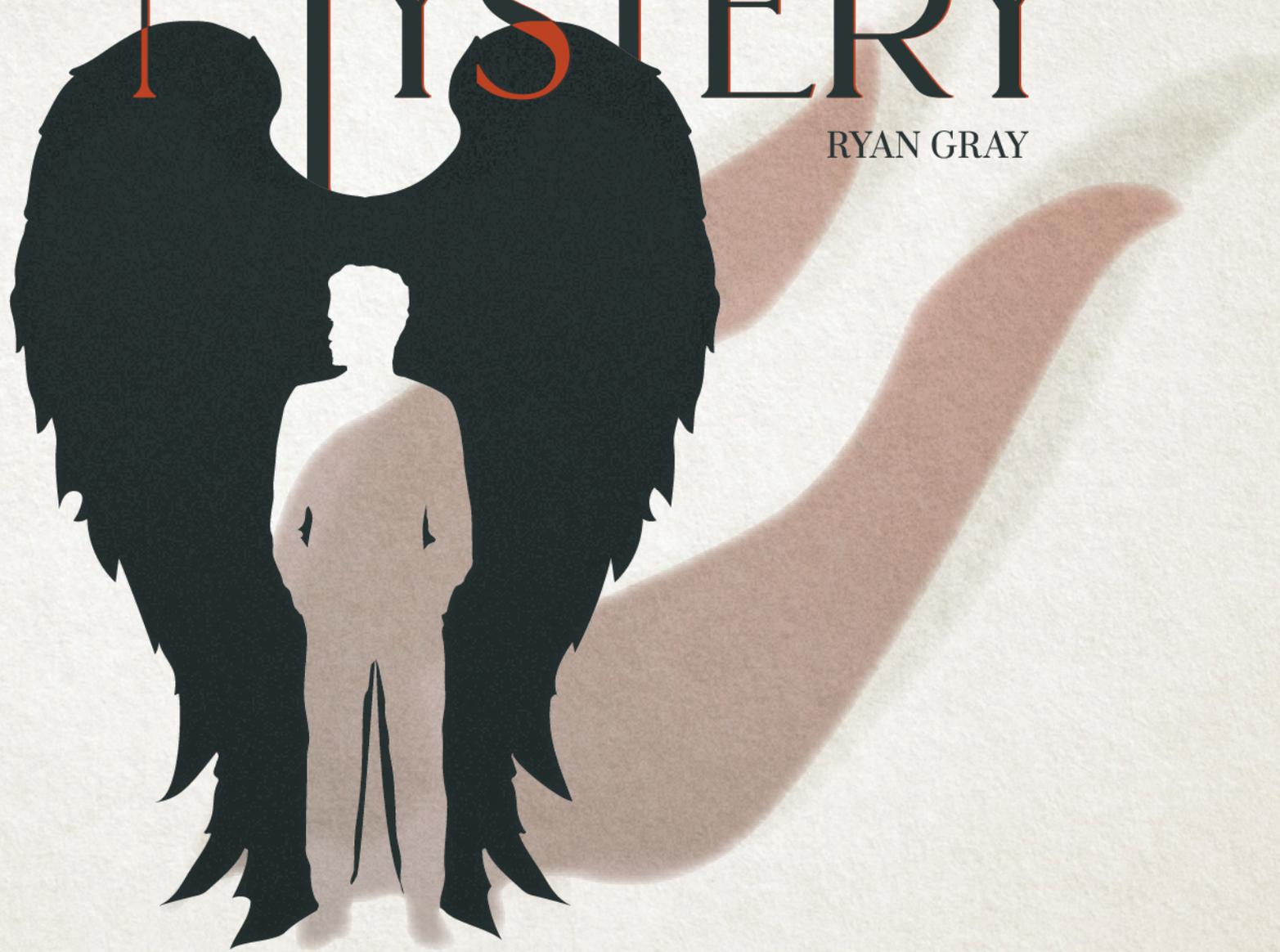


THE MORAVIAN MYSTERY

RYAN GRAY



The Moravian Mystery

by Ryan Gray

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JENNIFER

It was a cold and moonless night, but Jennifer didn't have time to notice. She hurried down the street with a long tan coat flapping in a stiff breeze layered atop her scrubs. She was in her twenties and loving her first year as a nurse. She was a single mom and pretty, so 'options' seemed to show up everywhere, some of which were married doctors. *Those idiot men*, disgusted Jennifer. They didn't know how good they had it, a spouse with whom to share life's burdens and successes. She longed for that, but it became a little difficult after the one night stand that resulted in her perfect and favorite 'mistake', Ishmael. He was almost three now and loving his new daycare.

Fumbling for her keys, she swore aloud as the thought of being late to pick up Ishmael again popped into her head. "This will be the fourth time this month, Jennifer! Come on! Where are your keys? I can't afford another late fee!" Jennifer groaned aloud at her purse. After several moments of panic, she hit pay dirt. "Finally!" Grasping the keys, she pressed the button to unlock her minivan. The beeping noise of the lock sounded signalling she could open the door; she reached out to grasp the handle of the car but missed it.

As if sucked into some sort of a strange 'Alice in Wonderland' nightmare, the more she strained her arm to reach the handle, the further away the van's door handle became. Her minivan became smaller and smaller and then vanished.

Fear had seized her mind, but now her brain was finally able to make sense of what was happening. I'm not dreaming, she thought, this is real and I'm being taken into the back alley! Adrenaline released into her veins, giving physical form to panic and terror. She kicked, but one assailant had her legs, she screamed, but a second attacker gripped her mouth tightly with a calloused meaty hand. She tried to swing her arms, but she only caught air. There was nothing she could do, it was hopeless.

The two attackers had reached a predetermined spot and slammed their prey into a wall. A third figure emerged from the shadows: it was a woman! She wore a long fur coat and a vintage skin-tight black silk dress. Her face was layered

thick with makeup. Her hair was done up high and tight like something you would only see in a 60s British spy movie. Her voice was much older than her body, revealing years of nicotine abused lungs. “Sorry dear, if my boys are a little rough.” The boss-lady stepped closer. “You see, when times are tough on the streets, we need fresh blood to, let’s say, volunteer. Think of it as a draft program like ya might get from Uncle Sam.” Her Cheshire Cat smile was filled with evil pleasure.

Jennifer’s desire for survival and the determination of motherhood kicked in. She kicked and struggled as much as she could, but the men holding her were too strong.

“Ah, boys, you got yourselves a good one”, The boss lady pawed at her like Jennifer was livestock. “We’re gonna make some money on this one,” a wicked smile grew on the woman’s face “several times over. Hahaha.” She chuckled with evil intent and her cronies complied with sickening laughter.

Jennifer spat in the boss lady’s face “Screw you, you’ll get nothing from me!” The boss lady didn’t change facial expressions or wipe the spit from her face. Instead, she punched Jennifer in the side of the head with a right hook. It made a sickening ‘crack’ sound and Jennifer’s consciousness faded in and out. All noise sounded like it was mostly blocked by cotton in her ears, like a roll of toilet paper had been stuffed into her skull.

Her eyes opened, slowly, and timidly. She couldn’t move, “No” she screamed without breath. Sucking in all the air she could, she released a horrifying scream filled with terror and pain, “No.... help.” And fought the bonds tying her down. “Calm down ma’am, please calm down.” This was not an attacker, but an EMT. “Jennifer, sweetie, I’m here, we are taking good care of you.” It was her friend and a doctor from the Clinic she worked at, Doctor Shan.

“Doctor Shan, Ishmael - where is he?”

“He’s fine, your mother picked him up and she will keep him until you are ok.”

Jennifer’s response was immediate, “I’m ok now, I need to see my boy, please I need to see Ishmael,” she pleaded, “Please, please, please...” She broke into a sob as her brain began registering the terrifying events of the evening.

Doctor Shan, a mother of three, knew all she could do was hold on to Jennifer while she let it out.

Then, almost as quickly as it started, the sobbing stopped and Jennifer slowly pushed doctor Shan away so she could think. “Doctor, what happened, why am I here? Why am I alive?”

The Doctor’s face looked surprised, “You mean, you don’t know what happened?” “No. I was taken down the alley and then this woman showed up, but she hit me and I blacked out, then I awoke here, I don’t understand...”.

Her thought was cut-off by the sound of a commotion: Two huge men were being lead away in handcuffs, but they were dragging the police with them. These were the two henchmen responsible for her assault, yet they were not the same men.

They repeated over and over again, “Get me outta here, it’s not safe, I need to get to jail now before he comes back!” Like large undisciplined dogs on a leash pulling its master towards the park, these two men were dragging themselves and the two cops each to the squad cars. They were terrified.

“What happened in that alley, Jennifer?” Doctor Shan asked. Jennifer was confused but her mind sharpened slightly, “...I don’t know”.

SAUL

A thick heavy hand pressed hard on the loud buzzing clock. But the alarm would not stop buzzing. Hidden beneath dark olive-green covers, a gravelly voice moaned, “Off...turn off!” Again the hand slammed down on the alarm. The buzzing persisted. “Stop!” He moaned louder and hit the clock harder, “Ow!!” That hurt, so the hand clenched itself in anger and drove a white-knuckled fist through the cheap plastic covering to the innards of the digital timepiece. That did the trick, and peace once again reigned....for precisely ten seconds.

Next to the smashed alarm clock, a cell phone vibrated, dancing along the pressed-wood nightstand. The fist once again raised and came down hard but stopped itself short. It couldn't afford to buy another. Instead, the hand reached down passed the vibrating phone to the ground. It felt its way along a pile of empty glass bottles in search of the sound of liquid. The hand grabbed hold of a sloshing sound coming from a mostly empty bottle labeled ‘Vodka 750ml’ and dragged it deep underneath the olive-green covers. The cell continued its buzzing. The hand re-emerged, clutching the now empty bottle and slowly dropped it to the ground. It worked its way to the nightstand again, gripped the phone and sucked it under the covers.

A short but distinctive belch accompanied a labored “Yeah.”

The voice on the other end moaned, “Come on, Saul, you still drunk? It's ten am and you're late again, the LT is pissed. I can't keep covering for you, partner!” Still under his covers, Saul sucked a deep breath in and focused his thoughts, he was a trained police officer, detective and interrogator, plus an experienced drunk. “Ah, no worries Bobby, it's just breakfast, what's up?” He smiled under his covers knowing that a smile somehow always showed in your voice on the other end of the line.

His partner also knew this, so he chose to growl in return, “yeah right! Get your butt down to the 4th street Clinic, pronto. There's some weird assault case that needs to be signed off and paperwork to be done. Get it done or LT will feed you to the wolves.”

“No worries, I’ll be there in twenty minutes tops!” Saul’s false smile remained plastered on his face. His facial muscles began to cramp.

Bobby *sighed* on the other end of the phone, “Listen, partner, I know you got a raw deal and some junk to workout, but if you ain’t cut out for this job no-more, just tell me so I can find a partner who’ll have my back, you know?”

The cheap smile faded and Saul exhaled in defeat, “Yeah partner, roger that.” No more discussion needed on the topic. Bobby expected him to clean up or Saul would be on his own, and Saul had acknowledged that he understood.

“Well, alright then” An awkward moment of silence hung in the dead air, “See ya after you check the 4th street Clinic.” Bobby hung up as did Saul.

They’d been army buddies, best cops together and now detectives in ‘Major Crimes’. Now his friend and partner of 16 years couldn’t trust him. What was worse was that Saul knew he didn’t deserve Bobby’s trust.

Saul sat up quickly, which hurt. He tried to stand but the sloshing juices in his stomach and a massive dehydration headache pushed him back down onto the bed. He drank down the remains of an old glass of water from the nightstand and begun the slow process of hobbling to the shower. Before he reached the doorway he stopped and turned right. Directly in front of him hung the photo of a tanned beauty in her thirties. She held a laughing 5-year-old girl who had soft curly brown hair tied up in pigtails, and one dimple in her left cheek. Saul kissed his index and middle fingers tenderly and then lightly pressed them against the picture-frame glass. His smile was hollow and only served to shroud the ache in his heart.

“Miss you both”, the drunk detective said aloud before continuing his hobbling to the shower.

DISGUSTING MESS

The sound of Saul's knees cracking, accompanied his groans as he squatted on his heels. He was in the middle of the crime scene next to the 4th street Clinic. Next to him was the dumpster where the victim, Jennifer, a nurse, had been knocked unconscious; but then some sort of vigilante had stepped in.

Saul always squatted in the middle of the crime scene, as a matter of habit. He was in a slump, drinking himself half to death and caring very little for the job, but old habits die hard. As an avid hunter, growing up in the West, he had been taught to always change his perspective. As humans, our natural instinct is to always look straight ahead, or down. But most mammals, especially those who would be hunted, are built to look up. "Don't forget to look in the trees, you never know what you might find." That was an old saying his grandfather passed on to him from his time in WW2. That advice had followed him into combat in Iraq. In Fallujah, a soldier learned to keep his head on a swivel, always looking up, down and around, it was a matter of saving your life and the guy next to you. He was a good soldier, but still carried several scars from an explosive device that wounded two of his unit; one died.

Saul pivoted back on his heels in the other direction. He spied the garbage cans where the first suspect was thrown into. They were all but flattened. "He must have been moving fast when he hit those cans" Saul mused. Then he stood up as he looked where the other thug had been thrown against a brick wall. The brick had a fresh crack in it. Saul dug out his tweezers from his pocket and pulled something from the middle of the impacted area and placed it in a small plastic bag for evidence. He held it up in the light and then realized, it was a piece of shirt. The guy had been thrown into the wall hard enough to crack the brick! He peered down at his notes. The first suspect's weight was 240lbs. The second, the one who'd been thrown into the wall, was 6'5" and 280lbs!

Saul looked around trying to think. *What happened here? If there were multiple vigilantes, surely someone would have seen something.* Saul looked at his notes again, neither one of them had defensive wounds. Saul peered around until he found the last area of importance; where the victim had been held and

assaulted by the female thug. They had found her with her face buried in her arms, on her knees, trembling, white as a ghost and catatonic. She wouldn't, or couldn't talk.

Again, Saul squatted on his heels and peered around, then looked up. *Bingo!* With the help of a nearby wooden crate, he was able to get a better look at what caught his eye. Roughly ten feet up the wall was a symbol of some sort. It was only two inches in diameter and was etched into the brick. It was still a little high for him to see in detail, so Saul took a picture with his camera phone and stepped off the crate.

"What the heck is that?" Saul mused aloud.

"What's what?" A soft female voice interrupted the detective's thought process. Saul looked up, "Huh?"

A woman stood within the crime scene area, staring at the detective as he went through his process. She wore tracksuit pants and a sweatshirt. Her dark hair was pulled tightly back into a ponytail, her left cheek sported a purplish bruise. Her hands were wrapped tightly around her body. Her green eyes were tense but tired. Saul decided almost immediately she was both beautiful and most likely the victim.

"You shouldn't be here."

Saul's blunt statement caught Jennifer off guard, "Excuse me?"

"You shouldn't be back here, not yet, you're still in shock." Saul went back to focusing on the strange image he had just taken a picture of. He was not concerned with feelings.

"Do I know you?" Jennifer retorted defensively.

Saul put his hands on his hips showing his growing impatience, "No, we've never met, but you're the victim, I'm the cop investigating," - He cocked his thumb to the right - "And you should be on the other side of that nice, bright, yellow tape." He squatted down to his heels again, looking back at the symbol on the wall, then to his phone. The symbol looked like an animal in the middle, maybe a dog, with a flag or something?

But Jennifer was not done, "Are you always this rude?!"

Saul's answer was aloof, "Only when I've been drinking."

"What!" - Jennifer's jaw dropped and her shoulders slumped - "Oh, that's great,

the cops send me the 'town drunk' to investigate. This is going to be fantastic!"

Saul stood up with a grunt and firmly gripped her elbow then escorted her out of his crime scene, "Of course they did, Lady..."

"Jennifer...My name is Jennifer."

"I know," - Saul raised the case file and waved it back and forth - "And, of course, they sent the drunk, lady Jennifer."

Jennifer tore her arm out of his grip and squared up to him. She leaned into his face angrily as Saul leaned back, raising one eyebrow.

"Why would they send you? Tell me!" Jennifer demanded.

"Cause..the bad guys are all in jail. The only thing to investigate is why you're not dead and they're in jail." Saul swallowed hard realizing he'd gone too far. In his head, the statement didn't seem so calloused, but in retrospect, he wished he could take that one back.

"You're a pig!" Jennifer shouted over her shoulder as she stormed off. She walked through the crime scene tape, tearing it with her hands in anger.

Saul rolled his eyes, "Ah, shoot!" He quickly ran to catch her.

When he did chase after her, she wouldn't stop walking so he had to keep walking at a fast pace beside her. "I'm really sorry, I'm not very good at handling people. Haven't been around many...um, well, gentle people lately, and I forget to be human and not just a cop. Anyways, the point is that I am actually a good cop and I will try to figure out what happened." Saul smiled broadly, revealing a set of teeth that rarely saw the light of day.

After a few moments of Saul's awkward smiling, she stopped and looked at him. Her jaw was still set and her eyes angry. However, Jennifer stopped and truly looked at him for the first time. He was unshaven, his clothes wrinkled and his overcoat filthy. But he was a shade over six feet, broad shoulders, a square jaw and piercing blue eyes. Even a hungover mess, Jennifer had to admit to herself that he was very handsome. But, still a disgusting mess.

Jennifer dropped her hands and rolled her eyes a bit, letting down her defences, slightly. "Ok, well, please just look into it. I saw something, not quite sure, but something happened that doesn't make sense."

Saul reached into his coat and pulled out a pocket-sized notebook. “Ok, well what exactly?”

She shook her head, “I can’t really say, my vision was blurry. Only that it was white, I think? Very, very white, big and fast.” Saul smirked and said under his breath, “Great. So it’s big, white and fast. I’m looking for a Yeti!”

“What was that?” Jennifer asked.

Saul smiled and put his notebook back, “Nothing, I’ll be in touch. Here’s my card.” He handed her a creased business card. A coffee ring ran through the middle of the card which made the phone number difficult to read.

“Of course, the hungover cop’s business card is disgusting” Jennifer mumbled to herself.

“Huh, did you say something?” Saul asked.

“Nope, just thank you and please call if you discover anything, detective.”

Saul smiled broadly again, “Ok, sure will; have a great day, ma’am.”

Jennifer watched him walk away and rolled her eyes, “I’ll never know what happened in that alley.”

BARNEY

Saul was nervous and tense. His knuckles cracked as a thick thumb pushed down on each finger. It was a bad habit that always raised its ugly head when Saul felt very uncomfortable. A lone bead of sweat trickled down the side of his forehead. He mopped it up with his coat sleeve. The smell, the way everything looked, even the air made him want to run. Actually, at 17 he had, as soon as his parents had allowed him.

At 16, he knew he didn't believe in or care about this stuff. Then after his junior year of college, he decided for sure that this archaic institution was at the very least a waste of time and at the most, a giant con. Then, New York City was attacked and the Twin Towers fell. He and three of his college friends joined up to make Bin Ladin pay. Instead of Afghanistan, however, he was deployed to Iraq. In his second fire-fight, Saul forgot that he no longer believed or had rejected the church; he screamed for God to save him, and to this day, he could not forget that out of his unit he was the only one that was not seriously wounded or killed. "Saul? Is that you?" A voice called from the other side of the large church auditorium. "Hey, Barney, sorry to bother you." Saul hollered back.

"I'll be right there!"

Reverend Barnabas Smith, or Barney to his friends, was an old college buddy. One of the other three to sign up with Saul. When they were both honorably discharged, Barney used his GI bill to go back to school to get a degree in Theology and History.

Barney was finishing a meeting with what looked to be an African-American reverend, a Catholic priest, an Asian guy with spiky hair and thick-rimmed hipster glasses, and a lady with a traditional white reverend's collar. They were all shaking hands, smiling and hugging. The big Afro-American reverend even had tears rolling down his cheeks. After they had all gone, Barney motioned for Saul to join him, and they both drifted towards the kitchen.

"What was that all about?" Saul asked.

Barney's face beamed with excitement. "Wow, I'm so blessed, brother. Wow, God is awesome. It was just family, man, family."

“What the heck you talking about, preacher, you sound crazy” Saul chuckled awkwardly.

“I’m sure I look nuts to you, but for real, Saul, God is doing something.”

“Looked like a bunch of orthodox ministers, thought you didn’t believe in the same things?” Saul asked as the two stopped at a half-full pot of dark, thick coffee.

Barney’s eyes sharpened as he poured two cups of coffee, “That’s just pride that the church has handed down from generation to generation. We all believe that Jesus was the son of God, and died and rose again for our sins. That’s all that matters!” He looked up at Saul, “Listen, the five of us are all the church leaders in this neighborhood, and we have been meeting and praying, and preaching at one another’s churches for a year now, and things are happening!” The preacher handed the detective his coffee. Saul sipped it and tried to hide his smirk at the enthusiastic comment.

They walked around the corner to the back of the church, as they did, the hall opened to a garage area which was bustling with activity. Saul was saying “...preacherman, whatever, I still got smack on those streets, prostitutes all over...” His voice trailed off as his mind processed the scene.

A dozen workers were handing out blankets and food to the poor. Next to them was a group of other volunteers giving free haircuts and helping ladies with their nails. Some helped and others prayed with those who wanted it. But what had really grabbed Saul’s attention was one of the volunteers; he was a known pimp and drug dealer, but he was clean shaven, his eyes clear and he had a smile on his face that Saul had never seen before. “Slim?” Saul called out. Slim looked up and smiled warmly, “Good to see you, detective.”

On the other side of the room, the two ladies doing nails were known sex-workers, but come to think of it, Saul hadn’t seen them on their regular corner for a couple months. They noticed Saul’s stares and waved excitedly, happy to see the police officer.

“Barney...what, how...what kinda crazy church you run’n here?!”

Barney draped a smaller arm around the large framed detective and said, “Brother, for the first time in maybe a hundred years this town’s got a real church family, and I ain’t talking about this building” - He waved a dismissive hand around the

room - “but, people who wanna take care of folks, for real!”

Saul looked his friend in the eyes, and he expected to see something akin to insanity, but instead, he saw passion, joy, confidence, and peace. Saul shook his head slightly, he couldn't get distracted by all this...whatever it was. Barney and his church were obviously doing something good here for folks that needed it, so he liked that part of it, otherwise the detective had a job to do!

“Listen, I need you to look at something for me, can we go to your office?” Saul asked.

“Sure, brother, let's go back this way.” The preacher pointed his thumb toward the back of the building.

Once in his office, Barney closed the door behind them. The leather chair Saul sat in creaked under his weight. He pulled his smartphone from his pocket and thumbed through his pictures as he spoke, “I found this at a crime scene. I think it has something to do with a vigilante I'm chasing down.” - Saul handed it over to the preacher - “Thought it looked religious and you might recognize it.”

Barney slipped on a pair of reading glasses and focused intensely at the phone. He wrinkled his forehead and pursed his lips in confusion, but only for a moment. The preacher snapped his fingers, “Morash...Morrone...No, Morgantown, no.”

“Barn, what you on about, brother?”

He stood and shook a triumphant finger in the air, “Moravians! Haha, I know I'd seen it.”

“The Moravi-ah, what?” Saul asked, standing to see what his preacher friend was doing now. He was bent over, digging through a stack of boxes.

“I have a book here you can read.”

“Barn, I don't got time for a book, just give me the cliff notes, please?!”

The preacher popped out of his chair quickly with excitement, but his back wasn't ready. He froze and then stretched his back out with a groan, “I'm too old for that” - He turned around and pulled a dusty hardback book out of the bookshelf behind him and then tossed it onto the desk. “I'll give you both.”

Saul pulled it closer to him and compared the photo on his phone to that picture embossed into the cover. It was a golden lamb cradling a banner that displayed a medieval cross. The title of the book read ‘Our Lamb Has

Conquered - Let Us Follow Him’.

Saul began cracking his knuckles again, nervously, “They’re a bit too close to be a coincidence, but what’s this got to do with some Jesus history book? Why would some vigilante mark the crime scene with it?”

Barney shrugged his shoulders as he sat back into his chair, “I dunno. Take the book with you and check them out.” The preacher leaned back, “I can tell you that one of the most unique feats for the Moravians happened in the early 18th century. They held the longest prayer meeting known to man.”

Saul nodded his head, trying to look interested.

Barney grinned and leaned forward, “A prayer meeting: 24 hours a day that lasted over 100 hundred years.”

The detective looked up, “Wait, what? A hundred years, so you’re saying I’m dealing with a psychotic Jesus cult?”

Barney chuckled, “I don’t know what you consider a cult, but they were nuts! Some of them felt called by God to go to the far ends of the earth, to share the good news of Jesus Christ. But, they didn’t have the money. So, they sold themselves into slavery, to reach the places God called them to go.”

Saul stood to leave, “A hundred years of pray’n? Selling yourself as a slave to preach at folks? Come on Barn, you gotta believe that’s crazy, right?”

Barney stood and smiled, “I believe a couple of lightweight frat boys joining the Rangers and making it home alive is nuts, but serving God? That’s the surest bet you’ll ever make!”

Saul rocked back on his heels, “You might be right, but has anyone told you, the last thing you sound like is a preacher?”

Barney sighed, “Almost every day, brother, almost every day.” - Then Barney had a thought - “Do you want to figure this case out quickly? Is it important?”

Saul looked curiously at his friend. “Maybe.” Saul bit his lower lip in contemplation, “I know the victim and she’s real eager to know what happened, so...”

“Ok, then it’s settled,” Reverend Barnabas quickly walked around his desk and placed his hand upon his friend’s big shoulder. “I’m gonna pray that God opens your eyes to things you’ve never seen before, to help you solve this case faster than you could ever imagine.”

Saul was about to protest, but the preacher didn’t give him a chance.

“God, I thank you for my brother, who puts his life on the line every day to keep my city safe. I ask you to bless him, put your angels around him, keep him safe. I speak to his spiritual eyes and say ‘be opened’, and reveal to him all he needs to solve this mystery. Amen.”

“Amen” Saul’s voice was croaky, so he cleared it and again said, “Amen...Thank you for that...I think.” Saul shook his head, feeling a little different, funny even. Then he looked up at his friend. The detective rubbed his eyes and looked again, “I think I’m tired and the light in here is funny, Barn, you look weird, almost fuzzy.” Barney laughed, “Trust me, bro, I’m exactly how I was 30 seconds ago.” Saul laughed, “Yeah, these old eyes of mine probably need some glasses.”

When they walked past the garage where all the volunteers were handing out food and praying for people, the detective stopped dead in his tracks, *what the heck is going on?* Saul exclaimed to himself. They looked funny too, but they weren’t fuzzy, they were glowing!

ZACH

Saul had driven back in the direction of the original crime scene. However, before he plopped into the driver's seat he had given himself a simple eye test, everything seemed to be ok. He could read street signs and there was no blurred vision or glowing objects, just his dirty unmarked squad car as dull and black as ever.

After he was satisfied that he wasn't seeing things. He decided to go check out some haunts the local hoods frequented; especially those known for prostitution and assaults. The attack last night was not handled by rookies, those two were both veteran 'cons' each having done at least four years in prison before being paroled. He knew that they had friends, possibly more 'co-workers' who might also be frightened enough of this strange vigilante to give him information in order to keep themselves safe.

He parked a few blocks down and then slipped into an alley to enter it through the side entrance so the lookout might not see him coming. It was not much more than a grungy old bar, built in the 1970s. Even though it was against the law, everyone smoked inside, and not just tobacco products. And even though it was only two pm the place seemed to have plenty of business. Saul slipped inside and let his eyes adjust. Three bar flies hunched over shot glasses and empty beer bottles, slurring words back and forth at one another. Two of the bar flies glanced back at the detective. He was almost taken aback. Their eyes were dark, so dark, they seemed almost hollow and lifeless.

Saul shook his head slightly and kept walking. He continued drifting further into the bar, past a couple sharing a crack pipe. He was about 50, she couldn't have been more than 20. They both glanced at him with those same hollow eyes, void of life. "Creepy!" Saul muttered to himself and swallowed hard, but continued moving to the back. He knew that he'd always pitied this crowd, more than despised them. But now Saul could almost see the raw truth they carried open and transparent for the world to see. They had no hope. The detective shook the speculation from his mind, and he focused back on his job. He pressed on.

In a back corner booth, hidden under a dim light, sat the man the detective searched for. Saul strode up and leaned his thick large hands onto the vinyl table top. “Hey ya, Zach, who you been bilking these days?”

“Ah detective, take a load off, I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Ah...I’m on duty and don’t take favors from scum, you know that.”

Zach chuckled, his face hidden by shadows, “You’re probably right, I wouldn’t take a drink from me either. Truth is, not many people in this world have much of a reason to ever trust me, but I will still try to offer a hand of friendship.”

Saul smirked and shook his head and slid into the booth, “What load of horse-manure you peddling these days? Once a con, always a con, right Zach, even if you are officially the ‘city inspector’.”

Zach’s face was still turned from Saul, “I actually go by my full name now, Zaccheus.”

“Oh come off it, Zach, you’ve been a sex and drug addict, taking bribes from the mob and bilking the weak for money to sustain your habit for at least ten years. You’re saying you found religion?” Saul shook his head chuckling.

The city inspector didn’t seem to notice Saul’s sarcasm, “I find Zaccheus a more fitting name, as I was a small insecure man, intent on stealing from others to make myself feel powerful and in control.” - He turned and looked at Saul in the eyes and leaned forward out of the shadows - “I didn’t find religion. Jesus Christ found me!”

Saul’s jaw dropped slightly and he leaned back as he studied the other man’s face. He looked like a different person. His eyes were clear, his teeth even looked healthier, not the usual rot left by smoking crack, and his smile had changed. It was warm and genuine. However, that is not what shocked Saul. Zac had the same brilliant glow, the glow he had seen on Barney’s church people.

The detective stood quickly, almost stumbling to the ground. He didn’t understand what was going on but needed to space himself from it, for protection.

Saul stumbled out of a side door into an alley. He leaned his back against a wall next to a dumpster and planted his hands on his knees, as he breathed short concentrated breaths trying to make sense of what was going on.

After a few minutes, he sat up and looked around, everything seemed normal. There were no shiny objects or glowing objects. Saul smiled to himself. —

Of course, it's all in my head. Trick lighting and some people who were messed up for a long time just happened to get straight at the same time. Good for them, but it was just coincidence.

Suddenly, a loud baritone voice barked out, "Shut it! I don't want your excuses, only results, the boss had plans with that woman...and her boy. Now, she's found some protection, we're gonna have to start over with someone else."

No ways! I can't be hearing two thugs talk about Jennifer and some conspiracy for their boss, could I? I'm not that lucky! Saul thought to himself. The detective was completely hidden behind the dumpster, so he could not see the origin of the voices.

The voices continued, "But, Shameless, I'm telling you. I didn't see them coming, and they had such power. There's been nothing like it around here in over 100 years!"

Shameless? Must be the Irish mob or some stupid nickname. But what does the other yahoo know about what happened here a century ago? Saul pondered this as he slipped his Glock 22 from its holster. With his other hand, he texted his partner Bobby his location and to bring back up.

A massive thud interrupted his thoughts. "Lascivious, you know nothing of control or power. Stop your whining before I drag you by that long tongue of yours to the boss and he eats you alive!"

A string of obscenities poured from Lascivious' mouth, "Fine, just stop hitting me, it hurts!"

Lascivious and Shameless? Great, they sound crazy and like their pill popping, ugh, why me? "This is gonna hurt," Saul muttered under his breath as he slid from his hiding place, gun raised and ready for anything.

LASCIVIOUSNESS AND SHAMELESS

There are times the brain experiences something so foreign, awesome or offensive to its senses that it will seem to go numb, creating the illusion of slow motion. Doctors are only recently discovering that this sensation is to do with the mind laying down memories with greater detail, which may be a way to determine whether this new experience is helpful or harmful.

As an adult, Saul first felt this euphoric feeling when his brother in arms was shot by a sniper three feet away, while their squad cleared houses in Iraq. He also felt this the first time he saw the woman of his dreams. Saul had thought she was so beautiful that the entire day must have been a dream, a dream from which he refused to wake. The most recent experience was the vivid memory he drank away every night in bed: shattering glass, crunching metal and the world in front of him rolling over and over again.

If those three experiences combined into one, they could still not shock his brain as the sight he currently beheld. In front of him stood two giant beasts!

He had spun around from behind his cover, an olive-green dumpster, and was ready to take down two scum bags who were involved with the attempted abduction of Jennifer. Instead, he was facing two circus-freak looking guys, in strange costumes. They looked like something seen in Greek mythology.

The shorter of the two was at least eight feet in height and wore a long black cloak that looked to sway in the wind; but with no discernible pattern, as if controlled by chaos, and most disturbingly, there was no wind. Its face was mostly hidden by the shadow of the cloaks large hood. Only a pale mouth with bright red lips could be seen protruding from a narrow jawline.

The second had the face of a man, but the horns of a large ram. His breath came out hot and steamed as if it were a cold winter's day, but the day was 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and sunny. He stood almost a head taller than the eight-

foot cloaked figure.

They're just huge men with crazy costumes and prosthetics. Saul thought as he swallowed hard and allowed his instincts and training to take over. "Now, I want you both on your knees, interlock your feet and place your hands on the back of your head, fingers interlocked."

The two huge 'beast-men' continued their heated conversation, hardly noticing the detective.

Saul drew three steps closer still, his gun raised and very tense. He was 15 feet away. "Hey, you two bozo's, Lascivious and Shameless, I'm talking to you."

The huge beast-men stopped suddenly and turned to face Saul and peered down at the detective. Their heads simultaneously cocked left so they could look at him sideways. They bent their heads so far over, Saul thought their necks might break.

"Stop doing that with your head, you're making me sick" Saul ordered.

"I think he's actually talking to us" Lascivious exclaimed. He gleefully clapped his hands, and his red lips smiled broadly. His cloak also seemed to dance with delight.

Shameless was much more serious and cautious. He studied the detective, he peered all around him as well as the air above him, as though expecting an ambush, "I know he's talking to us, which means he can see and hear us. That worries me, you moron."

"Maybe I can be of some assistance, gents." A new voice piped in from nowhere. It was a small hairy man behind Saul; he could not have been taller than two and a half feet.

The strange little man seemed to appear from thin air. He wore an olive-green bowler hat which he tipped at the huge beasts as he walked past Saul. He peered back at Saul, over his shoulder revealing black, sinister beady eyes and a pig's snout for a nose. He turned back towards the beast-men and bowed slightly, "I am but a humble Minion-Accuser. Keeping my ear to the ground for such magnificence as you."

Shameless waved his hand, "Enough, the meat sack can hear you, come near." *Who are these whackos?* Saul thought.

“As you wish.” Minion-Accuser said and walked at Shameless, without hesitation, the little man hopped, amazingly high into the air, almost floating. The beastly Shameless snatched him up with a huge hand and freakishly long fingers. He drew him to his ear, taking in the information from the much smaller being like a giant brick cellphone from the 90s.

Lascivious leaned in close to Shameless trying to listen on what was being said. Shameless repeated keywords aloud to himself, most in absolute shock and horror, “A praying pastor? No, what...different pastors? From different churches, that’s disgusting! They allowed pimps and prostitutes into their building, but where was Religion’s army when...All Gone? What? How!!!? No!!” Rage overtook Shameless’ features and with unreal force, Shameless hurled the little Minion into the alley wall. The little man crunched against the brick and slid down the wall into a pile of trash.

Not understanding the freak show in front of him, Saul fired at Shameless out of instinct. Saul was a crack shot and could split a coke can in half at fifty paces, so when his tight grouping on the beast’s chest didn’t do the trick, he aimed at his head. But the bullets didn’t do anything. They struck the huge Shameless but there was no blood, no holes and the beast didn’t even seem to notice or care.

Without thinking, Saul dropped his empty magazine and slammed in another. Shameless swiftly moved over to the pile of alley trash and dug through it until he found the broken little man. The little man was bent in half, but still moving a bit. *He’s dead, probably just nerves making him twitch, nasty.* Saul thought to himself. The detective was about to start shooting again when Shameless gripped Minion by the head and the ankles and pulled. It almost looked like the beast-man was straightening out an old piece of wire he wanted to reuse. *Now, I’m really going to throw up.* Saul thought.

To the detective’s astonishment, the little Minion-Accuser opened its eyes, rolled its head around to stretch out his neck, then said, “I’m ok, *Gove’na*, where was I?”

Shameless held him like a giant cell phone again, “You were about to tell me what this abomination of a church building has to do with this cop seeing us?! Remember, in my ear, I don’t want the copper to hear.”

“Right,” Minion glanced over at Saul who was still registering the sight of what

he had only ever seen in cartoons.

As the Minion spoke, Shameless grew dark and contemplative. “Really? Just that one prayer?” He looked at Lascivious who was trying to distract the detective by acting sexy and cute.

Shameless noticed the ‘seduction’ and back-handed Lascivious, “Stop! You idiot. That only works when they can’t see how repulsive you really are! Besides, I need you to go to boss right now and tell him about this ‘pastor’ who prays with power. Tell them it’s the one who likes the street scum and used to be a soldier.” “But Shame...I was having such fun...” A sharp look from Shameless shut him up and he turned to go.

Saul was about to demand he stay, when the cloaked figure turned to look at the detective one last time and said, “Next time, Saul...we’ll have some fun!” It shot out a foot long pink serpent-like tongue which licked its cracked lips. Then hurled itself atop a five-story building in one leap and was gone.

“Aliens! You’re an alien and this is one of those strange conspiracies like the body-snatchers movie. Right?” Saul exclaimed.

Shameless, satisfied that he got all the information from the Minion-Accuser that he needed, dropped him to the ground. The little man scurried away, like a cockroach looking for darkness. The beast-man stepped closer to Saul. “If only I thought you’d stick to the alien story, I’d actually let you live, but since I don’t think your preacher buddy will keep his big mouth shut, I won’t. Detective, you’re now a liability. And don’t worry about back-up, we’ll keep them busy for a while.” Shameless stepped closer, looming over the large detective.

“Stay back! I mean it! I will shoot you,” Saul waited for a second after the warning, but Shameless took another step forward. Saul emptied his Mag from eight feet away.

The huge beast clutched at his chest and crumpled to his knees. Even hunched over on his knees, he was still as tall as Saul. Shameless’ voice was labored and his breath raspy. His face was that of shock. “Wow, I just wanted to talk, but you would shoot an unarmed man, without provocation?”

Saul was reloading his weapon as the words registered in his head, “Wait, what? I mean, I know what you said, and you’re a giant beast, you tried to kill me?” The beast-man, laid down, wincing in pain, struggling for every breath, “No.... detective, I have acromegaly, you might call it gigantism,” He coughed then continued, “My friends and I all share this disease, and our sister association, all suffer from a form of dwarfism. We were cruelly given to circus folks who used prosthetics to make us freaks for their shows.” Shameless’ eyes widened, “Ah...I’m going to die, I’m only twenty eight...I’m too young to die.” A tear welled in the huge man’s eyes.

Saul knelt down next to this giant man. He didn’t seem so bad on the ground, and his story wasn’t all that crazy. Worse things had been done to those who were different or not understood. “Hang in there, big fella, help is coming.”

Shameless rolled his eyes and coughed again and grunted out, “Great, shoot me to death, but then offer help, detective. Sounds like you’re really good at helping people. Bet, your friends all love you! Probably turn your back on them when they need you and things are hard. Your family, too. Did you hurt them also?” He began coughing again and turned away from Saul as he groaned more, clutching his guts in the foetal position.

His family, his fault, his penance, his shame. The thoughts all swarmed into his mind, like a damn of guilt and shame poured into his mind. Saul knew he had been fighting a losing battle. Every night after he got home when the house was quiet, and his body so desperately wanted sleep, the sounds, images and pain of that day, of that car crash, would pulse through his mind like a drumbeat from hell. But, it was his judgement, what he deserved.

Now, he’d all but abandoned his partner, Bobby, and shot this poor guy in cold blood. This time, he’d really stepped over the line. His penance had to be over, the shame was too much to bear as it was. The only thing left in this world was the reputation he had behind his badge. Now, that little hope and respect he had left would be ripped from his needy heart; because of a cop’s worst nightmare, a bad shooting.

He could see the headlines now, “Grieving Cop, Shoots Unarmed Diseased Man.” The cable shows and online media would eat it up. His name, his wife and child, their deaths, everything would be played over and over on TV and Talk

Radio. His life would be filled with nothing but drinking and disability, trying to not think about what if...what if he had listened to her that day. What if he had just not answered the phone. What if he were a better man, a better father, a better husband. But he wasn't and, all the emotions he had locked away in his mind were overflowing his soul, drowning his will to live.

He was a murderer and failure as a father and husband, but he didn't need to be that anymore. It was time it all ended, NOW!..he placed the barrel of the metallic Glock 22 against his temple and pulled the trigger. It was time to end the shame.

GRACE AND LOVE

Click!

The sound of the misfire shook Saul from his semi-trance. He threw the weapon to the ground with disgust, “No!” He shouted, “I won’t.”

Shameless sat up and peered around with a paranoid look. The massive beastly man thought aloud. “No, it was just a coincidence, nothing more.” Then he locked paranoid eyes onto Saul. “I’ll have to do this the old fashion way!” He reached his long fingers around the detective’s throat and slowly squeezed.

To Saul it felt like a python was suddenly wrapped around his throat, sucking up every inch of space his collapsing throat muscles would give. Every instinct of training and experience shrieked in his mind to fight! He couldn’t, he was frozen in fear, something the salty veteran had never experienced before. He felt more terror and fear at that moment than he could have ever imagined, he was in shock and could only look on, as the psychotic beast-man killed him.

The blood flow to his head was almost completely constricted now. Slowly, his vision left him. Objects become fuzzy and blackness overtook his peripheral vision. He knew he was a gonner. Suddenly, something flashed past him and air flowed into his lungs, blood flooded back into his head. Saul coughed uncontrollably. Giant hands lifted him from under his arms and dragged him back thirty feet. He could not understand why not until his vision came back and his brain could register the spectacle unfolding before him. It must have been the gnarliest two-man fight, ever!

Saul had grown up fighting, survived a combat tour and had been a cop for a long time. He knew what to expect from certain body types when they fought. Little guys are quick and move a lot, big guys are slow but will knock you down with one big hook, if they know how. Before him were two giant beast-like men, Shameless, nearly 10 feet tall, against another guy his same height but much broader, and fuller in the shoulders. He was dressed in a white suit, with a blue

collar, a navy blue tie and navy blue shoes. These two fought as if some crazy scientist had spliced together a heavyweight Pro-wrestler and Bruce Lee.

“Your authority is over, The price has been paid, and His Grace is here.” The newcomer stated with a left jab-hook-uppercut combo, knocking Shameless to the ground.

Shameless mat-kipped himself to his feet with amazing speed. “YOU thief, you always wanted my position!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Shame...I only wanted to serve the Commander! but you sided with the traitor!” He attacked again with more force and speed ending with a swift roundhouse kick. It sent Shameless high into the air. He slammed into a brick wall, twenty feet up. Shameless knew he was beaten, so he gripped the side of the building and climbed the rest of the five stories like a spider. At the top, he crouched and glared down at the victor in white and blue, “This isn’t over Grace, the cop will be mine again,” e smiled wickedly, “He can see you, so you’ll never control him or get him to believe now! HAHHAHA!” He cackled and turned and ran off across the roof.

Saul, still reeling from this, worked up enough nerve to look up at the man who carried him to safety. He suddenly felt fear...again...but this was not the same fear he had just experienced with shameless. This was the sense of pure beauty and power combined. Both men glowed with a hue of majestic bright gold light. The man who carried him was also dressed in a matching white suit, except with red shoes, red lapels and a red tie. His olive skin complexion was handsome with jet black hair, and his eyes were a brilliant gold.

The fighter in the white and blue suit, apparently named Grace, approached first, “I really don’t like that guy! What do you think Shame meant when he said this guy can see?”

The big man in white and red squatted down on his heels to examine the detective, “I don’t know, but I think we should determine if Saul needs an ambulance.”

“I’m fine, I don’t need an ambulance, just some time, but I wanna know what the heck is going on and how you know my name, right now!” Saul snapped back. Both huge men jumped back with shock.

Grace turned to his partner, “Jump’n Jehoshaphat! Love, did you get briefed on this?”

“No, if I did, don’t you think I’d tell you!” Love tapped his ear twice, “Command, this is Love, could you confirm with the Commander’s office that we have an unauthorized seer on the ground...ok, please confirm, copy, out.” Love turned back to Grace and shrugged his shoulder, then back to Saul and again shrugged his shoulders and squatted down.

“Ok, well detective, I’ll try to give you a brief of what you are seeing here.” The huge man scratched his head, “Have you ever heard the phrase, “Faith isn’t about seeing, it’s about believing?”

“Yeah...” Saul replied cautiously.

“Well, this is why, if you have not chosen to believe in your mind of the existence of a world beyond what is readily expected or is tangible, then your mind is not ready to accept what you can’t understand.”

Saul was lost, and his face told the other two as much.

Grace placed a massive hand on Saul’s shoulder. As he did, Saul felt a wave of peace and a weight lift from his mind like nothing he’d ever experienced. “You were a soldier, right Saul? Well, imagine, taking a local barista from their bed in the middle of the night and leaving them to wake up in a war zone. But instead of telling them they were taken to a new country, you instead told them, this is the same place, and this war has been raging around them their entire life and for the first time they can see the truth.”

Illumination hit Saul like a ton of bricks and his eyes widened, “you mean you two are...?”

“Angels,” Love butted in.

“And the others they were..?”

“Demons, our sworn enemy.”

Saul tried to ask more questions, but something didn’t work. His mind wouldn’t formulate words. “I..I...” Everything went black.

CHAOS AND JUSTICE

Since his wife and daughter's death, the 8th precinct became Saul's only family. What a family it was. Some of the best cops he knew, were the worst possible fathers and mothers. Some of the best moms and dads were mediocre cops. However, there were a few that somehow managed to excel at both. He'd never quite figured out how they could be so amazing within the stresses of juggling all the messes and conflicts society had to offer, and have a spouse and kids!

One of his first sergeants had shared half the secret by telling him what not to do. "Kid, let me tell you, being a good cop and a good husband and father might be the darned hardest task God ever put on earth. Just cause it's hard don't mean it's impossible or we don't try. If that were the case, then why even take this God-awful, thankless job? Now here's what you do, you get your head right before you go home, but don't you use booze or sex. Both start out as promising lovers, but after you've had your fun they introduce you to their pimp and demand your soul for payment."

Saul held tightly onto that advice. That is, until the day his family were taken from him. After the shock and grief, the old detective couldn't stomach the pain anymore. He tried pills, but they messed with his head. So, he tried something a bit more 'traditional'. Since he wasn't much of a drinker to start with, he only drank a few beers at night...every night, for a while. Soon that had grown to one or two at lunch and another six before bed, then some bourbon and eventually the functioning alcoholic's best friend, vodka. Currently, he kept a flask or a smaller 500ml at arms reach at all times for a little 'nip'. Saul took sips throughout the day, as some would do ibuprofen for a headache or sore joints.

Saul knew his drinking was a problem, as his partner Bobby constantly reminded him. What the old army combat veteran and cop would not admit to anyone, his real problem wasn't the booze, he actually wished it were that simple. Deep down, he was scared. The ugly truth was, he couldn't deal with the real battle that was raging inside. So, like throwing another blanket on hot coals, he

drank himself through yet another day. The impending flames were obvious to everyone, himself included, as his life was filled with smoke. Heat seared through the pile of blankets one layer at a time. It was only a matter of time before the devil got his due.

Twenty minutes earlier, Saul had jerked awake in his car. He grabbed for his gun, and glanced around nervously, ready for a fight. Instead of an attack, the memories of the events from the alley flooded back to his mind. He shook his head violently, thinking they had to be some sort of hallucination from a bad hangover and stress. That was until he looked in the mirror and spotted two giants dressed in brilliant white suits walking away from his car down the sidewalk, then disappearing into a side street. Saul guessed Love and Grace had dragged him there and disappeared so they didn't have to answer any more questions.

Much after that was a daze. Without much thought and mostly from habit, the detective drove himself back to the only home he had. He reached between his seats and tilted a stainless steel cylinder and screwed off the top with trembling fingertips. Saul gulped hard from the flask, as he looked out into the 8th precinct's outdoor parking lot. "The devil is given his due." He repeated the thought aloud as the events of the past few hours looped in his mind, over and over. Now that phrase had new meaning, "Ah, crap!" he swore as he tossed the flask against the passenger side door. "This world sucks more than ever and now I have to worry about another one that only I can see? What the hell man! This is bull!" Saul shouted to himself as he dragged his tired and hungover body out of the unmarked squad-car, and trudged through afternoon sunlight towards an old double glass door. Etched in stone on the old 8th precinct building were the words 'Serve and Protect'.

"From what and how?" Saul mused. *Wonder if 'The Ghost Guys' can get a badge...* *Hmm*, he chuckled to himself as he climbed into the elevator and nodded at a passing officer who said "hi." His chuckled again to himself at his private joke, but this time the joke twisted in his mind to a real thought. *How do I fight these things, and what about the angels, are they subverting justice? And what does their organization look like? Army, or maybe organized crime? Where do they hide...Where do they live?* These thoughts weaved around the detective's mind as he waited for someone to get on at the second floor before he continued to

the third. The elevator door opened and usual chaos of the bullpen and intake desks flooded into the elevator like a thick fog. It was almost suffocating, and no one liked it, but eventually, you just learn to deal with it by watching one another's back, no matter what. What also helped was a healthy mixer of cynicism and aggressive authority when needed.

Saul barely noticed him at first, but just smiled at a female co-worker stepping into the elevator next to him. He was about to go back to his faraway thoughts when suddenly the scene before his eyes registered in his brain and his instincts made him grab for his gun and pull his colleague behind him for protection. Taken aback, she also reached for her gun. *Ding*, the elevator door tried to close, but Saul's big hand slammed it back open. Poised and ready for action hand still on his gun, the detective's eyes surveyed the scene.

Little evil-looking leprechaun creatures, with clipboards in hand, scurried from here to there, always in the shadows, gathering information against, well from what Saul could observe, everyone! A fight broke out in the corner between two human men with different gang tattoos inked all over their arms. Hovering over them stood a large demon with long fingers that looked to be inserted into their skulls. The tall devil grinned slightly. To Saul, the demon looked more like a heroin addict getting his fix than a sadist enjoying his work.

All of that was disturbing enough, but it was not nearly the most terrifying sight. Standing in the middle of the open plan room was the midsection of a giant. A giant with massive hands on the hilt of a gigantic sword. The type of giant parents told their children about before going to bed. His feet and shins must have been on the first floor. His thighs and massive chest were here in the bullpen; which meant his head was observing everything on Saul's floor. That thought sent shivers down his spine.

The detective felt a hand on his shoulder, "Saul, you ok? Something wrong?" His colleague asked, her hand still on the .9mm strapped to her hip.

"No, ma'am, it's ok." He swallowed hard, "Thought I saw something."

She nodded slowly, not quite believing him. But she was busy and too tired to care. Saul allowed the elevator to close, the sliding doors briefly stuck leaving an eight inch opening for a brief moment. The doors framed a word etched in fire on the side of the giant's massive blade - 'JUSTICE'.

ORDERS FROM THE COMMANDER

Saul's hand still rested on the hilt of his Glock as the elevator doors opened to his office. As expected, the massive head of the giant was in the middle of his office, only 13 feet from his desk! It slowly and methodically turned, looking for something to fight.

"Saul, where the heck have you been, brother?" An African-American detective grabbed Saul by the arm and practically dragged him through the office to their conjoining desks. "LT's so pissed I thought she'd eat me as a warm-up before getting your butt!"

"I've been working that attempted 134" Saul replied. He tried to sound convincing, but his body language gave him away. He tried to walk around the giant angel's head, but Saul's stomach leapt as his angry and oblivious partner walked straight through it.

"What's wrong with you Saul, that vigilantly junk wasn't going nowhere and thought whomever it was did us a favor?!" Saul's partner Bobby finally released his 'captive' into his chair but remained looming over him, with arms-crossed.

Saul leaned back and peered up at his friend and police brother. When his partner finally got the nod to join the detectives' squad, Saul had been his mentor and 'big brother'. Now, the younger officer had become the mentor, desperately trying to get his senior in line. Saul tried not to think about it, but the embarrassment seeped into his soul all the same. He closed his eyes and sighed, *This stinks, how in the world do I even explain this*, he thought. Saul opened his eyes, and looked Bobby in the eyes, pleading for a little slack.

"Partner, I know how it looks, but there's something crazy going on here, I just gotta figure it out, my guts telling me I need to do this. When I do know something, you're the first one I'll tell. Please, just back me on this...com'n Bob, please!"

Now, it was Bobby's turn to *sigh*, "Ok partner, if you think you're onto something I'll back you, but I'm warning you, time's running out around here. Your leash is

shorter than ever.” Saul smiled, “Copy that, and thank you.” Bobby turned and plopped down on his desk, muttering to himself. “If I have to break in some fresh-faced green partner ‘cause of this, I’m gonna be pissed!”

Saul ignored the comment and leaned forward into his computer to dig into the mass of emails and paperwork, piled on his desk. However, movement out of the corner of his eye distracted him. When he turned his head to see what it was he got such a shock that he almost fell out of his chair.

Grace, in all his glory, stood looming over him. “I apologize for looming, detective, but if I don’t, my head will be in the ceiling and I thought that would frighten you more.” Saul looked back at his partner. But Bobby was glued to his computer screen and didn’t see a thing.

He slowly looked back at Grace and motioned for him to get closer. The big angel slunk down, his feet and legs melting into the floor. Saul’s eyes widened and he shook his head, “Sorry,” Grace said and flew back up to ground level and bent down very low, “I am just trying to be helpful, but I can see you are not ready for that.” Saul shook his head again, about to say something, but then glanced at his partner who was sipping from a mug that said “World’s 8th best Cop.” A gag gift from the squad for his Birthday.

Saul didn’t want to give his partner any more reason to worry.

Well, if you’re an angel, I guess you know what I’m thinking, so just tell me why you’re here?! He glared up Grace expecting an answer.

The big man in the white and blue suit looked confused at first, then smiled and laughed, “If you are trying to get me to read your thoughts, that will not work. I’m not the Almighty! He empowers me to do his work, but only He knows your heart and mind, not me.”

Saul rolled his eyes, then held up his finger with an idea. He reached in his jacket and pulled out a pen and notebook. He quickly scribbled, *Do you know how to read?*

“Yes, in several thousand languages,” Grace replied matter of factly.

Saul rolled his eyes and then scrawled, *I’m not gonna get caught talking to myself, so you talk, I’ll write.*

Grace shrugged his shoulders, “Ok, sounds good.”

Why are you here?

"I've come to answer your questions."

Saul set his jaw, and scribbled, *Fine, let's start with why me? I never wanted this. I want THIS - THING gone!*

"Why you? I cannot answer that. That is above my pay-grade. I only do what I've been commanded to do. Maybe you didn't want this, maybe you did. The heart is a funny thing, often its true desires are covered by anger, hurt and confusion. I do know, that if He chose you for this, then the Commander has His reasons."

Saul dropped the paper and pen onto his desk and leaned back in his chair burying his hands in his face with frustration. Then he had a thought, he leaned forward again and scribbled out a new question. *Since you're here, make yourself useful. The bullpen downstairs. It's full of your sworn enemies. Why don't you and your buddies go clear them out?*

Grace shrugged his shoulders. "Cause I haven't been ordered to. As I said, I only follow orders. 'Answer your questions' those are my orders from Command."

Saul rolled his eyes, *figures*, he thought.

"Listen," Grace continued, "When you were in Iraq, how many fights and injustices did you have to ignore and avoid due to orders?"

Saul hesitated, then jotted down, *a lot*.

"Well, I'm a soldier, detective, not a cop or a concerned citizen. My unit completes our objective, that is all."

So how do I speak to your Command?

"Now that, is the right question, detective. The answer is first you must listen."

"Ugghhh!" this time Saul moaned aloud.

His partner looked up, "What's wrong?"

Saul realized his mistake and covered, "Um...well, these old dinosaurs they call computers, stupid thing keeps freezing up!"

"Oh, well let me look at it," Bobby stood to help.

"Nope...ok, nope, yeah, it's fine now...I mean for now, but I'll let you know if it does it again."

"Ok, partner, not a problem, just let me know."

Grace piped in, "Lying is never a good idea, detective."

Shut it! Saul replied on paper.

Grace put up his hands defensively, "Just trying to help." Then an idea came to the large heavenly being. He pulled out his own notepad and pen from his jacket

pocket and began writing. “If you want to know how to speak with Command, these are some friends of ours. They are in constant communication with our superior and are HIGHLY respected. They should be able to help.”

Grace folded the paper in half and dropped it on that detective’s desk. “I’ll go ahead of you and make sure they know you’ll be coming.” He looked up and bent his legs as if to jump, but then stopped. He looked down at Saul, who was obviously still very uncomfortable with what he thought might be the worst hallucinations known to man. “On second thought, I’ll take the elevator. Good day, detective.” With that, he strode through the middle of the office, seemingly unnoticed, and bent his large frame into the elevator catching a ride with two officers who didn’t notice a ten-foot giant hunched over them.

Saul picked up the paper, he was about to throw it away, not wanting to go any further down this rabbit hole, but his curiosity stopped him. He opened it up. Written in impeccable calligraphy, Saul made out an address and a time “1830 hours” under a picture. An exact replica of the symbol that sent Saul on this insane adventure. The same picture Barney had identified as the Moravians: a lamb holding a banner. His shoulders sagged as he moaned to himself through a sigh, *what the heck is going on?!*

MORAVIAN KNIGHTS

30 minutes later, Saul arrived at the address, stomach in knots and head spinning ever so slightly. He procrastinated for almost ten minutes, weighing the pros and cons in his head. These thoughts eventually melted into nothing more than an internal fight. Yes, I need to know, no, I want to keep my head in a bottle and ignore it! Suddenly and without really meaning to, he was moving. Strutting to the ground floor apartment building.

Saul yanked out his gold shield hanging around his neck, so it was visible. Taking no chances, he drew his weapon, banged hard on the door then stood to one side. “Police, open up!” He pounded his fist against the white door again and shouted with more authority. “Police, open up!” “I’m coming, I’m coming, hold your horses.” A soft, kindly feminine voice answered and a moment later the door unlocked.

The detective thrust out his shield to identify himself as the door opened, but there was no one there. A tiny woman with a baby blue shawl draped over a flower patterned dress hobbled away from Saul, back inside the apartment. She spoke at Saul over her shoulder when she reached the end of a short hallway, “Well, come on in detective, and close the door. You’re lett’n the air out.”

Taken completely off guard, Saul felt suddenly unsure of himself and did as he was told. However, he kept his sidearm in hand and against his coat, where he hoped it could go unnoticed. He cautiously drifted inside and warmth filled his belly, and a calm draped over his mind. He swallowed hard at this sensation, it felt similar to when he had been touched by Grace.

As he stepped around the corner, trepidation melted from his face into confusion and maybe even a little disappointment. It was a bunch of old women! The woman who had opened the door, sat back into a recliner and picked up a cross stitch project, and continued her work. She did not make eye contact with the detective, but the other five ladies did.

The detective grunted slightly, *This is a bust*. He thought to himself as he holstered

his weapon. "I'm so sorry to barge in on you ladies and your...well, your social event. I have the wrong place. If you'll excuse me I'll..."

He was about to turn and leave, but something caught the corner of his eye. It was a massive cross-stitched portrait of a lamb, holding a flag that said *Our Lamb Has Conquered, Let Us Follow Him*. "Of all the dumb luck..." He muttered to himself.

"What is that!" Saul pointed at the flag with an accusatory finger.

"Oh...that is our group motto." A handsome elderly woman to his left said, with a warm smile.

"I made it, I was told to by Someone important." The woman with her needlework and blue shawl stated this without looking up from her work.

"What're you after detective?" An African-American woman asked from his left, she smiled at him with apple-round cheeks and a twinkle in her eye.

"Huh?" Saul turned to square up his body quickly to the new voice and his gun hand tightened slightly. He didn't know how to respond.

The elderly woman didn't wait too long to give him much of a chance in response, "Usually, local Law Enforcement Officers don't come into a home without a warrant and a Glock drawn unless they've got some probable cause or feel like there's a target on their back. Since I know you don't have probable cause in here, tell me," she peered over silver spectacles, staring hard into his eyes, "Is there a target on your back?"

The detective raised an inquisitive eyebrow, "How long were you on the job?" The woman smiled and leaned back into her chair, "Too long, honey, too long. That's how I found this group. Sally over there with the knitting was with the District Attorney's office for 12 years, Mary's husband was a cop I worked with, and these others we met along the way.

But you still need to answer my question, officer. Do you feel there is a target on your back?"

"No," the woman identified as Sally spoke up, "He doesn't, but your world's been turned upside down, hasn't it, son?"

For only a millisecond, the hardened cop cracked. His face betrayed his real emotions, and Sally saw it. She stood and gently took his arm, "Please, sit with me over in the kitchen for a cup of coffee." He didn't feel like he had a choice.

Sally spoke as she poured two steaming mugs of hazelnut coffee. "I worked my

entire life, since I was ten years old, to go to law school,” She began, “not just to be a lawyer, but to bring justice.” She paused, “Sugar, cream?”

“Two sugars, no cream.”

“So, naturally I became a prosecutor. I wanted to see victims get justice. It was my calling, my religion!” She handed the detective a steaming green mug and sat down across from him. “But no matter how quickly we put these bad guys away, it seemed it was never enough...never enough arrests, convictions, never enough justice. I did everything I could. I even flirted with doctoring a few documents once to put us over the top on a few cases, something I would never have even considered when I took the oath to uphold the law and constitution.” She took a long pensive sip of her own coffee.

“Then I met Mercy, the ex-cop woman who just called you out.” She chuckled and patted Saul’s arm, “Oh, and don’t worry about that, she calls EVERYONE out.” She turned in her chair and yelled back to the group down the hall. “Ain’t that right, Mercy, you call everybody out!”

Mercy snorted and scowled, “Hmph! I just say it like I see it, that’s all!”

Sally turned back to Saul, “Well, like I was saying, I met Mercy. She was a tough veteran cop, with a family.” The elder woman looked down at the table and fidgeted with her cup as she continued. She pursed her lips and swallowed hard as she continued, “Her little girl was struck and killed by a drunk driver, while she rode her bike home from school.” She looked up and into Saul’s eyes, “It was the girl’s first time coming home from school on her own.”

Saul spied tissues next to him, and handed her the box, “Thank you, detective,” she replied. She wiped her nose and sniffled. “15 years and I still can’t tell this story without a couple of tears, after all I heard and saw in those courtrooms.” She shook her head at her own silliness.

Saul smiled, still confused as ever, but polite enough to respond, “Yeah, it’s ok” was all the gruff detective could muster.

“Anyways, we had all the evidence on this 18-year-old drunken party animal to put him away for years, basically to really end his life as he would have known it. However, the day of the trial, Mercy, the victim’s mom and a police officer, asks me to arrange a sit down with the judge, the suspect, and his mom. They talked for almost an hour, and when the doors opened, Mercy’s hugging the victim and

his mom, they are all in tears, including the judge. She forgave him and asked the judge for a deal without a prison sentence to give the perp another chance. It was amazing!”

Saul’s reaction to the heartwarming story could only be described as strange. His face contorted and he involuntarily shook his head back and forth several times, “No, that’s not right, he needed to pay!”

Sally quickly agreed, “Oh, I know, and I gave Mercy a piece of my mind almost immediately! I told her about justice and subverting the law, deterring crime, and on and on. And I just couldn’t understand what she was thinking!”

“She responded with asking me if I knew anything about Jesus. I told her I go to church, sometimes, and know all about that religion stuff since I was a kid. And her response changed my life...” She paused and sipped from her cup, but then said nothing. A pregnant pause filled the room as Sally seemed to lose herself in the memory she was describing.

After several moments, Saul spoke up, “Ms. Sally, what did Mercy say?”

Sally jolted back to the conversation, “Well, don’t rush me, son, I gotta take my time in these things!”

“Oh, stop milking it and get on with the story, Sally!” Mary chided out from the other side of the apartment.

“If the hoard back there can keep from butting in, I just might!” Sally countered.

“Oh ladies, it’s not a problem, I’m in no rush.” Saul attempted to mediate.

Mercy warned Saul off, “Don’t try detective, these two been poking one another all day every day since we first met up, some 20 years ago!”

“Anyways,” Sally broke in and rolled her eyes. “Now that story’s ruined! Mercy told me I may know about Jesus and even go to church, but I don’t know Jesus. If I did, I’d understand what she did.

“Well! I had never, in my life, been so insulted! I, of course, stormed off and didn’t talk to her again for months. However, detective...those words just kept rolling around in my head, over and over. Finally, I could no longer ignore a nagging in my soul. I asked Mercy to lunch, and she told me about her friend and savior, Jesus. I had never in my life heard anyone talk about Him like that! It was like He was with her all the time for real, and made her so happy!”

“I knew she was the real deal, detective, trust me. She was a cop of almost ten years, and her baby had just been killed by a drunk driver, but she was still

loving, happy and forgiving! I knew, sweetie, I knew, I wanted THAT in my life! I asked Jesus to be part of my life, right then and there, and things were never the same.”

Saul sat back and spied her suspiciously. “So, you stopped your pursuit of justice, you stopped prosecuting? And Mercy’s not a cop anymore?”

Sally smiled patiently, “No, no. Not at all, I continued prosecuting, and Mercy was still on the job for a while, but eventually, she reached retirement age, as did I. By that time, however, we already knew it didn’t matter. We had found the answer to our life’s quest for justice. And we didn’t have to be in law enforcement to fight it.”

Saul raised his eyebrows and chuckled a bit. He couldn’t help but be a little patronizing, “You have - really? The ‘secret’?”

Sally laughed, “That’s right detective, us old crackpot ladies got it figured out for ya! Now, you wanna hear or you just gonna mock us?”

Saul *sighed* deeply, “Please proceed, after my day, I’ll listen to just about anything.”

“Thank you, my good sir. Now, what we first realized is that we were fighting the wrong bad guy.”

Saul’s amused expression turned slightly confused, “You mean you had the wrong scumbag?”

“No, detective, not like that. Whereas, yes, the criminal was doing the crime, but, almost eight or nine times out of ten, he or she had been compelled to make a bad decision or a series of bad decisions by some other, umm, let’s say, exterior force. This evil force is where the real problem is.”

“So you mean like a conspiracy or organized crime?”

Mary spoke up again from across the room, “These vultures do operate like that, but much more sophisticated and a lot smarter!”

“Yes, they do,” Sally agreed, “but these suckers are not what you are used to, and might be hard to understand.”

Saul’s eyes narrowed as a wave of adrenaline sent a shiver down his spine. He gulped hard, as he felt the rollercoaster ride of this insane day once again take off into a massive loop.

“Detective, these are not men, but spirits, most call them demons or fallen

angels.” Saul’s hand dropped to his gun again as his mind began to race, and his body tensed. Across the room, Mary spoke up. “Demons with names like Shameless and Lasciviousness.”

Saul sprang up, gun drawn, “How do you know those names?! What information do you have on them!”

Mary chuckled, “Son, I’ve been making life hard on those two for more than 15 years, and I hope to keep doing so for another 15, too!”

Saul tried to swallow, but he just couldn’t force the lump down in his throat, so instead, he cleared his throat. “I don’t understand!”

Mercy slowly set down her book, careful to keep her hands out where Saul could see them, she stood slowly. Saul could see that although she was a handsome woman with gentle eyes, she was tall and powerfully built. She was probably once a great cop. She walked slowly at the nervous detective. “Son, you don’t understand and that’s the problem. You’ve seen things you can’t explain, and it freaks you out, ‘cause most us folks who walk the beat for a while become control freaks, from a need to survive and maintain order. We make it our business to lock junk down, so everybody’s safe. When something we can’t explain happens, then we must kill it or lock it up. Problem is, there’s only one way to fight this kind of evil, and it’s with an even more powerful good. Good we have to ask for.”

Saul wet dry lips with his tongue, and spoke cautiously in a hushed tone, “Hmm this may sound nuts, but, uh...well, truth is ma’am, I was sent here by one of the, um, good guys, I guess. A huge dude that walks through walls and calls himself Grace. He said you could teach me how to talk to the Commander, his boss.”

Mercy smiled warmly, “It would be my pleasure, but I have a feeling you’ve talked to the Commander before, and you know exactly who it is.”

Mary, leaned forward in her chair, “and it’s time you forgave Him and yourself. It’s time to choose life.”

THE COMMANDER

Saul gripped his steering wheel tightly, he was angry. “Who do those old bags of...” He stopped himself from saying what he wanted, even though he was alone. Lately, being ‘alone’ didn’t mean what it used to.

He was just so, so, what was it? How did he feel? Whatever it was, the hardened cop couldn’t keep it down anymore. It had boiled up to the surface. He pulled his Crown Vic over to the side of the road and reached for a swig from his flask. It swished around his mouth, but Saul couldn’t swallow. He opened the car door and spat it out with disgust, and threw his flask out the window.

Suddenly...and finally, the volcano erupted.

He slammed his fists over and over against his steering wheel. “Screw you, I hate you! I trusted you, I trusted you....Why, why!!! I thought you cared, I thought you love me!” Hot spit chased his words and splattered his windshield. Tears drifted down to his mouth as his tone turned to a sob. “They didn’t deserve that, why them, why not me?!” But then, the anger began to melt away. The cynicism and bitterness were no longer big enough to cover his true feelings of shame. “Why not me? why not me?” He asked over and over as he leaned a moist face against the steering wheel, “Why, why???” the question came out of his mouth over and over, for how long Saul would not know, but he felt as if it were an eternity. With his forehead resting against the steering wheel, eventually, he drifted into a restless, exhausted sleep.

“Jennifer needs your help, now!”

“Son-of-a gun!” Saul grabbed for his Glock. He realized it was Grace sitting next to him in the passenger seat before Saul had a chance to clear his holster or his head. “Grace, where the...never mind, you almost gave me a heart attack! Why are you here?”

“Jennifer is in trouble, she is about to be eliminated by the enemy, using some who do not believe in justice, but only fear and power. You must stop them now!”

“Why would I help you? Did you not notice, I just got done with screaming and crying at your Commander because he let my family die?!”

Grace shrugged, “Yeah, you spoke to my warrior ladies, and they got you started. Most of you humans start like that, especially soldiers, cops and leaders. You, sir, are all three. Frankly, I believe your type is just stubborn and I don’t know why He puts so much time into your lot in particular, but he has a soft spot for the thick-headed ones.”

“Hey, who you calling thick-headed?”

Grace peered thoughtfully into the distance, “I wonder if you just remind Him of Peter, that would make sense, and it is funny that I never thought of that, but then why...oh never mind,” The angel shook his huge head, “Doesn’t matter either way. You need to go do your job to protect Jennifer, and I’ll do my job and protect you and provide air support.”

“Hey, I already said, no reason to trust any of you, why would I even believe what you have to say?”

Grace sighed and muttered under his breath, “Man, I miss the old days when I could just bring a giant flaming sword and make everyone obey.”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing at all, listen, detective. All I can say is this, “If you go, I cannot guarantee the answers you want. I can only guarantee the answers you need.”

Saul *sighed*, slammed his head against the back of his seat in defeat, “Guess I’ve been down this crazy rabbit hole this far, might as well finish. Fine, OK, where?”

“Back where you started. The Clinic.”

Grace climbed his massive body out of the old Ford.

“Wait, I thought you said you were backing me up?”

“Oh, I will, but I’ve got some, um, artillery to gather, let’s call it, and a few friends. Oh, and just remember: Faith works for us, Fear works for them.”

Saul rolled his eyes, “Great, thanks, Confucius. By the way, did you say you had air support?”

Grace grinned and a twinkle sparkled from his translucent eyes, “Yeah, and, Sergeant, I think you’ll like it, too!”

FEAR HELPS SHAME

“We’re gonna die if we stay here!” Jennifer screamed into Saul’s ear.

“We’re gonna die if you blow my eardrum out as they try to finish us off!” he snapped back.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Without thinking, Jennifer began to sit up to see where the shots were coming from. Saul yanked her to the ground and shouted over the hail of gunfire. “That sound means they know where your head’s at!” Saul fired his Glock blindly over the top of the dumpster three times, and then threw himself on the ground, in a position along the dumpster, and peeked around the corner looking for a target. An arm, waving men towards him was the only thing in his line of sight, “I’ll take it” he muttered under his breath.

He fired three times and struck his target once, “pretty good shooting, from 70 feet!” Saul said to himself as he sat back up against the dumpster. He checked his ammo but then again had to yank Jennifer by the back of the collar towards him to the ground; she was once again trying to peek around the corner to see what was going on. “Would you stop doing that, why don’t you just be the terrified victim, who’s too scared to move?! You think you’re Florence Nightingale or something, stay down! If you haven’t noticed, they are only trying to kill me cause I’m protecting you!” Saul tore away the velcro from his bulletproof vest and pulled the heavy jacket off over his head.

“I’m a nurse, I’m trained to run to trauma” Jennifer retorted, “Besides, where’s your backup?!”

“I called for it! I called my partner” Saul replied defensively, Then shoved his body armour at the fearless nurse. “It just went to voicemail.”

“You gotta be kidding me!”

Saul sighed, trying to calm his nerves enough to assess the situation, “Lady, quiet for a minute, Let me think!” *Grace, where the Hel...Heaven...are you?!*

Nine minutes earlier, Saul arrived to find the Clinic parking lot empty and the lights off. He looked around the building for a few minutes and was about to go back to his car when he thought he heard a commotion. Two blocks down from the Clinic, in the same alley that started this mess, Jennifer was facing off

five assailants.

The insane thing was that she had them backing into a wall. “Why are you still after me?” she screamed, “Leave me alone!” Saul recognized two of them. A woman, the same woman who had been arrested last night for the assault. The other was known as Little Tony, he was about 5’ 5” and lean. He was suspected for running all the sex trade this side of the city.

Tony’s people didn’t attack, but they wouldn’t leave either, they looked almost like half-starved jackals, waiting for the right moment to attack prey that would not fight back. Something wasn’t right, because at just over 5 foot and about 110lbs Jennifer could not handle one of these guys. Why would a top-level mobster care about one girl who got away?

Saul’s brain continued rolling this over, as his cop instincts took over. Weapon already drawn he shouted “Freeze, police.” and tried to move to the right side of the semi-circled bad guys without getting too close to them.

“Detective, what are you doing here, how did you know I was in trouble?” Jennifer hissed.

“A friend told me, now, back away slowly!” the detective ordered.

“No, not until I know why these...these people keep coming after me!”

Little Tony spoke, “Detective, as you can see, me and my friends were on a nice quiet stroll, and this crazy lady comes after us ‘cause she seems to think my lady friend here is someone else. Now, if you please just lower the gun...and...”

“No, he’s lying, she’s the one who attacked me, I know it.”

“Quiet! I told you to move, lady, now do it” Saul kept his pistol trained on Tony, but his eyes were searching for quick movements from his thugs flanking the mobster.

He was just about to demand their weapons when his ears pricked up to the sound of rushing footsteps behind him. He turned around just in time to see a fist making its way to his face. Saul let the punch come, and spun. He absorbed the force of the blow by spinning like a top. Wielding his Glock like a club, he pistol-whipped the assailant just above his ear sending him to the ground. Saul’s victory was short lived as the closest of Little Tony’s muscle took the opportunity to rush him. The thug was mean but didn’t know much about fighting. Saul struck him twice in the nose with quick left-handed jabs, then gut punched him with his pistol butt, and caught the bigger man in a judo shoulder throw, slamming him to the ground. Saul lost his balance, so he judo rolled his way to safety, but then momentarily lost the grip on his gun during his roll. By the time he regained it

and turned around, he had lost control of the situation.

“Forget it! Just shoot’em!” The little mobster shouted, bullets began to rain down at them from both sides of the alley, as Tony and his other two remaining stooges took cover and then took aim.

Now, this is where they were, they had managed to get behind this dumpster, and Saul had taken out the rifle from the window behind him, but it took him two magazines. He just used half his last mag and had his .38 in his ankle, which wouldn’t do much at this distance.

“Come on, Grace, where are you!” Suddenly, he felt a sharp buzz in his hip. The old vet grunted and thought to himself *keep it together, you’re still in this fight, just assess the damage and hold ‘em off a little longer while the adrenaline is still pumping.* His hand reluctantly drifted to his hip and back again to his face. There was no blood? Suddenly, the sharp buzz hit him again. “What the heck!” Ducking from another barrage of gunfire, Jennifer rolled her eyes, “It’s your phone, *detective...*” She emphasised his title with sarcasm.

His reply was dripping with the same tone, “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Bobby, where the devil are you!? I’m surrounded and almost out of ammo, I need the cavalry now!”

“Um, sorry sweetie, this is not your partner, Bobby, but Mercy from earlier today”

“Uh-hmm. And...” another voice broke in.

“Yes, AND the rest of the ladies.”

“Isn’t it amazing, detective,” Mercy tried to take over the conversation quickly,

“We are all on our phones, but talking together from our different homes. It’s called a conference call.”

“Mercy, not now! He’s in trouble.”

“Right, sorry detective, what’s wrong, how can we help?”

“Right now, I’m pinned down by five bad guys with lots of bigger guns than I have. Unless you have SWAT on sweep-dial...”

“Now, we were told to be your ‘air-support’ and that’s what we are doing.”

“What I need right now, is some REAL air support, I’d take one chopper with a single shooter on it!”

“Listen, Saul, you’re scared and I know it, but you have to remember, the enemy

thrives on fear, your fear.”

Fear, Shame - Shame, Fear The words rolled around in his brain as something he knew was important, but... Why, what did that have to do with anything?

“Son, you still there?”

“Yeah” he replied half listening.

“Now, we’ll be praying for you, but it’s time that you get into the real fight.”

“Ok, thanks ma’am” Saul handed the phone to Jennifer, as more bullets clanged against the thick green steel dumpster or bounced off the pavement. “Think, think, shame and fear. What does that have to do with anything” He closed his eyes and banged the back of his head against the dumpster desperately trying to understand. After the seventh bang, Saul quit trying.

“That’s it, I’m done, I’m done, I tried, but you’re not there,” he shouted at no one in particular and threw his hands up.

Jennifer almost said something snide but held her tongue after a second thought.

“You want me dead, here, I’m yours, but I’m done playing your stupid games.” He dropped his head between his knees and wanted to weep, but he just felt too tired to even cry.

Jennifer, now also reaching a new level of desperation bowed her head. For the first time since she left her mom’s house when she was 17, she bowed her head and began to pray. As she said ‘amen’, she noticed movement next to her. Saul put his gun on the ground, took off his coat and stood up. She thought he had snapped and gone completely insane.

He turned to her and smiled, his face had completely changed, “I don’t expect you to understand this, but the only way out of this is through it!” he had a brilliant glint in his eye and his face was almost...glowing! He continued, “You see, Jennifer it’s all clear now. Shame keeps us from Him, the Commander! And Fear keeps us from love. But the Commander is love, so together Shame and Fear work to keep us from the Commander! Well, not me.”

A grin grew from ear to ear and he stood straight, just as a pair of bullets whizzed past his head. Jennifer cringed, as he continued his monologue “Not anymore, ma’am. I’ve done quite enough on my own and made a mess of my life. It’s time I let the big man pull his weight.”

And at that, the detective stepped out from behind his cover, stood and walked straight at Little Tony and into a hail of gunfire.

THE REGENT'S FEAR OF LOVE

Our Father, who art in heaven, holy be thy name, thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven, give me this day my daily bread and forgive me my debts as I forgive those with debts against me, and lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil. For thine is the kingdom, thine is the glory, Forever!

It had been almost 12 years since Saul had said that prayer, but it suddenly flew through his mind as he spotted several flashing muzzles aimed at him. He froze mid-step, expecting to be knocked back, torn in two or for the lights to just, 'go out' but nothing happened, so he slowly finished his step. He stepped again, and again, the muzzle flashes responded to his advance and again he froze, but still nothing. Now, his belief in the Commander was growing. Again he stepped, and again the *crack crack crack* of gunfire, from only 30, 25 and even 20 feet away, nothing!

As this insanity continued, the salty detective grinned from ear to ear, then he broke into a chuckle. He thought it was just nervous laughter, but by the time he reached the group of gangsters, he let a belly aching laugh escape his lungs, the likes of which his mouth hadn't experienced in many, many years.

Jennifer still hiding and praying as hard as her collective being could muster, stopped. "Is that laughter?" She asked to herself and slowly peeked her head around, awkwardly holding the detectives Glock out in front of her, ready to fire. What she saw was so shocking she dropped the pistol to the ground and stood up.

Saul stood in front of five gangsters at almost point blank range. He was laughing so hard that he could barely stand.

Little Tony, beat red and spitting angry shouted, "Empty everything you have into him."

But then, Saul changed, He stood up straight, raised his hand and stated, "No, no, you won't."

The shooters were suddenly confused, "We won't?" One of the thugs asked. "No, you won't. You see guys, this is all pointless."

“It is?” another gangster piped in.

“Yes, sir, sure as you’ve been shoot’n. See, that’s why it’s so funny. The same enemy who made you behave the way you are behaving, made me behave the way I was behaving. It’s the same evil suckers who made me a useless angry drunk and you all extorting criminals, they hate us all. They aren’t on my side or your side, they are only on their own side. They want to control, and play God. But I’ll tell you this, there is only one God, and if we say no to these two punks, we can all be happier and have more love than you can ever imagine.”

One of the thugs dropped his gun, a tear ran down his cheek. Saul continued “Are you ready to tell these enemies to take a hike?”

Tony shook his head violently, “No! No! You’ve gone loco, copper! Shoot him, now!” His eyes were crazed and manic.

“No,” the lady henchmen next to him said, and stuck her nickel-plated .38 between his ribs, “I ain’t done listen’n.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I promise, you WON’T regret this!” Saul closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, and then opened his eyes and was about to pray, but didn’t have to. He saw who he was looking for. Lurking behind the group stood Shame’s favorite number two.

“Lasciviousness, good to see you!”

“Ah, detective, I was just leaving, I promise,” The ‘s’ on word “promise” forced a long serpent-like tongue out of his mouth, and he gently folded his hands together with implied innocence.”

Saul glared, “Oh, you’re right, you are leaving, but your’re gonna take your bosses with you, both of em!”

“Why, detective, I have no idea what you mean?”

“Not this time, Lasciviousness, I’m under orders from the Commander, now speak!”

“You’ll have to excuse my skepticism, detective, but how do I know that you have that kind of authority?”

“Do it now!” Saul retorted.

Suddenly, what looked like a seven-foot tall five-foot wide NFL linebacker appeared out of nowhere and levelled Lasciviousness with a bone-crushing tackle.

“Saul, meet Purity.” Love stated as he stepped up next to Saul. “Those two are very old ‘friends’.” Love sneered at the squirming Lasciviousness.

“Please’ ta meet ya!” The muscle-bound angel’s accent made it sound like he was born in the Bronx. He stood over the enemy and slapped his face hard, “Now, answer the man’s question, traitor, or we’ll visit upstairs!”

“Ok, ok, he’s waiting for my signal to come in and finish off the meat-sack,” THUMP! at the derogatory remark. Purity picked up the taller and thinner spirit over his head with one hand and pile-drove him into the pavement. “Uhhh-ugh-ouch!” Lasciviousness exhaled painfully, “I meant, the nice man.”

“Well, detective, it’s your call, what now?” Love asked. “We take orders from you on this one.”

Saul didn’t quite know what to make of the idea of him being in charge, yet as if huge blinders had suddenly been taken off his brain, all this craziness was beginning to make sense. In all this insanity...he was finally at peace. Now, it was only right to share this peace with everyone! Good or bad, they needed to know!... Without much thought, but with complete belief and confidence he shouted, “Shame, get your lying murdering butt out of here right now!”

Off to his right, a commotion broke out. Dumpsters kicked around, bricks, trash and even a stray cat were flung into the air.

CRACK, CRACK “Get over here punk!” Grace grunted as he dragged the massive being from his lair.

Saul glared daggers at the big enemy. Shame was done, but he still tried, “Listen, I’m gone, I’ll never bother you again.”

“Your’re right, you are done and you both won’t bother us again!” Saul spat at the ground in disgust. “Shame, you kept me living in a bottle for years, you made me feel dirty and guilty whenever I got sober. With the help of your pal Lasciviousness over there, you almost talked me into killing myself! And for what, so you could play God, so you could pretend you’re in charge?! How many have you killed, how many lives have you destroyed? No more: Shame, Lasciviousness, by order of the Commander, GO!”

Grace stood behind Shame with an arm wrapped around his head as Love strolled forward to take the enemy’s shoulders,

Shame tried to struggle, but Grace was too strong, and he knew once Love and Grace both got their hands on him, he’d be dead. “If you do this, detective, my people will come after you, you’ll be a threat to them, and with much worse than

me...but if you don't, I can guarantee...*SNAP*" Love gripped Shame's shoulders and pulled as Grace twisted and yanked. The result was a snapped neck and a puff of black smoke. Shame was no more.

Lasciviousness, wild-eyed and angry screamed, "No, you can't do this, you can't do this!!!" Still holding him upright by his throat, Purity swept the squirming enemy's feet hard, sending his prey sideways. The thick warrior caught him in his arms mid-air and dropped him onto one knee, wrapping the shocked Lasciviousness' spine around his leg into a grotesque backbreaker. *POOF* - he was gone.

Saul turned to his now captive audience some of whom were still holding guns on him, "I know you can't see what I can, but don't you feel something better, like a sense of happiness and peace you've lost or never felt before? Why not put those guns down and let's talk about it now."

"Yeah, Yeah - let's do it, boys." The lady pimp's face was now damp from tears as were most of her colleagues. Weapons mindlessly dropped to the ground.

"Wait," Grace put a cautious hand on Saul's shoulder, "This is not yet over."

"I agree," Love turned to look up and around anxiously, "Stay here you two, I'll be back with reinforcements." Love didn't wait for a reply but shot into the sky over the nearest building.

Grace tapped his earpiece, "Roger that."

"No...No!!!! This is not happening, NO!!! Don't you see, we'll lose all we have!" Little Tony screamed at his people. "Peace, peace? How will peace keep you safe or make sure you can survive? How will peace keep a nice suit on your back, or give you the cars and house you need? What about the girls, you all think they'd want you if you don't have some green ta throw around?? How will peace keep the Chinese or Russians from killing us? There is only one way to live in security, and that's to make your gun's bigger than his and shoot first!"

At those words, a deep rumble shook the entire city. Jennifer had crept her way up to Saul and had no idea she walked right through Grace, it sent momentarily happy and peaceful chills down her spine to the depths of her soul. But now she was scared all over again. Everyone taking cover, not knowing what was happening. All except Tony whose maniac eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets, and Saul who wasn't scared: he was mad!

The angry detective gritted his teeth and growled in hatred as he looked through the little crazy mobster and caught sight of the real enemy rumbling up from the dark depths of the city. The real power behind the mob and criminal element. He stood right behind Little Tony and growled a shriek which rattled every building within a six-block radius.

“Fear!” Saul glared at the enormous size of this enemy. He was as big as a building, with a mouth so dark and deep it seemed an abyss that anyone could fall into and never return. His arms were claws the shape of giant backhoe buckets for digging down deep, making it hard to tear out. His feet, like giant eagle claws, with talons the length of telephone poles made of steel.

“It’s a reagent!” Purity stated and crouched ready to fight.

“Grace, what’s the play?” Saul asked.

Grace said nothing but put himself and Purity between the group and the enormous beast. “Stand your ground, detective. We all do our jobs, even if we have to pay the ultimate price.”

The monster drew closer, shaking the ground in waves. Only Saul could see what was causing the ‘earthquake’, but everyone felt it, the shaking, the waves and the darkness came with it. Purity and Grace reached under their jackets and pulled out their weapons. Grace, a double-handled sword with a seven-foot glistening blade, a golden spiked hilt adorned the dangerous weapon. Purity wielded a massive sledgehammer with a head that must have weighed 70lbs and looked to be made of a single diamond. Both were awesome weapons, but neither could put a dent into the reagent of Fear. The rumbling was so loud now, it was impossible to hear. Grace and Purity nodded to each other and raised their weapons ready to charge, but then stopped. Both warriors touched their earpieces, and exchanged a quick nervous glance, and hit the deck.

Wooosh!!!!

A huge gust of wind blew over Saul’s head. *What now, a tornado?* Saul thought as he turned. Instead, he saw a swinging boot the size of a dump-truck moving right at him, He ducked out of instinct, but looked up just in time to see it make contact with Fear. Fear squealed with terror as he lifted off the ground, higher and higher into the night sky and into oblivion. Saul stood and turned and then smiled with pride, he was looking up at a face he’d known for a while. It was the massive warrior he saw earlier that day standing in the police precinct: Justice.

But he looked different, his face was a little fuller and softer and his suit was not black and white, but included a swirl of red around the lapels. Then Saul found out why; the massive warrior morphed back to his original appearance just as Love re-appeared. He looked to be growing out of Justice's chest, where his heart would be floating mid-air. Once again, Justice was in his usual distinct black and white suit.

"Detective, you look confused, I told you I would bring back reinforcements."

"No, Love, not that, I didn't know, or have an idea that you could, do that! Whatever that is!"

Love floated down to ground level as he spoke, "Without Love, Justice can be confused, but with Love, Justice can always prevail and get rid of any fear. Until Justice and Love team up, we cannot have lasting peace. So, officer, the big man and I team up whenever we can to crush that scumbag Fear."

"Besides," A deep baritone voice chuckled down at them from 150 feet up, "I get a kick out of it! Hahaha"

"You and your puns...Stick to kicking butts, not jokes." Purity quipped.

Justice wasn't phased, but grinned all the more, and continued, "I must say; it's good to have you back, detective."

"Good to be back, and I'll see you at the office." Saul grinned.

"That you will," Justice said with a lazy salute. He turned around and drifted back through the city towards the precinct.

Saul turned to the three much smaller warriors, "How can I ever thank you?" "All thanks belongs to the Commander," Purity said, flipping his huge sledgehammer onto his shoulder and then smacked Saul on his shoulder almost knocking him over.

"And all glory on the field of battle belongs to Him as well," Love said with a warm smile as he gently patted Saul's cheek.

Saul nodded and then breathed deeply and turned to Grace. Tears welled up in his eyes, and the words he wanted to speak, didn't want to come. Saul forced them out anyway, "I don't have the words...but, thank you for showing up to help an old, angry drunk like me."

Grace smiled, "Saul, I was always there. I never left, you just forgot about me. No matter the person or the sin, I'm always there to help you get back to

the Commander.”

Grace gestured at the dumbfounded criminals, and Jennifer. “Now, we did our job, detective, it’s time you do yours.”

At that, the three massive warriors turned and walked away, fading into golden light which suddenly zipped up to the heavens.

Jennifer was about to ask who or what the detective saw when Tony spoke up. “Wh...What, what happened?” he exclaimed aloud, where am I?! “The voices, the pain, the...everything, it’s gone...he’s gone...” He chuckled and felt his face and arms checking to see if this was a dream or cruel joke. The color was returning to his face and the crazy glint was gone “I feel, um, I feelGood!”

Saul took the confused little man’s hand and put an arm around him, guiding him to a spot where they could sit.

“Tony, you and I have been given an opportunity. We’ve been given our lives back, now.” Saul moved forward and squared up to Tony and stared him in the eyes, “What do you think we should do about it?”

EPILOGUE

“Stop, that would you?”

“Well, your collar is buttoned up so tight, just undo one button and it will look a lot better.”

“It’s not professional”

“You’re not on duty now, so relax, please? Stop always having to be a cop.”

“Ok, ok.”

“Are you sure about me meeting these ladies, can’t you just explain everything to me?”

“No, I’m telling you, these women have...well they have a gift. They can explain about the Commander and they fight way better than I. Besides, I owe them a thank you. Ok?”

“Fine, but if you wanted to take me out, you could’ve just asked.”

Saul stammered, but then stopped and turned to Jennifer.

“I would be honored...”

“Yes!” She kissed him on the cheek, he blushed just as the door opened and a smiling Mercy, Sally and Mary all peered at them, like hungry wolves not knowing who to devour first.

“I told you, Mary, that’s five bucks you owe me.”

“I never agreed to that. Now, how long you two been going steady?”

“And have you discussed marriage?” Mercy asked with a stern voice while peering down at them both from the spectacles on her nose.

Saul rolled his eyes and silently prayed *Lord help me!* as hands descended upon them both and yanked them inside. “I changed my mind, Jennifer, this was a horrible idea...”

THE
MORAVIAN
MYSTERY

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