

OUT OF
DARKNESS

BY

BYRON METTLER

HE BROUGHT THEM OUT OF DARKNESS... AND BROKE
THEIR BANDS IN SUNDER ⁱ

OUT OF DARKNESS

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All names are fictional. Some stories are based on actual police cases I was a part of.

The Meth Stories by Jimmy, Autumn, Edna, John and Barb are based on stories published on the Stories Of Meth website at <http://www.kci.org>. Used by permission.

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Thanks to Jesus. Without you, I'm just another lost soul searching for truth.

Thanks Mom and Dad. You've always encouraged me.

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OUT OF DARKNESS

*Book Two in the
Police Explorer Series*

Miranda Warning

You have the right to remain silent.

Anything you say can be used against you and will be used against you in a court of law.

You have the right to talk with an attorney and to have an attorney present during questioning.

If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed free of charge before and during questioning.

Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you?

With these rights in mind, do you wish to talk to me now?

Yes or no?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MIRANDA ADVISEMENT.....	7
PROLOGUE- THE DARK SIDE.....	11
CHAPTER 1 METH LAB.....	15
CHAPTER 2 BURGLARY AT NIGHT.....	23
CHAPTER 3 POLICE EXPLORER MEETING..	31
CHAPTER 4 STOLEN GOODS	39
CHAPTER 5 TRAGIC DECISION.....	53
CHAPTER 6 WILD RIDE.....	63
CHAPTER 7 TEEN REACH.....	85
CHAPTER 8 CRUEL INTENTIONS.....	99
CHAPTER 9 STRANGE EVENTS.....	109
CHAPTER 10 DAYLIGHT THIEVES.....	115
CHAPTER 11 FOOT PURSUIT.....	123
CHAPTER 12 SAD TALES.....	129
CHAPTER 13 FIGHT OR FLIGHT.....	137
CHAPTER 14 FACE OFF.....	153
EPILOGUE.....	161
GOOD KIDS USE DRUGS TOO.....	163
JESUS HELP MY DADDY – POEM.....	171

Prologue

THE DARK SIDE

“Ready?” Agent Crawford asked.

“Ready when you are,” Agent Wilson, a Narcotics and Gang Task Force member whispered. Behind him stood seven drug agents wearing black tactical masks and jump suits with bright yellow NGTF on the back. Each officer carried a 10mm Glock semi-automatic handgun strapped to their hip in a paddle holster.

The sky loomed midnight black over the small white house with the white picket fence. The sweet aroma of fresh baked cookies once greeted visitors at the door, but now the bitter chemical odor of methamphetamine seeped out through the clapboard siding. It looked just like grandma’s house, but grandma didn’t live here anymore. The home was a drug house, rented by dealers to cook up methamphetamine.

“Is anyone inside?” Agent Wilson asked.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Brett Baker. He lives here with his girlfriend Pamela Sawyer. Their latest batch of Meth is drying and they are going to cut it and bag it in the morning.”

“Let’s go!” Crawford signaled.

Two agents went to the rear to block escape from the back door. One went to the right side of the house and one to the left. The remaining agents ran toward the front door. The group moved in unison like a tactical brigade of well-trained experts. The lead agent carried a Blackhawk 32 inch 10 lb Thundersledge. He ran up the steps to the front door and yelled,

“Police Officers! We have a warrant! Open the door!”

He cocked both arms back to a full swing and piled the weight of the Thundersledge against the deadbolt, splintering the door jam to bits. The door burst open with a crash and three agents stormed into the house pointing their Glock handguns high and low.

“Cops!” A man’s voice shouted from the bedroom. Shattering glass erupted through the bedroom window.

The agent at the side heard the smashing glass and turned to see Brett Baker soaring toward him through the air surrounded by chips of broken glass. Brett crashed into the officer and knocked him to the ground.

“Stop,” the officer yelled and grabbed for Brett’s arm. Brett twisted and pulled away. He rolled one more time, sprung to his feet and bounded over the white picket fence in the front yard. The officer jumped to his feet and ran after him holding his Glock in one hand and calling for assistance on his radio with the other. He hurdled the picket fence and chased him down the sidewalk.

Seconds later, Pamela Sawyer jumped out of the same broken window, she lost one shoe, fell to the ground and rolled across the grass. She crab-crawled to the edge of

OUT OF DARKNESS

the yard and fled under a row of thick green bushes.

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The agents ran to the bedroom and kicked open the door at the same instant Pamela jumped out of the window.

“Get back here!” Agent Crawford yelled as he reached out to grab her ankle as she jumped. Crawford caught hold of her dirty sneaker, but the woman’s foot slipped out and she fell outside on the grass and crawled across the yard to the bushes.

“Secure the rest of the house. Watch out for booby traps and chemical spills.”

Agent Crawford jumped through the broken window and followed her to the bushes where a barking pit bull terrier with teeth bared leapt at him from behind a trashcan. Crawford pulled Mace Muzzle repellent from his duty belt and sprayed a blast into the dog’s face. The dog howled in pain and retreated back to his hideout, rubbing his face on the grass.

The distraction gave the young woman time to run through the neighbor’s yard and escape into a thicket of trees.

Crawford, expecting a second attack, turned his attention to the dog. He shined his Streamlight flashlight at the dog and saw he was tied with a ten-foot chain just long enough to reach the fence. The dog growled at him with deadly red eyes reflected in the beam of light. Crawford backed away, deciding to forgo the chase to focus his attention on the Meth lab. He knew who the woman was. He would ask the judge for an arrest warrant in the morning.

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OUT OF DARKNESS

Hyped up by methamphetamine, Brett Baker outdistanced the officer chasing him. At a freeway entrance, he jumped up into the open bed of a passing cargo truck as it turned to the onramp and escaped on the 54 Expressway.

Ninety seconds after the officers smashed in the door, both suspects had evaded capture. Sometimes nothing goes your way. Their next job was to secure the scene and collect evidence.

CHAPTER 1

METH LAB

“I have an important job for you Tom,” Officer Spencer said as he pulled away the yellow POLICE LINE-DO NOT CROSS tape draped across the gate on the white picket fence.

“Last night NGTF raided this house and found a Meth lab in the bathroom. One of the officers got sick from the poisonous fumes he inhaled and was taken to the hospital.”

“How did they know a Meth lab was inside?”

“A week ago the neighbors called the police to complain of stinking odors, and a lot of empty solvent cans in the trash. This morning the Hazmat crew is going to clean up the toxic chemical mess so we can begin our investigation. Your job as a Police Explorer Scout, is to write down the name of everyone who walks through this gate.”

“Yes sir, Officer Spencer,” Tom answered as he pulled his notepad from his shirt pocket. Tom was wearing a light blue short-sleeve shirt with an embroidered POLICE EXPLORER badge sewn over the

OUT OF DARKNESS

left pocket and dark blue pants with black shoes. The proper uniform for a Police Explorer Scout at the Oak Hills Police Department.

Officer Spencer handed Tom two WANTED posters and continued, “The home is rented by Brett Baker. He was here with his friend Pamela Sawyer. Their latest batch of Meth was drying and they were ready to cut it and bag it. When the NGTF team raided the house, they both jumped out of a window and got away.”

A large white van drove up to the curb in front of the house and parked. The rear van doors popped open and two men dressed like astronauts stepped out on to the street. They were covered head to foot in loose fitting white Hazmat protective suits with an oxygen tank strapped to their backs. The men in the suits looked out through a clear face shield attached to the hood.

“They look like they should be in a horror movie,” Tom said.

“This is far worse than a horror movie. The dealers cooking up Meth are killing thousands of people and ruining millions of lives. We’re fighting a monster. It’s called Crystal Meth-- a nickname for methamphetamine. The most destructive illegal drug in the world today.”

“We found some photos of the people who lived in this house.” Officer Spencer showed Tom two photos. The first was of a man who was about twenty-two years old. He had straight, brown, stringy hair and close-set, piercing eyes. He looked thin and pale with a bent nose that was broken in a fight. His face was pock marked with red blemishes.

“This is Brett Baker. He’s been arrested four times for selling drugs and three times for burglary.”

The second photograph was of a skinny-faced woman

OUT OF DARKNESS

who was only nineteen but she looked years older. Brown stringy hair hung down on her face in disarray. She had large red spots on her face. The splotches looked more like a skin disease than acne.

“She is Pamela Sawyer. She’s never been arrested but we want to talk to her about the drug lab.”

“Why is her face so splotchy?” Tom asked.

“From using Meth. Methamphetamine is made from extremely toxic chemicals. Toxic chemicals such as red phosphorous and lye are often used to separate the amphetamine from the batch mix. There is always some of the toxic residue left over in the final product.”

Officer Spencer continued. “Can you imagine taking a highway flare, which contains red phosphorous, and breaking it open and then adding cold medicine and antifreeze so you could eat it or inhale it or shoot it into your veins with a syringe?”

“No way!” Tom exclaimed. “That’s sick.”

“Each time a Meth addict takes a hit of methamphetamine, they’re doing just that. Putting a dangerous mix of toxic substances into their bloodstream. These chemicals, combined with the amphetamines, damage the skin to cause a severe itchy rash. The constant scratching creates the ugly red blemishes you see in the picture.”

“Why would anyone ever do that?” Tom asked.

“That’s a good question, but I’ll tell you about that when I have more time,” Officer Spencer said as he walked toward the white van. “I have to brief the Hazmat crew before we go inside.”

Officer Spencer left Tom standing alone at the gate. After a short conversation with the clean-up experts, Spencer climbed inside the van to put on a white Hazmat

OUT OF DARKNESS

protective suit. A few minutes later, the three men walked to the front gate to enter the yard.

Tom remembered his job and stood in the gate blocking their access.

“I’m sorry, but I have to get your name before you go inside,” he said holding pad and pencil in hand.

Officer Spencer smiled behind the mask.

“Officer Spencer,” he said in a muffled voice. Tom wrote his name down and let him go in.

“John Wentz,” the next man said in a respectful voice.

“Harry Kramer,” the man who followed spoke up.

Tom wrote down the names and the time, 1640 hours 4:40 PM on his pocket notepad.

The three men in Hazmat suits penguin-walked up the cracked sidewalk to the front door and went inside. They closed the door behind them and Tom was left alone watching the gate.

The street was quiet on that Saturday morning. The small white house looked serene and peaceful with a neat rose garden growing under the shuttered windows on the front of the house. No one would suspect crooks had been living in the house cooking up Meth. That’s exactly what the drug pushers wanted people to think.

Not a soul came through the gate and no one left the house for twenty-five minutes. Tom stood alert, with his feet set at shoulder width and hands folded in front. His wavy brown hair was combed neat to one side and his shoes sharply polished. Carefully, he watched each car drive by as the drivers turned to look at the large white van.

He recalled what his grandfather would tell him when he was still living. “T.J,” he would say pointing to the sky. “I want you to learn from the honey BEE. Be

OUT OF DARKNESS

Excellent in Everything.” He would then smile and rough up Tom’s hair. Tom always tried to live up to his grandfather’s standards.

On his right shirt collar, Tom wore a small silver pin shaped like a shield with two swords crossed in front. He received the award for saving Office Spencer from a sniper attack during his first police ride-along. Shortly after, Tom joined the Oak Hills Police Explorer Scouts and went on ride-alongs and worked special events as often as he could.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement from behind a bush in the neighbor’s yard. Someone was standing behind a small flowering bush by the sidewalk.

Perhaps it’s a nosey neighbor. Tom thought.

The person stepped out from behind the bush and struggled to act casual as she walked toward Tom.

She was wearing a long sleeved blue denim shirt buttoned up to the collar. The shirt was un-tucked. She wore dirty, white, shorts, and was bare footed. She looked down at the concrete as she approached Tom. Stringy, brown hair hung loosely over her face. Even with the large shirt on, Tom could tell she was malnourished and underweight. She stepped briskly in an unnatural way as if her knees were not bending properly.

When she was still eight feet away the girl asked, “What’s going on in there?” Her voice was fast and she mumbled.

“Did you arrest anyone?” She turned her head to look at the house.

“This is a police investigation,” Tom answered. “I can’t tell you any more than that. Confidential, you know.”

“Oh,” the girl replied scratching at a red sore on her

OUT OF DARKNESS

lip.¹

She came closer and Tom noticed large red spots on her face and neck. Her cheeks were sunken and her hair greasy and matted down. A picture came into his mind. It was the picture Officer Spencer had shown him earlier. This was the girl who had escaped from the house last night. She was Pamela Sawyer. Tom didn't have a police radio but he needed tell Officer Spencer that the suspect was outside. If he yelled, she would run away.

"Do you live in the neighborhood?" Tom casually asked. He didn't want Pamela to know he had identified her.

"Oh, nearby," she answered coyly.

"Maybe you know something about the people who lived here?" Tom said trying to gain her confidence.

"Yeah, maybe." Pamela shifted her feet nervously.

"Great," Tom said naively to keep her off guard. "Stay here for a minute and I'll get someone to talk to you."

"Okay," she said as she looked up and down the street. "I'll wait."

Tom left her standing by the gate and quickly walked up the path to the house. As he approached, he smelled a pungent chemical odor and held one hand to his nose. Tom hopped on the porch and rapidly knocked on the door. He turned to see Pamela Sawyer still waiting on the sidewalk and gave her a friendly wave and a smile.

¹ Meth fact: The psychological aspects of this drug complicate the situation even more by causing the user to tweak out and obsessively pick, scrape and dig at their skin. This action, is generally performed with the fingernails (staph havens) but can also be performed with any number of chosen "tools" which could be any object found in an ordinary home that could be used for picking or scraping. Copyright © 1999-2007 by KCI The Anti-Meth Site

OUT OF DARKNESS

He rapped on the door again and Officer Spencer opened it.

“Office Spencer,” Tom whispered. “Pamela Sawyer is standing on the sidewalk right in front of the house.”

“Where?” Officer Spencer asked urgently as he looked toward the street.

“Right there, by the gate,” Tom answered pointing to the sidewalk.

They both looked toward the sidewalk but no one was there.

“She was there just a second ago,” Tom said with exasperation. “Pamela Sawyer came out of those bushes next door and talked to me for about a minute. She promised she would wait right there while I came to get you.”

Officer Spencer stepped out on the porch and looked down the street to the left and to the right. The street was empty.

“You’ve just learned an important lesson about drug addicts,” Officer Spencer said.

“What is that?”

“All drug users lie,” he answered. “And they’re good at it.”

Tom looked at the empty street and felt betrayed.

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 2

BURGLARY AT NIGHT

Brett Baker turned to Crank and his buddy Lester and said, “Those cops took everything I had last night. All my dope and all my money. I’m hurtin’ bad man. I need to get high.”

At 11:45 that night, the three of them stood across the street from a vacant house with only one outside light on by the garage door.

Brett was fidgety. Beads of sweat covered his forehead. He paced back and forth.²

“What’s that noise?” he blurted out. He stood still and scanned the empty street with wide-open eyes.

“Just a dog barking,” Crank answered.

“Cops have dogs,” Brett said hurriedly. “I’ll bet it’s

² Meth Fact: Amphetamine-related psychiatric disorders are conditions resulting from intoxication or long-term use of amphetamines or amphetamine derivatives. The disorders are often self-limiting after cessation, though, in some patients, psychiatric symptoms may last several weeks after discontinuation. Some individuals experience paranoia during withdrawal as well as during sustained use. Withdrawal is very often accompanied by intense vascular headache, tremor, agitation, and anxiety, variable degrees of twitching, and vivid nightmares and waking delusions.

OUT OF DARKNESS

the cops! Let's get out of here!"

"It's not the cops," Lester insisted grabbing Brett's coat sleeve. "You're just paranoid, man. You're hurtin' cause you don't have no Meth. You'll feel better when we get some cash so we can get amped-up again."

"Man, my head hurts," Brett muttered. His hands shook as he took a cigarette out of the package. He fumbled with the cigarette, lost his grip and it fell to the ground.

"Don't light up now, man," Crank said. "The neighbors will see us."

Brett left the cigarette on the ground and stepped quickly off the curb toward the house. Lester and Crank followed ducking low as they walked, darting their eyes back and forth scanning for witnesses. The street was silent.

Brett pushed open the gate to the right of the garage and disappeared into the darkness of the side yard. His criminal companions followed.

There was a low, flat patio cover at the rear of the house with a sliding glass door that opened to the living room. Crank pulled a twelve-inch wrecking bar out of an extra deep pocket sewn into his pants. Skillfully he jammed the bar in the doorframe near the lock, leaned his body into the bar, and gave a quick push. The door popped open with a snap.

Silently, the three thieves stepped into the house to begin their night's work. A dim, low wattage lamp on a small antique table in the corner lit up the room sending long shadows across the living room.

"Check this out." Brett reached for a clear glass decanter over the bar. The crystal decanter was half full of brown syrupy liquid.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“That looks like high quality booze.” Lester reached for the bottle.

Brett pulled it away and held it tightly.

“Me first.” Without hesitation, he tipped the bottle to his lips. Closing his eyes, he took in a deep swallow.

“Ahhhhh,” he exclaimed as he finished. “That’s smooth as silk.”

“Give me some,” Lester insisted eagerly reaching out for the alcohol. Brett let him take it and Lester enthusiastically gulped down a full mouthful. He shuddered as it went over his tongue. Crank was next, and the three crooks passed the bottle around until it was empty.

“Now I feel better,” Brett said and hurled the bottle across the room smashing it against the fireplace. The two hundred dollar crystal bottle that once contained the eighty-dollar liquor shattered on impact scattering glass shards across the room as a cascade of fragments rained down on the hearth. The remnants of the liquor trickled down the red brick fireplace.

“Let’s go to work,” Brett commanded.

Lester went to the kitchen pantry where he found three, large, black plastic trash bags to carry their loot. The first room they went to was the master bedroom. Brett picked up an old photo album displayed on a small end table. The cover was made of richly carved Teak wood with an overlaid ivy design in pure gold leaf. A faded photograph taken in 1855 showed a man and his wife standing in front of a palace.

“This is pure gold,” Brett exclaimed. He ripped the cover off the album and tossed it into his plastic garbage bag. He threw the pictures on the floor.

The album would have sold for two thousand dollars

OUT OF DARKNESS

at an antique auction. Brett hoped to get two hundred for it. To the family who owned it; it was priceless. The album was hand made for an heir who was a member of the royal Russian family. It was painstakingly carried across the ocean when the family came to America.

Brett didn't care about the sentimental value. He just needed to get some dope.

"You check out the office, Crank," Brett said. "And Lester, you look in the dining room for a China cabinet. I'll bet they have some real good stuff in there. This house is loaded."

Brett pulled open the dresser drawer and was surprised to see a polished wooden case labeled Smith and Wesson. Inside he found a silver-coated, hand engraved 38-caliber collectors revolver with pearl handles.

"I'm gonna keep this," he said and stuffed it in his belt.

Crank went to work in the office. In his excitement, he disregarded caution and turned on the desk light. He sat down at the desk and pulled the handle on the center drawer. It was locked. He took out his pry bar and jammed it between the desktop and the face of the drawer. With a sharp tug, he ripped the lock out of the drawer splintering the rich Cherry wood finish. He dug through the contents and found a checkbook and two credit cards. He threw them into his bag.

He yanked open the bottom drawer to his right and spotted a gray strongbox.

"Bingo," he said.

Crank grabbed the strongbox, slammed it on the desk and went to work on the lock with the pry bar. After a few sweaty minutes, the box was open. He opened the

OUT OF DARKNESS

cover and saw a wrapped bundle of new fifty-dollar bills and six rolls of quarters.

“It’s payday for old Crank.” He quickly thumbed through the stack of bills.

“One thousand dollars and it’s all mine,” he whispered to himself. He dumped the rolled coins in the bag but hid the money deep in his extra pocket.

A large antique grandfather clock chimed twelve o’clock with a loud English BONG! - BONG! - BONG! Brett, Lester and Crank froze motionless for twelve seconds as the bell rang twelve times signaling the midnight hour. Their nerves stood on end as they anticipated discovery.

Each of them felt they were being watched. An uncanny feeling of discovery infiltrated their minds. Inside they instinctively knew God had His eye on them. They felt a tinge of guilt for the life they lived, but remorse or sorrow never entered their souls. They feared getting caught. But they didn’t fear punishment from God.

The chimes stopped and the spell was broken. The feeling passed from memory. For twelve seconds they had a chance to change their life and repent of their evil deeds. But the moment had passed and they continued to choose a life of crime.

Crank turned his attention to the middle side drawer and pulled it open. Displayed on top of a pile of papers was an old, blue-steel .38 revolver in a shabby brown holster. The bluing on the handgun was worn revealing the shiny steel underneath. He picked it up and shoved it in his deep pocket.

The gun had belonged to the homeowner’s father who was a police officer from 1932 to 1955. It had little value

OUT OF DARKNESS

as a handgun but immense value to his son who cherished it as the only memento of his father who died tragically in a house fire while trying to rescue a trapped infant. This service revolver was all that remained of his personal possessions.

Now it belonged to Crank.

Lester had as much success in the China cabinet. Carefully displayed, and lit with a dim recessed light, was a one hundred fifty year old set of hand made crystal goblets from Romania. Next to that was a full set of silver serving dishes handcrafted and signed by Paul Revere. Both sets were irreplaceable and worth thousands of dollars. Lester casually tossed them in the bottom of his black garbage bag and calculated in his head that he could probably get three hundred dollars for all of it.

He found a set of gold plated wedding keepsake knives used only once during the owner's wedding reception fifty years earlier.

"Money in my pocket," Lester said with excitement as he tossed all of it into his bag. He felt no remorse or sadness for the old couple who would later return home to discover their family keepsakes had been stolen. He had no regard for the sentimental value they held for the owners. Only one thing filled his mind.

"I'm gonna get cranked up tonight," he said with a smile.

The burglary had taken just over twenty minutes. Brett, Lester and Crank were professionals. Together, they had burglarized over forty homes. In each home lived victims who had lost their family heirlooms forever.

"It's time to get out of here." Brett jogged across the living room. His bag was half full and weighed him down. Crank ran from the home office to follow him and

OUT OF DARKNESS

Lester came in behind with his weighty bag of costly serving ware.

“This is the best haul so far,” Crank bragged.

“I’ll bet we clear over two thousand dollars,” Lester added. He told no one about the cash he found.

Brett didn’t tell anyone about the silver coated handgun he had hidden in his pocket.

“First we gotta fence it,” Brett said. “Sonny is expecting us at the pawn shop. We have ta’ dump this stuff fast so we can buy some Meth. That booze is wearing off.”

Feeling like the Billy the Kid Gang they ran out of the house with bags over their shoulders and coats flapping in the wind behind them. They crossed the street and piled into the beat up blue sedan Brett had stolen from his grandmother.

She doesn’t need it anymore, he thought to himself when he forced her to sign over the registration. *She’s old.*

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 3

POLICE EXPLORER MEETING

“All rise for the Pledge of Allegiance,” Explorer Scout Williams said as he stood facing the flag.

The twelve members of Oak Hills Police Explorer Scout Post 1147 pledged together in unison.

“I pledge allegiance to the Flag, of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands: one Nation under God, indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for all.”

Pastor Simms, an aging man with thinning hair, walked to the podium. “Please remain standing for the Policeman’s Prayer.”

“Oh almighty God, whose great power and wisdom embraces the universe,

Watch over all policemen everywhere.

Protect them from harm in the performance of their duty to stop crime, robbery and violence.

We pray, you help them keep our streets and home safe, day and night.

We recommend them to your loving care because

**their duty is dangerous.
Give them strength and courage.
Protect these brave souls.
Grant them your almighty protection.
Unite them safely with their families after duty has
ended.”³**

Pastor Simms stepped aside and Officer Spencer walked to the podium.

“Thank you Pastor Simms. The Oak Hills Police Explorer Scout Post 1147 will come to order.”

Twelve Explorer Scouts sat down in folding chairs and opened their meeting notebooks. They met every Wednesday night at 1800 hours 6:00 PM in the public meeting room at the Oak Hills Police Department. Tom Proctor sat in the back row

“Tonight I have a new case to tell you about,” Officer Spencer continued. “During the past year we’ve had over forty residential burglaries in the north end of town near the river bottom area. The crime lab thinks they were all done by the same crooks.”

He picked up a handful of photographs and passed them to Kevin, who was sitting in the front row.

“These photographs are of items stolen last night in a home burglary. The owner had previously documented their belonging by photographing them and he kept a copy of the photos in a safe deposit box.”

Kevin thumbed through the photographs. The first was of an antique, silver serving set with ornate carvings etched in the metal. The next photo was of a silver-plated, engraved .38 caliber, handgun.

³ Author unknown

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Why do you think the same suspects did all the burglaries?” Tom asked.

“They all have the same Method of Operation.

One - the owners are away on vacation.

Two - entrance is made through a rear door.

Three - they always drink liquor if it's available and throw the bottles against a wall.

Four - none of the homes have burglar alarms.”

“Do you have any suspects yet?” Jennifer Loring asked.

“Yes. We have three confirmed suspects.”

Officer Spencer passed out more photos. The first was a color photograph of a twenty-two year-old man. He had a narrow face bordered by long, brown, stringy hair. His eyes were close and mean. When you looked at the photo of the man, his eyes stared back at you bringing a shudder.

“Tom, you've seen this photo before. This is Brett Baker. Our NGTF team did a drug raid at a Meth lab in his house two days ago. Brett escaped by smashing through a closed window. He's been arrested seven times and served one year in prison.”

The next photo was of a crazy looking man with shaggy black hair, sticking out at all angles. He was unshaven and had large red spots like moon craters on both cheeks. One side of his face was tensed, making him look uneven.

“That guy looks crazy,” Kevin said.

“This is Crank. He's been a heavy user of methamphetamine for five years. Crank is a slang term for methamphetamine. His real name is Chester Sylvester Alvin Goldfield. Now, you know why he likes his nickname better than his real one.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

The next picture showed a slightly older man with wavy brown hair and wide-open eyes. He looked perpetually frightened. A week-old stubbly beard covered a large red sore in the middle of his chin. Small bleeding sores peppered the rest of his face.

“This is Lester Backwater. He’s been Brett’s best buddy since Brett got out of prison two years ago.”

“What should we do if we see one of these guys?” Jennifer asked.

“Don’t let them know you’ve spotted them. They’ll get suspicious if they see anyone staring at them while talking on a cell phone. Move out of eyesight and text or call our dispatch center and they’ll seed out a patrol unit immediately.”

Spencer walked down the center aisle and collected the photos.

“Before you leave the meeting tonight, pick up a wanted poster of all three suspects. Keep a copy of the flyers with you.”

The door opened and an officer wheeled a stainless steel cart into the room. The cart was set up with a complete methamphetamine lab.

“We have a special treat for you tonight.” Officer Spencer walked to the back of the room. “Officer Tanner collected this methamphetamine equipment on a raid last month. We washed out the toxins and the acids and now use it for training purposes.”

Officer Tanner parked the cart near the door at the back of the room.

“I want all of you to come over here and I’ll explain how a Meth lab works,” he began.

Chairs rustled as the twelve Explorer Scouts hurried out of their seats and gathered around the display. A

OUT OF DARKNESS

round glass beaker that looked like a glass basketball with a long pointed glass spout at the top was in the middle of the cart. The bottom half of the beaker was stained a golden brown color. Under the beaker was a propane burner connected by a thin black hose to a small propane tank. Also on the table were a metal can of Acetone, a container of Lye, a box of paper matches and ten bubble packages containing cold medication capsules. Scattered across the table was an assortment of hoses, clamps, beakers and a stack of tiny plastic baggies.

“I’m not going to tell you all the details on how to make Meth, but I’ll show you the basics.” He pulled out a sheet of cold medication sealed in plastic wrap and held it up.

“The purpose for all of this equipment is to get the Pseudo/ephedrine out of these cold capsules and convert it to a usable powder form. When the chemical process is complete, the resulting compound is known as methamphetamine. The Lye, Ether, Acetone, and whatever else they may utilize in the process, are used as solvents to break down the Pseudo/ephedrine to a soluble form. All of these chemicals are dangerous. All of them are toxic. And many are flammable.”⁴

⁴ Meth fact: Common chemical used in the making of Meth: Alcohol, Ether, Benzene, Toluene/Paint Thinner, Freon, Acetone, Chloroform, Camp Stove Fuel/Coleman Fuel, Starting Fluid, Anhydrous Ammonia, "Heet", White Gasoline Phenyl-2-Propane, Phenylacetone, Phenylpropanolamine, Iodine Crystals, Red Phosphorous, Black Iodine, Lye (Red Devil Lye), Drano, Muriatic/Hydrochloric Acid, Battery Acid/Sulfuric Acid, Epsom Salts, Batteries/Lithium, Sodium Metal, Wooden Matches, Propane Cylinders, Hot Plates, Over-the-counter cold and asthma medications containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, Cold Tablets, Bronchodilators, Energy Boosters, Rock Salt, Diet Aids
Resource: Koch Crime Institute http://www.kci.org/meth_info/links.htm

OUT OF DARKNESS

He picked up the can of acetone and took off the lid. "I want some of you to smell this."

Tom put his nose to the spout and cringed backward, wrinkling his nose at the sharp, penetrating solvent odor.

"Given the right conditions, a small spark or strike of a match could cause a minor blast that would take out anyone in front of it."

The can was passed from person to person, each one showing the same distasteful expression when they smelled it.

"I won't show you more about how the process works because it's not my job to train future Meth dealers. But according to the *Betty Cranker Cookbook*, 'you take a pinch of red phosphorous, a smidgen of ephedrine, a dash of iodine and a skosh of lye. Add some distilled water, let it simmer for a few hours and hope it doesn't explode and kill you'"

The group chuckled.

"But basically, what they do is mix the liquid and the solid chemicals together and add heat to release the amphetamine. When Acetone or a similar solvent is added, the methamphetamine separates from the batch and settles to the bottom of the flask. The sediment is collected, dried, mixed with other powders to cut it, and sold on the street for lots of money."

The door slammed open.

"I gotta find my car!" A disheveled, heavysset man in a dirty gray suit yelled as he stumbled into the classroom. His bloodshot, watery eyes wavered weakly as he looked around the room.

"Is this th' Lazy Q Bar?" he said with a slur as he stumbled forward.

He stopped near the cart, both of his eyes turned

OUT OF DARKNESS

upward, his jaw slacked, and he reeled to one side and crashed into the Meth lab. The table tipped over and the glass beakers, hoses, cold capsules and the open can of Lye and Acetone fell over showering poisonous liquid chemicals and shattered glass across the room. The unconscious drunk rolled onto the broken remnants of the smashed Meth lab with eyes half open, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Everybody! Evacuate the room!” Tanner called out.

Powdered Lye, ammonia and liquid Acetone combined together sending out a deadly cloud of poisonous gas. The drunken man lay passed out on top of the shattered glass and dangerous chemicals.

Officer Spencer lifted the unconscious drunk by the shoulders. “He must’ve escaped from the drunk tank. Let’s move, everybody. Get out!”

Tom picked up the drunkard’s feet and helped Officer Spencer drag him out of the room as the rest of the Explorer Scouts rushed through the door. When everyone was clear, Tanner slammed the door shut and picked up the nearest station phone to call out the Hazmat team and the fire department.

A uniformed officer ran toward them from a room at the far end of the hallway, stopping when he saw the drunk passed out on the floor.

“There you are Charlie, you old drunk. I wondered where you’d gone to.” He looked at Spencer and Tanner and back to Spencer again. “I hope he didn’t disturb your meeting.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 4

STOLEN GOODS

Tom left the Oak Hills Police station and walked home through the old downtown area. The sun was setting late during the summer months and a long shadow followed closely behind as he walked down the sidewalk.

Downtown Oak Hills was two blocks long and lined with low glass storefronts facing Main Street. The highest building was three-stories tall with living quarters on the top floor. Each little shop featured a distinctive sign telling the buyer what they could purchase inside. In front of the lawnmower shop hung an oversized red lawnmower with faded paint and a missing wheel. The drug store had the familiar RX sign prominently displayed over the door. At one hundred-foot intervals, the town planners had placed decorative benches where weary shoppers could rest. Tonight the street was vacant.

He casually walked past the pawnshop with the distinctive three golden balls hanging over the entrance and Tom looked to his left at the items displayed behind the glass storefront. Behind the display he and saw three grungy men standing in front of the sales counter talking

OUT OF DARKNESS

to the pawnbroker. Something familiar about one of the men struck his mind.

Tom stopped and cautiously peered inside. From the partial profile of the tallest man, Tom knew he was Brett Baker. Tom's jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide taking in the image. The clerk handed Brett some cash. On the counter was a bright silver serving set. Brett unexpectedly turned his head and locked eyes with Tom from ten feet away.

Tom's startled expression telegraphed his thoughts. *I see you and know who you are.*

Brett's eyes narrowed as he looked at Tom. Tom saw recognition in Brett's eyes. A sixth sense a thief has of knowing when they are discovered.

"He recognized us," Brett said. "Let's get him."

It's time for me to get my feet moving, Tom thought.

Tom rushed down the sidewalk toward an alley between the cleaning shop and the large hardware store. He cut left into the alley just as Brett and his companions ran out of the store. Brett looked to his left in time to see Tom disappear down the alley.

Brett, Crank and Lester ran to the alley just as Tom turned right to a side passage.

"Come here kid," Brett snarled.

Tom ran forward into the shadowy storage alley and ducked behind a gray, metal trash dumpster. Brett and his thieving friends strode into the corridor three abreast and slowed to a walk.

"There's no way out of here," Brett said as he kicked over a crate. The wooden box chattered across the pockmarked asphalt.

Crank sang out. "Come out come out wherever you are. Olly olly oxen free."

OUT OF DARKNESS

Tom didn't want to play their game.

"Come out kid," Brett urged. "I just want to talk to you."

Tom scrunched lower behind the dumpster. He looked over his shoulder and saw a ten-foot high, locked chain link gate. Behind the gate was a fifty-foot deep alley ending at a gray, cinder block wall. Brett was right. There was no way to escape.

An ugly hairy face peered at Tom from over the dumpster.

"Hey punk," Crank said. A dirty smile crossed his face. "Tag you're it."

Brett stepped around the dumpster and seized Tom by the collar. His wiry arms pulled him forward across the asphalt. Tom gripped Brett's wrists with both hands and whiffed the sharp, oily smell of methamphetamine seeping out of Brett's skin.

"Why were you spying on me?" Brett demanded pushing his face close to Tom's. He looked down and saw Tom was wearing a Police Explorer uniform.

"What are you – some kind of a cop?"

"He's a Junior Cop," Lester answered. "I seen them at the County Fair working the parking lot."

"A Junior Cop, hey," Brett said. "Why is a Junior Cop spying on me in the pawn shop?"

"I wasn't spying," Tom said trying to buy time. Brett was still holding tightly to his collar. Crank and Lester were standing on either side of him blocking any escape.

"I say you are," Brett spit out. "And I don't like spies."

"I was just walking home when I happened to notice..." Tom stopped.

"Notice what?" Brett demanded.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Nothing,” Tom said. “I didn’t see anything.”

“I’ll bet he saw us pawning that stuff,” Crank said.

“Shut up Crank,” Brett scolded. “Now we got to teach him a lesson.”

“Do you want me to cut him?” Lester pulled an eight-inch hunting knife from his boot.

Adrenaline surged through Tom’s arteries. Murky shadows engulfed the narrow alley as the sun vanished in the west. His heart rate jumped and his vision cleared. In one instant, he saw everything. On both sides, twenty-foot brick walls rose high above him. A chain link fence with a locked gate was behind him. Behind the fence, he saw empty crates and wooden pallets lined up along both walls. At the end of the alley was a set of steps that went down to a basement. His only way of escape was blocked by three strung-out Meth addicts intent on silencing him.

“God. My present help in time of trouble. I need you now,” Tom prayed quietly.

“What did he say?” Crank asked.

“Never mind that,” Brett said. “Cutting him is not good enough. I have something better for him. I don’t want him to be able to tell no one what he saw.”

He released his grip on Tom’s collar and reached into the back pocket of his grimy jeans. Brett took out a small glass vial with yellow-brown liquid inside.

“You still got that hype with you?” he asked Crank.

“Yeah I got it.” Crank reached inside his shirt pocket and handed Brett a plastic hypodermic syringe with a thin, bent needle. A red cap protected the sharp point.

“Oak Hills is gonna have another tragic drug overdose,” Brett said.

“You going to mainline him up with Meth?” Lester

OUT OF DARKNESS

asked.

“I’m gonna shut him up for good. I won’t let a Junior Cop turn me in.”

Tom sat on the ground feeling small and helpless. He wouldn’t be able to fight all three of them at the same time. He needed a distraction.

Brett pulled the red cap off the syringe and stuck the corroded needle into the bottle. Like a sinister doctor, he turned the bottle upside down and filled the syringe to the top with slimy, brown liquid.⁵

“That much will kill him,” Crank warned.

Brett looked past the bottle and stared at Crank but said nothing. He added the last drop to the syringe and pulled it out of the bottle.

“It’s time for you to get high.” He smiled showing his black, rotting teeth. “I think you’ll like it – the first time is always the best,” he said smirking.

“I can see the paper now.” Lester laughed. “Junior Cop found dead of a drug overdose in an alley. Won’t his mama be surprised.”

“You’ll get caught for sure,” Tom said. “Think about it. You were seen on the security camera at the pawnshop just a few minutes ago. The camera probably caught you running out of the store. The police will know who you are.”

“I already have enough warrants to put me in jail for ten years. A few more felonies won’t make much

⁵ Jan 9, 2006 07:12 AM WAFF48 News

Meth Fact: A new form of meth has surfaced in North Alabama. The Marshall County Drug Enforcement Unit ran across a liquid form of the drug. “We just kind of stumbled up on it by accident and investigating it, found out that it was already pretty common on the streets,” says Phillips. But earlier this year, U.S. officials ran across liquid meth that was being smuggled in from Mexico.

OUT OF DARKNESS

difference.”

Brett held the syringe in front of Tom’s face. “Grab his arms,” he ordered.

Lester grabbed Tom’s right arm. Crank held on to the left.

“This is it kid.” Brett smiled. “It’s time to meet your maker.”

Brett reached forward and directed the needle to a vein on the inside of Tom’s arm. He leaned forward to administer the fatal injection and Tom brutally kicked him in the stomach and struggled against Lester and Crank to free his arms.

Brett wheezed and coughed to catch his breath. “You kicked me, you pea-brain cop lover!”

A weak siren howled in the distance.

“Cops!” Lester blurted.

The siren wailed louder as it came closer.

Crank let go of Tom’s arm. “We gotta get out of here.”

Lester released the other arm, ran to the entrance of the alley. He peered into the street. Crank followed and stood behind Lester bobbing his head up and down for a better look. Brett stood between Tom and the alley entrance. Brett looked at the syringe in his hand and looked at Tom sitting alone on the ground. The siren sound grew louder, getting closer and closer.

Brett held his arms out like a defensive tackle waiting for Tom to make a run for it.

Tom jumped up and did the opposite of what Brett expected. He turned and ran to the ten-foot chain link fence and scaled to the top without slowing. Brett looked over his shoulder toward the high-pitched siren. The sound reverberated through the alley as the source of the

OUT OF DARKNESS

earsplitting wail drew closer. A bright red fire truck with red lights flashing sailed past the alley and continued on Main Street to a house fire on the other side of town. The siren sound lessened and diminished to a faint moan.

By the time Brett realized it was only a passing fire truck and the police weren't coming, Tom was already over the fence and clambering down the other side. He landed hard and hit the ground running.

"There he goes," Brett yelled startling Crank and Lester into action. "That alley is a dead end. There's no way out."

Tom ran forward and snaked his way under a shambled pile of wooden produce boxes.

Brett ran to the fence still holding the syringe in his right hand. He scaled the fence much slower than Tom and stopped when he got to the top and looked into the dark alley.

"Get over here and help me find him," he yelled to Crank and Lester.

Brett dropped to the other side and his companions followed.

Tom huddled in the darkness, his only protection a few lightweight boxes. *God you got me out of one jam, now help me out of this one.*

"This way," a voice whispered to Tom.

Tom thought he was hearing things.

"Come quickly," the voice urged.

"What?" Tom asked.

"Be quiet and follow me," the whisper continued.

A hand reached out through an open stem wall access hole and tightly grabbed Tom's forearm. Tom had two choices. He could follow this unknown voice or turn back to face the needle. He choose to follow the whispery

OUT OF DARKNESS

voice.

Footsteps stomped into the alley.

“Where are you kid?” Brett bellowed. “Sooner or later I’m gonna find you.”

Tom crawled through the opening into the crawlspace hidden under the floorboards of the hardware store. Hands pushed him forward into the pitch-black musty service space. He heard the sound of the steel access grate being fastened back into position and the latch tightly locked.

“Follow me amigo,” the whispery voice urged and Tom crawled in the dirt on hands and knees following the sound of the voice.

“Where’d he go?” Tom heard Lester shout from the alley.

“There’s no way out.” Crank kicked at the wooden boxes. “He has to be here.”

The sound of boxes and pallets clattering across the alley echoed through the access grate. Tom crawled through the dust as fast as his hands and knees could move. The ground in front of Tom fell away and he slid down about four feet into a shallow dirt pit dug into the ground.

“Silencio!” The voice urged.

Tom lay in the dirt and held his breath.

“Maybe he went into this access hole,” Crank yelled, kicking at the grate.

Loud banging boomed through the crawlspace.

“It’s locked from the inside. There’s no way he could get in there.”

Crank kicked the gate hard four times, but the lock held tight.

“It must be welded shut.” He kicked it one more time

OUT OF DARKNESS

and turned away.

“Look over here.” Brett walked down the short staircase to the basement door at the end of the alley. “Maybe he went into the basement.”

Brett kicked the locked steel door with his heavy black boots but the door did not budge. He turned and climbed up the stair to the alley.

“He must’ve got behind us and climbed back over the fence.” Brett was still holding the syringe.

Lester kicked a few more boxes, walked over, and stood beside Brett. He looked over at Brett holding the needle.

“Are you going to use that?” He asked.

Tom heard cussing and shouting but couldn’t make out what was said. The clanking sound of the meth-heads climbing back over the fence echoed into the damp crawl space and silence followed.

Tom let out his breath and took in a deep lungful of clammy cool air. He heard the steady breathing of his unknown companion.

“Who are you?” Tom asked quietly to the darkness

The wall of dirt surrounding him muffled the sound of his voice.

“My name is Pedro,” the young voice answered. Tom heard a scraping sound and a match burst to life bringing light to the darkness. Pedro lit a small candle and placed it on a wooden box in the corner.

The small hovel dug in the ground was four feet deep and five feet square. Above them was the wooden underside of the hardware store. Black plumbing pipes and silver electrical conduits attached to the floor joists criss-crossed back and forth. In one corner of the hole was a small box with the candle on it and a plastic water

OUT OF DARKNESS

bottle. A rolled up blue blanket was neatly stashed in the other corner. It was as clean and neat as a hole in the ground could be.

“Why did those men want to hurt you?” Pedro asked.

“They wanted to do more than just hurt me.” Tom answered.

Pedro squatted two feet in front of him. He had jet-black straight hair and was wearing a plaid shirt, baggy blue jeans and dirty white tennis shoes with holes in both toes. His facial features reminded Tom of an ancient Mayan stone statue with a broad face, high cheekbones and a sharp square nose.

“What did you do to make them so angry?” Pedro asked.

“Nothing,” Tom responded. “I was walking down the street when I recognized these three guy who just burglarized a house. They saw me looking at them and chased me to the alley.” Tom explained the whole account to Pedro including the methamphetamine drug raid two days before.

“They are very bad men,” Pedro said at the end of the story. “You should stay far away from them.”

“Right now, that’s exactly where I want to be. Far away from them. So, tell me Pedro, why are you living under a hardware store. This isn’t exactly the Best Western Inn.”

Pedro handed the water bottle to Tom. Tom twisted off the lid took a deep swallow.

“I am not living here because I want to, but because I have no other home.”

“Where are your parents?” Tom screwed on the lid and handed it back.

“I don’t know where my parents are. I lost them. I

OUT OF DARKNESS

have been trying to find them for almost one year.”

“It seems kind of hard to just ‘lose’ your parents’. It’s not like they’re pets or something.”

“I do not speak English as good as you,” Pedro continued. “Let me try to explain.”

Pedro readjusted his position and pulled his legs underneath him.

“I was born far down in Mexico near Oaxaca. My parents came to America with me five years ago to work in the fields. They picked tomatoes and oranges and whatever crop was growing at the time. Sometimes I helped, but mostly during the day, I stayed with the friendly people at a church school. We had no money, but they let me sit with the other *ninos children* - and every day they gave me lunch. At the end of the day I went back to mi’ madre and padre and I lived with them in the little shack they made near the river.”

“That sounds like a hard life.”

“Not so bad. In the summer, I would go to Vacation Bible School and I would have lots of fun. It is much better than living in Mexico. There, we have no work at all.”

“So, what happened to your parents?”

“One day after school, I walk back to the camp and they were gone. The *émigré immigration officer* came and took them back to Mexico and a large yellow tractor rolled over our home. Since then, I have been waiting for them to come back. Every day I go to the side of the field to look for my padre, but he is never there. So now I live under the store.”

“Wow,” Tom said. “That’s quite a story. Maybe you should go to the police and ask them for help. I’m sure Officer Spencer would help you.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

Pedro's eyes widened and he scooted back as far as he could until his back hit the dirt wall.

"Oh, no. I can't do that. I am not American. If I go to the policia they will make me go back to Mexico. They will send me to a town where I know nobody."

Pedro looked left and right.

"I will have no familia. No friends. No one to help me. Here, the nice church people sometimes give me food. In Mexico, if I am alone the Banditos will catch me and make me work in a factory or a field or do much worse things to me."

Tears welled up in his eyes. "Oh, please do not turn me in. Someday I will find mi' padre and mi' madre."

"Okay, okay," Tom reassured him. "Calm down. I won't turn you in. Just relax, okay?"

Pedro relaxed and leaned against the wall.

"Sometimes I am so afraid. When I get very afraid I talk to Jesus and he helps me."

"You know about Jesus?" Tom said surprised.

"Oh yes. At Vacation Bible School, I learn that He is the Way. I try to follow him, but sometimes I get lost." Pedro stared down at the dirt floor. "And sometime my familia gets lost too."

"I'll help you find your family," Tom assured him. "And I promise not to turn you in to anyone. You helped me get away from those Meth dealers and I'll help you find your parents. As a matter of fact you not only prevented me from getting hurt," Tom leaned against the wall feeling very tired, "but I think you may have saved my life."

They sat in silence reflecting on the path of life that each of them had traveled.

"It's getting late," Tom said. "I'd better get home."

OUT OF DARKNESS

You can stay with me tonight if you want to. I'm sure my mom won't care."

"Gracias but I feel much safer here. I think it would be more dangerous to be with you. You know too many bad banditos."

Tom chuckled. "You might be right about that. Give me your parent's names and I'll ask around. Maybe they're trying to find you at the church you visited."

Pedro gave the information to Tom and they crawled to an access hole on the other side of the building. Pedro opened the hatch to let Tom out and locked the grate behind him.

Tom walked home staying in the shadows while cautiously looking over his shoulder from time to time. Tomorrow he would look for Pedro's parents and try to track down Pamela Sawyer. He had a nagging recollection he had seen her before she became a Meth-head.

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 5

TRAGIC DECISION

The next morning Tom called Carl Weaver, who worked at Grace Valley Outreach located near the tomato fields just outside of town.

“Hey Carl - Tom here, I have a question for you about a field worker who visited your church.”

“Good to hear from you Tom. We help a lot of migrant workers at our church. Every Sunday we invite them to come to our recreation hall for dinner. We even open our laundry facility for anyone who wants to use our washers and dryers. As far as I know, there are no electric washing machines by the river where most of them live.”

“Have you ever met a family named Zapata?”

“There was a Zapata family who used to visit here about a year ago. The father was Luis and his wife was Marie. They had a teenage son named Pedro.”

“That’s them,” Tom said. “I ran into Pedro last night and he told me his parents were deported.”

“Wow, that’s too bad. Who’s he living with now?”

“Right now he’s living on the street, or under it, and he’s trying to find his parents.”

“The farmers will start picking any day now. I’ll tell every one I know to keep an eye out for them.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Thanks. If you find them, let me know right away.”

“I’m glad to be of help Tom.”

“Talk to you later,” Tom said and placed his cell phone on his belt holder.

One job done and one more to go.

Tom was still mad at himself that he let Pamela Sawyer walk away from the drug house. According to the police report, she lived on Ash Street just two blocks from his home. He decided to walk past her house. Maybe if he knew more about her, he could help Officer Spencer track her down.

The home was a classic 1950’s American Craftsman house that could have been a prop for an old movie. Green, close cut grass filled the front yard bordered with red, yellow and pink roses blooming bright and wholesome. The vivid yellow house with white shutters beamed with joy at the warm sunlight.

Tom had expected a run-down shack with a front yard full of car parts, dog bones and broken washing machines.

Tom was walking in front of the white picket fence when a voice called out.

“Hey there!”

Tom stopped.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you son.” A man stood up from behind a rose bush. He wore tan leather gloves and held a pruning shears in his right hand.

“Oh... hi,” Tom said.

“I noticed you were looking at the house,” the man continued as he walked to the fence. “I thought you might be a friend of our daughter, Pamela.”

“Not exactly a friend.” Tom fiddled with the wanted posters in his rear pocket. “But I know her - sort of.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

“For six months, we’ve been trying to find her.” He looked Tom in the eye. “If you know anything about where she is, please let us know. Her mother and I fear she might be in serious trouble.”

“I can’t tell you much. But I can tell you I saw her four days ago...”

“Where?” he interrupted. “Do you know where she is? If you’re one of her druggie friends, don’t worry, I won’t turn you in. Just tell me where our Pamie is.”

“You have me all wrong,” Tom blurted out. “I’m not a druggie. I’m trying to find her, so I can turn her in to the police...”

That was the wrong choice of words, he immediately thought.

“What I mean is...” Tom tried to fix his mistake.

“That’s okay.” The man’s shoulders slumped and he dropped the shears and a yellow rose. “I knew it would come to this one day.”

He held the fence with one hand as if he were going to fall over. “She picked the wrong crowd to hang out with - now she’s wanted by the police.”

A tear welled up in his eye. Tom looked down and lightly kicked at a dandelion growing out of a crack in the sidewalk.

“Well,” the man said rubbing his eyes. “At least I know she’s still alive.”

He reached out a gloved hand to Tom. “My name is Wilber Sawyer. Do you want to come inside for a few minutes? Maybe you can tell us a bit more about Pamie.”

Tom shook his hand. “Yeah, sure. That sounds okay.”

Tom followed Mr. Sawyer up the cobblestone path to the freshly painted green front door. The living room was tidy, with conservative furniture set in all the right places.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Tom sat down in an armchair facing the coffee table. Mr. Sawyer sat across from him on the couch.

“Is somebody here?” A motherly voice called out from the kitchen.

“A boy came by for a visit. His name is Tom. He has some information about Pamie.”

The kitchen door burst open. “You know our Pamie? Is she okay? Where is she? Is she in any trouble? Can we go see her?”

Mrs. Sawyer shot-gunned questions to Tom as she dried her hands over and over on a dishtowel.

“Wait a minute,” Mr. Sawyer interrupted holding up a hand. “Our friend Tom here, just came in. Why don’t we offer him a soda? Then we can all sit down and have a talk.”

“Just water will be fine,” Tom said. His throat was dry.

Mrs. Sawyer went to the kitchen and returned with ice water for Tom and hot tea for herself and her husband. After serving the tea, she sat down next to Wilber with an expectant look, waiting for Tom to give her answers to a lifetime of questions.

“So Tom,” Mr. Sawyer began. “How do you know our daughter?”

“I saw her a few days ago at a house on Cedar Street. But it seems I’ve seen her before somewhere.”

“Well,” Mr. Sawyer said. “She’s only a couple of years older than you – and we’ve lived in Oak Hills for eighteen years. Maybe you met at school?”

“No, that’s not it,” Tom said thoughtfully sipping his water.

“We belong to the Faith Chapel on Prospect Street.”

“That’s it,” Tom shouted. “I saw her singing in the

OUT OF DARKNESS

Handel's Messiah program at the Christmas Pageant two years ago. She sang a solo."

"That was our Pamie," Mrs. Sawyer beamed. "We were so proud of her."

"But when I saw her last week, she was pale and thin and sick-looking. She looked fine at the pageant."

"The drugs did that to her," Mr. Sawyer sighed. "She was always such a beautiful child. The last time we saw her, she had aged ten years, and the lovely sparkle was gone from her eyes."

"She didn't look very healthy when I saw her," Tom added.

Mrs. Sawyer looked into her teacup quietly stirring it. Sadness shadowed her face.

"Not that she looked that bad," Tom continued. "What I mean is...."

"You don't have to try to make us feel better Tom. We know how bad off she is. It's the drugs, you know. That awful methamphetamine."

"How did she get hooked on it?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I suppose she met a friend who gave it to her at a party. That seems to be the way most kids start."

"We don't approve of any drinking parties," Mrs. Sawyer interjected. "We always made sure to ask Pamela exactly where she was going and who she would be with."

"We did the best we knew how," Mr. Sawyer placed his cup on the table. "We took her to church, taught her the Bible, gave her a good home, but she made the wrong choices, that's all."

"You're young, Tom," Mrs. Sawyer asked, "you know more about your generation than we do. Why do so

OUT OF DARKNESS

many young people have to take drugs?”

That is the billion-dollar question, Tom thought. Who really knows the answer?

“I suppose it’s because they are looking for something they haven’t found yet. Drugs make kids feel good-- for a while-- and for a few moments they can forget about some of their problems.”

“I wish we had noticed the signs early on. I never expected this to happen to us.”

“When she first met some of her bad friends, we didn’t approve and we told her so.” Mrs. Sawyer wiped a tear from her cheek with a napkin. “If we answered the phone when they called, they would hang up. Pamela would take the phone into the bathroom and whisper quietly so we couldn’t hear what she was saying.”

“I thought it was a phase she was going through.” Mr. Sawyer leaned forward. “We both thought if we just taught her the right values, and prayed for her, she would be alright. We thought that would be enough.”

“We finally took the phone away, but she bought a throw-away phone at Walmart and hid it in her room. Before we knew it, one Friday night she disappeared and has been away ever since.”

“Did you call the police?” Tom inquired.

“Of course we did,” Mr. Sawyer said. “But she was eighteen by then, and all they would do is fill out a missing persons report. We went door-to-door looking for her, we tacked up missing person posters on telephone poles, notified the media, and barely slept for the next three weeks doing all we could to find her.”

“If I could go back in time I’d do things differently,” Mrs. Sawyer sobbed.

“There’s not much more we could have done.” Mr.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Sawyer patted her gently on her back. “We raised Pamie the best we could. If I could just get my hands on those drug dealers.” He clenched his fists and his eyes reddened. “I would squeeze their no good life right out of them.”

“God told us not to hate,” Mrs. Sawyer reminded him.

He stood up and glared out the window with his fists clenched at his side. His voice quivered.

“God said we should love our enemies, but right now I fail in that area. I hate those drug dealers and I hate all that they are about. They are an oozing canker on our land and are stealing the innocence from our children. I hate everything about them and I want them stopped!” He slammed his fist against the wall.

Tom tipped back his water glass and the ice clinked against his teeth. He had to slurp the last bit of water to keep it from dribbling down his shirt.

“Why? Why? Why? That is the question I ask of God. Why did this happen to us?” Mr. Sawyer sighed in exhausted resignation and sat down next to his wife.

Mrs. Sawyer spoke up to break the spell. “Well, Tom. You were going to tell us more about where you saw Pamela.”

“I can’t say too much about it because there is a police investigation going on right now. But I was wondering if you’ve ever heard the name Brett Baker.”

“Pamela sometimes talked on the phone with someone named ‘Big B’. That might be who you’re referring to.”

“I knew it had to be a boy, or should I say a man.” The red blaze seeped back into Mr. Sawyer’s face. He slapped his thigh in disgust and walked back to the window. He pressed his lips tightly together and clenched his hands in anger.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Please calm down Wilber. So much anger will give you a heart attack.”

Wilber stared out the window in silence.

Mrs. Sawyer continued. “But we never met this ‘Big B’ person. Do you know something about him?”

“Let me simply say he’s a real bad bandito. I have a picture I can show you, and if you ever see him, call the police right away.”

Tom reached in his back pocket and pulled out the wanted poster of Brett Baker. He deliberately didn’t show them the poster with Pamela’s face on it. Mr. Sawyer walked back to the chair and took the wanted poster.

“He’s one mean looking character.” Mr. Sawyer held it up so his wife could see it. “What could anyone see in such a man?”

“It’s not a relationship drug addicts are looking for,” Tom answered. “It’s the drugs. The love for Meth is more powerful than the love of family, love for God, or even love for oneself. All that matters is getting high over and over and over again. And then one day, they have nothing left.”

“I pray that God will bring Pamie to a place where there is nothing left but Him,” Mrs. Sawyer spoke softly. “Then, maybe she will come home.”

Tom felt uncomfortable being the one to bring bad news. He didn’t tell them the last time he saw their daughter she was cold, barefoot, alone and scared to death.

“Well, I enjoyed meeting you.” Tom stood up. “But tonight, I’m going for a ride-along with Officer Spence so I have to get ready.”

“Thanks for talking to us.” Mr. Sawyer stood up and walked him to the door. “And let me give you my phone

OUT OF DARKNESS

number. If you hear any more about Pamela, please let us know right away.”

“There’s a Teen Reach meeting every weeknight at the New Life Dream Center,” Tom said. “If you hear from her, maybe you can get her to go there sometime. They’ve helped a lot of kids get free of drugs.”

“Thanks. I would give anything to get her to go. I pray one day soon, she will cry out for God’s help and come home again.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 6

WILD RIDE

Tom walked into the Oak Hills Police Station at 1700 5:00 PM and showed his Police Explorer Scout ID badge to the Police Officer at the counter.

“I’m here for a ride-along with Officer Spencer,” he informed the officer.

She looked at the ID card and compared it to the names listed on the visitor roster.

“Here it is.” She buzzed the door open. “Have fun Tom. Officer Spencer is in the booking room with a prisoner.”

Tom walked down the long hallway to the locked door leading to the booking room. Tom looked through the small wire-infused security window in the door, and showed his ID card to the guard in the booking room. The guard recognized Tom and opened the door using a large brass key.

Tom took two steps down the hall and heard banging sound like a rubber bat hitting a steel pipe. He turned the corner and saw Officer Spencer running toward the holding cell where his prisoner was held.

“You can’t keep me here!” The prisoner’s high-pitched voice echoed down the hallway. “I gotta get out

OUT OF DARKNESS

of here.”

Tom ran behind Officer Spencer into the corridor lined with five small holding cells on each side. The cells were constructed with cold, vertical, steel bars in front, with a wide door. In every cell was a small cot welded to the floor and a low stainless steel toilet in the corner.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound echoed through the police station as the prisoner slammed his head against the vertical bars. With both hands, he firmly gripped the bars while bouncing his head against the gray painted steel.

“Let me out of here!” He yelled in a piercing scream.

“Calm down Darrell,” Officer Spencer said running to the iron cage. He swiftly unlocked the door and ran inside. Darrell again smashed his forehead against the metal bar.

“Let go of the bars,” he ordered as he pulled Darrell’s head back with one hand and put his other hand between the steel bar and Darrell’s thick skull. Darrell continued to bounce his head against Spencer’s hand.

Tom ran inside the cell and tightly grabbed hold of one arm and pulled Darrell’s clenched hand loose from the bar. Two uniformed officers also ran into the cell and the four of them pulled Darrell free from the bars. One officer pulled the mattress off the cot and dropped it on the floor. Carefully, with each officer holding an arm or a leg, they placed Darrell face down on the mattress and held him down.

“Calm down Darrell,” Officer Spencer ordered. “We don’t want to hurt you.”

“I gotta get out of here,” Darrell screamed and struggled against the officers who held him tightly on the mattress. Officer Spencer took a pair of handcuffs from

OUT OF DARKNESS

his belt and pulled Darrell's right hand behind his back. Tom pulled the left arm back and they handcuffed his wrists securely together.

"Give me your hobble tie," Officer Spencer told an officer. The officer handed him a black nylon strap, about three feet long, with a loop at one end and a metal clasp at the other.

Officer Spencer looped the hobble around Darrell's ankles and snugly cinched it through the loop.

"Get off me," Darrell yelled as he kicked against the hobble strap. One officer reached out and pulled both of Darrell's feet up to his hands still securely cuffed together behind his back.

Officer Spencer looped the long end of the hobble tie around the handcuffs and drew Darrell's feet up to his hands. He wrapped the cord around five more times to take out the slack and snapped the metal clasp over the loop around his feet.

Darrell lay face down on the mattress with both hands cuffed behind his back and his feet pulled up and securely strapped to the handcuffs with the hobble.

"Why do you want to hurt yourself?" Officer Spencer asked leaning over as he gently pulled the hair away from Darrell's forehead. A large purple knot was forming where he slammed against the bars, but the bruise was not bleeding.

"I can't stay here any more. I hate being locked up," the drunken man sobbed.

"I'll get you out of here in ten minutes. I'm almost finished with the booking report. As soon as I'm done, I'll release you with a notice to appear in court."

Darrell relaxed and put his face in the mattress.

"Do you promise to calm down for just a few more

OUT OF DARKNESS

minutes?”

“Okay. I promise,” a muffled voice said. Darrell relaxed and resigned himself to the situation. His fast, heavy breathing slowed and he lay motionless on the mattress.

The officers tucked in their shirts and left the cell with Darrell safely tied, lying quietly on the mattress. Spencer closed the door with a clang and locked the handle.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he reassured Darrell. “Just relax and you’ll be out in no time.”

“Okay,” Darrell answered.

“Why was he so upset?” Tom asked as they walked back to the booking room.

“He’s drunk. Not drunk enough to pass out and sleep it off, but drunk enough to act stupid.”

“I’ll bet that hurt when he banged his head on the bars.” Tom winced.

“He didn’t feel a thing. But tomorrow he’s going to have one major headache.”

They sat down at the booking desk and Officer Spencer continued filling out the paperwork. He had to complete the arrest report, the intake report, the witness list, the evidence list, the notice to appear form and three other forms of blue, pink and yellow

“What did Darrell do?” Tom asked.

“He was caught shoplifting at the Rite Aid store. While he was in the store, he opened a bottle of whiskey and drank three quarters of it. He is getting more intoxicated by the minute. His liver hasn’t had time to clean the alcohol out of his system yet.”⁶

⁶ Alcohol is absorbed from all parts of the gastrointestinal tract largely by simple diffusion into the blood. However, the small intestine is by far the most efficient region of the gastrointestinal tract for alcohol absorption

OUT OF DARKNESS

A strange gurgling sound filtered down the hallway.

They both looked at each other. The sound quieted and Spencer went back to work on the release form.

The gurgling sound resumed, like someone was gargling with mouthwash.

Tom looked at Spencer again. The gurgling got louder and was interspersed with coughing.

“Darrell!” Spencer jumped up from his chair and ran to the holding cell. Tom sprung to his feet and followed.

Tom and Spencer turned from the hallway to the jail cell and saw Darrell face down in the stainless steel toilet, trying to drown himself in the bowl. He was still handcuffed with both hands behind his back and his feet were secured to his hands by the hobble, but somehow he managed to scoot over to the toilet and put his face in the bowl.

“GurrGGLE....gurrGGLE...gurrGGLE.”

“Get your head out of the toilet!” Spencer unlocked the door, and ran inside. He grabbed Darrell by the back of his hair and pulled his face out of the stainless steel toilet.

Darrell came up coughing and spitting toilet water across the cell.

“What are you doing?” Officer Spencer lifted him up and carefully placed him face down on the mattress to

because of its very large surface area. In a fasting individual, it is generally agreed that 20% to 25% of a dose of alcohol is absorbed from the stomach and 75% to 80% is absorbed from the small intestine. Because of this peak blood alcohol concentrations are achieved in fasting people within 0.5 to 2.0 hours, (average 0.75 - 1.35 hours depending upon dose and time of last meal) while non-fasting people exhibit peak alcohol concentrations within 1.0, and in extreme cases up to as much as 6.0 hours (average 1.06 - 2.12 hours). “Alcohol in the Human Body” Fetal Alcohol Disorders Society - www.faslink.org/index.htm

OUT OF DARKNESS

drain out the water. “Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“I don’t want to kill myself,” he sputtered. “I told you, I can’t stand to be in jail. I have to get out of here!”

“If I let you out, will you agree to go to the Alcohol Detox center?”

Darrell choked and coughed again. “I’ll go anywhere if I can just get out of this cell.”

“We have a police van going to Detox in five minutes,” Officer Spencer said. “After you sign the release form, I’ll put you in the Detox van and you’ll be out of here.”

Darrell calmed down and gasped a few more times. “Okay,” he quietly said.

Spencer loosened up the hobble, lifted him up and walked Darrell to the hallway where they sat down side-by-side on the bench.

“Will you promise to behave if I take off the handcuffs?”

“Yeah,” he answered quietly. Spencer used his handcuff key attached to his keychain to unlock the handcuffs. Darrell sat passively and rubbed his wrists as he leaned against the wall with his eyes closed. Toilet water dripped down his face to the front of his shirt. Now that he was out of jail, he was calm and willing to cooperate.

Spencer finished the booking package, and without complaint, Darrell signed the release form and quietly staggered to the Detox van and climbed in the back. The transport officer door slid the door closed behind him, and slammed it shut.

Officer Spencer sighed. “What a nightmare.”

“Do you get many like that?” Tom asked as they walked across the parking lot to the patrol car. Rows of

OUT OF DARKNESS

black and white police cars were lined up like modern war machines waiting for battle.

“I’ve seen a lot of drunks, and I’ve seen a lot of stupid people, but this is the first time anyone has tried to drown himself in the jail cell toilet.”

“I didn’t think it was possible to commit suicide by toilet,” Tom said grinning as he got into the passenger seat of the patrol car.

“I’ve never tried it.” Spencer placed the key in the ignition and logged on to the dashboard computer. “Let’s go back inside and you can do a toilet test to see if it works.”

“No way.” Tom grimaced. “That was nasty.”

“Unit 3-32 respond to an 11-8 *person down* at Shady Home Trailer Park, space #56,” the radio crackled.

Spencer reached for the dash microphone. “10-4. En-route from 10-19 *the police station*.”

Spencer raced out of the police lot to Fourth Avenue and drove his black and white two blocks to a run-down trailer park in an old part of town. He pulled into the Shady Home Trailer Park and stopped the car in front of trailer #56. Weeds were climbing through the cracked asphalt driveway littered with smashed beer cans and empty fast food bags. The dirty, tan trailer was rounded on both ends like the travel trailers built in the 1940’s. One corner jack was missing and the trailer sagged sadly to one side.

“I think he needs help.” A heavy-set man walked up to them as Spencer and Tom got out of the car. “He lives alone and has no family to take care of him.”

“Who lives here?” Officer Spencer asked as he walked toward the open trailer door.

“Steven Mansfield. He has diabetes, heart disease and

OUT OF DARKNESS

...um... well....AIDS.”

Spencer walked to the trailer and knocked on the side as he peered into the narrow doorway.

“Steven! I’m a Police Officer. I need to talk to you.”

“I didn’t call you. Go away,” a voice filtered out through the open doorway.

“I can’t leave until I know you’re okay....”

“I’m not okay. I have diabetes and both my legs are amputated. How can I be okay?”

Spencer stepped up into the entry. Tom followed but stopped at the open door.

A foul odor wafted out of the innards of the old roadhouse like a wall of stench that almost knocked Tom off the step. The man was lying on a filthy bed with both stumps uncovered. The white sheets were now stained brown due to years of use without laundering.

“How do you get out of your trailer? I don’t see crutches or a wheelchair.”

“I used to have some false legs,” the man snarled. “But somebody stole them.”

“Why don’t you have new ones made?”

“It don’t matter. I’ll be dead soon anyway. Someday you’ll come and drag my dead body out of this dump.”

Tom shifted his feet and kicked an empty beer can. He looked on the floor next to the bed and saw fifty empty beer cans scattered across the peeling, yellow, linoleum flooring. An open twelve-pack was on the headboard above Steven’s head.

“How do you go out to get your beer?” Spencer asked.

“I pay a lady ta’ bring it to me.”

The heavysset man standing outside near Tom whispered, “He gives her twenty dollars for a twelve-pack of beer. She buys it for him and keeps the rest of the

OUT OF DARKNESS

money. Steven is so drunk all of the time he doesn't know she's stealing from him."

A breeze blew out some stink from deep inside the trailer and Tom's stomach turned over.

"I got a call that you need help. What can I do for you?" Office Spencer asked respectfully.

"Can you give me new legs? Can you cure AIDS? Can you give me my life back?" Steven bitterly replied.

Spencer opened the fridge and saw bread, sliced turkey meat and milk. The top shelf was filled with twenty different medicine bottles.

"I can't do any of that, but I can call for an ambulance if you want."

"The last time I was in the hospital they cut my legs off. I ain't never going back," he shot back and turned toward the window.

Spencer backed out of the trailer and stood outside with Tom and the friendly neighbor.

"How long has he been like this?"

"I don't think Steven has been out of his trailer for eight months. The gas and electric company came here last week and turned off the electricity because he didn't pay the bill. I hooked him up to my trailer with an extension cord."

"He should see a doctor for a check-up." Officer Spencer sprayed antiseptic foam on his hands. He gave a shot of antiseptic to Tom who rubbed his hands vigorously. "But, if he chooses to, he is able to take care of himself. He's just bitter and ornery. I can't force him to go to the hospital."

Officer Spencer turned to the man who called the police. "Do you think you can convince him to see a doctor?"

OUT OF DARKNESS

“I probably can,” the man said looking warily at the trailer. “We have a small group here called the ‘Help Club’ and we kind of look out for each other. There are a lot of old people living here that no one cares about.”

“If you can get him to sober up for a few days, he might listen to reason and see a doctor. He needs medication for depression.”

“I’ll do everything I can do to help him,” the man promised.

“That’s all I can ask. If you need more help, give me a call. Here’s my card with my phone number on it.”

Spencer handed the helpful citizen an Oak Hills Police Department business card and they got back into the patrol car.

“I hope he gets help,” Tom sighed.

“Yeah,” Officer Spencer said pensively as he started the car. “Do you want to get something to eat?”

Tom hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast and the sun was already set but he’d lost his appetite. “How can you eat after walking into such a horrible mess?”

“We have to grab lunch when we can. We have so many radio calls that on many days we don’t have time for lunch.”

Officer Spencer drove out of the Shady Home Trailer Park and went four blocks to a small strip mall on Willow Valley Road.

He turned the car into the entrance and was approached head-on by a small Korean hatchback driving slowly toward him. The rear hatchback window was open. A small oriental teenager was running out of a restaurant toward the rear of the car. He held a purse in his right hand. A short, pregnant Hispanic lady was chasing him and screaming hysterically about her stolen

OUT OF DARKNESS

purse. Another woman followed her yelling at the fleeing suspect. When the ladies saw Officer Spencer's patrol car, they slowed and pointed frantically at the suspect and screamed at Officer Spencer to stop him. They gave up the chase and waited at the curb to watch the events unfold.

Spencer stopped the patrol car in the driveway as the hatchback slowly rolled forward to the exit next to him. The driver saw the police car but hadn't decided if he was going to stop the car, or jam on the accelerator and flee. Spencer leapt out of the car, stood in front of the hatchback, pulled his .45 cal Sig Sauer Semi-automatic handgun out of the holster, and held it firmly with both hands aiming it directly at the driver.

"Stop! Now!" he commanded.

The driver was a pudgy Filipino teenager. With wide eyes, he looked up into the large, dark barrel of the black handgun five feet in front of him. From his view, the gun looked like an eighty-millimeter battleship howitzer targeted directly at his face. He hit the brakes. His eyes widened to astonishing proportions. His jaw dropped and he froze in place waiting for the next command.

"Turn off the ignition!" Spencer boomed.

On the right side of the driveway, the three Hispanic ladies again started yelling about the stolen purse. Shoppers came out of the stores and stood under the awning, watching to see the outcome. The yellow parking lot lights spotlighted the scene like a TV crime drama. But this was real. Life and death hung in the balance.

Spencer retrieved his radio from the holder and called for "Code 3 Cover." *Officer in trouble - Send help with lights and sirens.*

The driver, like a stunned deer, looked forward down

OUT OF DARKNESS

the barrel of the gun. The car was still in gear and the driver held one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake pedal. The little Filipino purse thief in the back seat urged him on.

“Go! Go! Go!” he shrilled. The two other gang members in the car yelled even louder, “Run the cop over, you punk. Run him over!”

Spencer stood tall and solid like a Roman marble statue. Tom sat fastened to his seat and came to a new understanding of what the term “Command Presence” really meant.⁷

Spencer glared at the driver with eyes straight forward, holding his head aright. His jaw locked tight. Both feet were firmly planted on the pavement, immobile and fixed. If the driver was going to go forward, he had to go through Spencer. Strong muscled arms were locked forward, ready for battle. His blue uniform, creased to perfection, displayed a heavy gold badge shaped like a knight’s shield affixed to his chest. His weapons of warfare held tightly to his waist were attached to the polished, black weaved Sam Browne gun belt - with extra ammo, a side handle baton, Pepper Spray and two sets of handcuffs. He possessed an armory of offensive weapons, but right now, the only correct choice was his hefty.45 caliber Sig Sauer.

Command Presence exuded from him like a magician’s spell. The crowd fell silent. The passengers in the car became spectators anxious to see the outcome. The driver and Spencer were locked in a battle of wills. One, with a 3,000 lb, 150 horsepower combustion-

⁷ "Command presence," in military and law enforcement circles, describes the physical way in which leaders lead: their body movements, tone of voice, the way they stand, how they make eye contact.

OUT OF DARKNESS

powered, speed machine and the other with a .45 caliber Sig Sauer semi-automatic handgun loaded with eight, Blazer 200 Grain, Jacketed, Hollow Point bullets packed with seven grains of high-powered gunpowder. Both were equally deadly.

With one push of the accelerator, the driver could leap the car forward smashing into Spencer legs crushing bone and mangling flesh, dragging him down the street as his life was wrung out of him.

Spencer held the gun firmly. With 1/8 inch of movement from his right index finger, he could exert the five pounds of pressure required to set off a chain reaction that would resound into dozens of lives. A small finger press would pull the trigger back a fraction of an inch to release the firing pin into the primer of the .45 caliber bullet locked in the firing chamber. The ensuing explosion would propel the hollow jacketed projectile forward at six hundred feet per second. With a fiery blast, the bullet would explode out of the gun barrel and impact the windshield before the driver would hear the shot. Two hundred grains of three hundred degree metal would smash through the windshield on a straight path to the center of the driver's forehead.

The imminent impact would instantly incapacitate the driver and end his life. His mother would cry. His father would be angry with the police. Each one of the viewers in the nearby crowd would recount a different version of the events. Some would ridicule. Others would carry the scene into their nightmares for the rest of their life.

Investigators would arrive and measure each square inch of the death scene. Attorneys would be retained. Courtrooms would convene. Judges would decide and jurors would give sentence. The fate of the lives of

OUT OF DARKNESS

dozens of people waited on the minute action of the young pudgy driver in a small imported hatchback car. The car rumbled with the steady up and down beat of the waiting engine.

“Turn off the engine!” Spencer bellowed. A faint siren pierced the silence. Spencer stood firm. The driver stared forward making no movement.

Spencer leaned toward the windshield placing the deadly end of his handgun six inches closer to the driver. His eyes squinted slightly in a Clint Eastwood sort of way.

Calmly, forcefully, determinately Spencer said one more time as if it were the final warning.

“Turn off the engine... Now!”

The driver lowered his gaze and slowly moved his hand to the ignition key. The engine died.

Tom let out his breath and inhaled deeply.

Spencer moved to the driver’s door and held his gun eighteen inches from the driver.

“Place both hands out of the car window and drop the keys. Now!”

Silently the driver complied. Obediently he reached out and dropped the keys on the pavement. He had surrendered. The thirty-second battle of life and death was over. All of the adrenaline dumped into Spencer’s body had no place to go and nothing to do. The fight or flight chemical worked overtime damaging his tendons and heart muscle while pumping an extra load of cholesterol into his arteries. Just another side effect of being a cop.

A police siren echoed across the parking lot signaling the arrival of the first cover officer. Rubber and smoking asphalt burned off the pavement as the car skidded to a

OUT OF DARKNESS

stop ten feet away. The pungent smell of burned brake metal wafted from the smoking wheels. The siren sound was squelched as red and blue flashing lights infiltrated the dull yellow parking lot lights, breaking the spell of tension.

Officer Hamilton jumped out of his patrol car, ran to the passenger door and pulled the front passenger to the ground. Spencer yanked the driver and the other gang member out of the car and commanded them to lie face down on the asphalt. He handcuffed both suspects and checked their pockets and belts for weapons.

He then helped them to their feet, walked them to the curb and told them to sit. Officer Hamilton guarded the three criminals while Spencer walked to the other side of the driveway to speak to the witnesses. Tom got out of the car and listened to the interview.

“Tell me what happened ma’am,” Officer Spencer politely asked the short, pregnant woman. Only moments before, he held the power of life and death in his hands. Now, he calmly filled in the boxes on a form on his clipboard like a bored stenographer.

“He stole my purse,” she yelled.

“I know he stole your purse and I have him under arrest,” he patiently replied. “Now tell me exactly how he stole your purse. Where were you when this happened.”

She took a deep breath. “Me and my friend, Sylvia, went into Albiertos to buy some dinner. I was standing at the counter looking at the menu on the wall. I was holding my purse behind my back with both hands, when I felt someone grabbing it.”

“Did you see the suspect come into the store?”

“No, I thought maybe a child or something was trying to look in my purse.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

“What did you do next?”

“I gripped tighter to my purse, and when I turned around, I see a teenage Filipino boy pulling on my purse. I yelled at him to let go of my purse, but he pulled harder. I lost my grip with one of my hands and I fell down.”

“So you fell down, but you were still holding your purse with one hand?”

“Yes.”

“And are you pregnant ma’am?” Spencer asked as he looked at her expanded abdomen.

“Yes, Five months now.”

“And he pulled you across the floor?”

“Yes. I did not want him to get my purse. He started pulling me across the floor to the door and he yelled at me to let go. I held on, and my friend was holding on to me. When he dragged me to the carpet at the door, the carpet got caught and he could not pull me any further. He hit me on the face two times and I let go.”

“He hit you on your face twice?” Spencer repeated.

“Yes with his fist, right here.” She pointed to her right cheek.

“Then what happened?”

“My friend helped me up and we ran outside to chase him. That is when I saw your police car come into the driveway. You are very fast.”

Officer Spencer repressed a smile. For the time being, he would let her think he arrived there on purpose.

“How much money did you have in your purse?”

“Only two dollars. I was just going to buy a taco and a Coke.”

“Only two dollars?” he repeated.

“Yes. And my wallet with my drivers license.”

Officer Spencer pointed to a signature block on the

OUT OF DARKNESS

arrest form. “Do you want to place the suspects under citizen’s arrest?”

“Oh, of course I do,” she answered and gladly signed the citizen arrest sheet.

“Thank you ma’am. I’ll be taking the suspect to our booking room for an interview. I’d like you to drive to the police station to get some pictures of the bruise on your cheek. Later, I’ll ask you a few more questions.”

“Thank you very much. I am so glad you got my purse back for me.”

Officer Spencer and Tom walked to the curb where the suspects were sitting. All three had black hair, combed straight back, and wore black baggy pants with black tee shirts. The small guy, who stole the purse, had a red bandana stuffed in his rear pocket.

Sitting on the curb in the dark, with their hands cuffed behind their backs, they looked more like school kids who were caught cheating on a test than vicious gang bangers. The pudgy driver had a new swollen tattoo on his left arm with the initials “E S” in blue scripted lettering.

“That makes it easy,” Spencer said to Tom. “Those initials stand for East Side. It’s a small Filipino gang from the next town.”

“Do you run into them often?”

“They decided they wanted to make a name for themselves and recently we’ve had more fights and found new gang graffiti in the area. Last week a Vario Loco gang member was stabbed in the neck and he blamed it on East Side.”

“These guys could’ve done it, huh.”

“It’s possible. Let’s get them to the station for an interview.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

More officers arrived and they took the suspects to the police station in separate cars. At the station, they ushered the small Filipino gang banger who grabbed the purse to an interview room; furnished with a small metal table bolted to the floor and three chairs. The suspect sat behind the table and Tom and Officer Spencer sat on the other side.

“Before we begin I am going to read you the Miranda Warning⁸, do you understand English?”

“Yeah,” the suspect said as he leered at the floor.

“You have the right to remain silent and refuse to answer questions. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

Anything you do say may be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“You have the right to consult an attorney before speaking to the police and to have an attorney present during questioning now or in the future. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed free of charge for you before any questioning if you wish. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“If you decide to answer questions now without an attorney present you will still have the right to stop

⁸ In the United States, the Miranda warning is a verbal warning given by police to criminal suspects in police custody before they are asked questions. The Miranda warnings were mandated by the 1966 United States Supreme Court decision in the case of *Miranda v. Arizona* as a means of protecting a criminal suspect's Fifth Amendment right to avoid self-incrimination.

OUT OF DARKNESS

answering at any time until you talk to an attorney. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"Knowing and understanding your rights as I have explained them to you, are you willing to answer my questions without an attorney present?"

"Yeah man. Let's get on with it."

"What is your name?"

"Ernie Pavalo."

"Is your real name Ernesto?"

"Yeah. But my dad has the same name so they call me Ernie."

"Thanks for your honesty," Officer Spencer leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "Most people I arrest start out lying."

"I have no reason to lie," he said proudly. "I didn't do anything that bad."

"The lady said you stole her purse."

"Yeah, but she deserved it." Ernie cocked his head back.

"Do you know she only had two dollars in her purse?"

"I don't need her money. If I need cash I can sell some speed or something." He leaned back and crossed his arms.

"If you didn't need the money, why did you steal her purse?" Spencer sat up in his chair.

"To get back at her."

"Get back at her? For what? Do you know that lady?"

"No I've never seen her before. Me and my homies were cruising the shopping center and I picked her out because she was Mexican."

"What did her being a Mexican have to do with it?" Spencer asked as he leaned forward.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Last week my girlfriend was in the parking lot at the mall and three vatos came up to her, snatched her purse, and knocked her down, I picked that lady because I wanted to get back at the Mexicans who robbed my girlfriend.”

Spencer sat silent. After hearing every excuse in the book, this was a new one.

“We’re going to take a little break,” Spencer said as he stood up. “Do you want me to bring you a soda to drink?”

“I want to get outa this place,” Ernie smirked. “I’m done talkin’ to you.”

“I’ll have your booking finished soon and get out transferred downtown in a few hours.” The duty officer came into the room to guard Ernie while Tom and Spencer left to get a drink.

“Wow,” Tom said as they walked to the lunchroom, “that was unbelievable.”

“I’ve never heard that excuse before,” Spencer responded.

“Why did he confess like that?” Tom put four quarters in the soda machine. “I thought he would lie about it.”

“Most crooks do lie about their crimes, or at best tell only part of the truth.” Spencer poured a cup of hot coffee from the coffee brewer.

“I think he’s proud of what he did and wants to brag to his girlfriend that he went to jail for her. He must have forgotten he turned eighteen last month. No more Juvenile Hall for him. He’s going to prison this time. That’ll temper his pride.”

Tom’s cell phone vibrated. Tom looked at the display and read the text message.

“Remember that girl you were looking for, Pamela

OUT OF DARKNESS

Sawyer?” he said.

“Yes. Have you seen her?”

“I just received a text message from her dad. She returned home this afternoon, and tomorrow night she’s going to the Teen Reach meeting at the New Life Dream Center. Her dad wants me to go to the meeting to see if she shows up.”

“We want to talk to her too. You know she’s wanted for being at that drug lab.” Spencer looked at Tom firmly.

“For some reason, I don’t think she’s that bad. I talked to her parents today and I think she just got in with the wrong crowd.” Tom sipped his drink. “Maybe she wants to turn her life around.”

“What is the first lesson you learned about druggies?” Spencer asked as he slowly stirred his coffee.

“All drug addicts are liars,” Tom said like a schoolboy reciting his lesson.

“That’s right, so be careful,” Spencer warned. “If she wants to turn her life around, that’s great for all of us. We could use some inside information on this case. If she cooperates with us we might be able to work out a deal for her.”

“I’ll be careful,” Tom assured him. “If I get a chance to talk to her I’ll try to find out where Brett is staying. I’d like him to spend a long time in prison for his crimes.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 7

TEEN REACH

Tom arrived early the next evening at the Teen Reach meeting and met with the director, Peter Hanson. Peter told him that as the guests arrived Tom could serve coffee, but suggested he sit in the background during the meeting.

The participants trickled into the old warehouse, furnished with two couches and five comfortable chairs set in the middle of the concrete floor. The only illumination came from three up-lamps placed next to the chairs. The darkness of the surrounding room was a stark contrast to the minimal light among the chairs drawing the visitors together as protection against the dark.

“Thanks to all of you for coming,” Peter began. “I hope and pray that God will help you tonight. We call this a Teen Reach meeting but all ages are welcome.”

Nine people were in attendance. They were a cross-section of the residents of Oak Hills. Four were men and five were women and their ages ranged from eighteen to sixty. Their occupations varied from street person to business executive. Most had a hollow, vacant, strained

OUT OF DARKNESS

expression and a craving for the mind-altering drugs that brought destruction and shame to each one of them. Pamela Sawyer sat in a soft green chair next to Peter. Tom stayed in the shadows and sat on a folding chair by the coffee pot set on a table by the door.

“Last week I asked you to share your stories about your life in the world of drugs,” Peter continued. “I know some of you are here because a judge told you attend rehab or go to jail. In spite of that, I ask you to at least pretend you want to be here tonight.”

Snickers crept out from two men who tried to suppress a laugh by firmly covering their lips with their hand. Peter scowled at them.

“Who would like to go first?” he asked changing his cross expression into a smile.

“There’s nothing you can tell us we haven’t heard before,” he reassured.

After a few silent seconds, Jimmy raised his hand.

“No need to raise hands,” Peter reminded him. “We’re not in elementary school you know.”

Jimmy pulled his hand down and smiled nervously. He was a thin man with a thick dark mustache that stuck out of his face like a hedgerow. He had hollow cheeks and his fingernails were chewed to the skin. His pale, wrinkled face was aged beyond his twenty-seven years by drug use.

“Go ahead Jimmy. Tell us your story.”

He looked at each group member and then looked forward into his clasped hands.

“Meth took everything I had and more. I am twenty-seven, have done Meth since I was eighteen. I quit from nineteen to twenty-three. The only thing that made me stop for so long was a time I took a paycheck and bought

OUT OF DARKNESS

half an ounce to sell and make money, but that plan fell apart within a day. I only sold one hundred seventy-five dollars worth the whole time.”

He spoke fast like he was trying to get all of the words out at once.

“Eleven days after I had bought it, my friends had to trick me into snorting crushed up Loritab pain pills and confined me to a friend’s room, not letting me go home until I had slept enough and stopped the delirium.

“By the seventh day I was frantically asking everyone I knew where I could get a pistol, because I thought a large group of people were stealing everything from my parents house while they were at work for the week. Luckily, my friends were more coherent and kept promising that it was being delivered soon. Luckily, this time I only had an embarrassing story and empty wallet to show for it.”

“When I was twenty-six, I was using regularly again and had kept a nice job for two years. I was the owner of a remodeling company. I hid my use well and no one knew about it until I confessed to it a year later. That day I turned down my best friend’s offer to help me recover from it and turned my back on a wide circle of good people and family. I started dating a girl who did Meth.”

Jimmy looked around for reassurance “Why not? We had so much in common, right?”

“Within six months we went from the cute couple, that never fought, to having at least two violent fights each week. That started when I quit working and moved in with her.”

“We lasted another year-- until she did the right thing and finally kicked me out on the street. I knew no one. I had become so reclusive that when I hit the street, I had

OUT OF DARKNESS

nowhere to go.”

“So for three nights I hung out in front of my ex-girlfriend’s job until the store closed and begged her to let me back in so I could sleep, shower and eat. I had no money, no job, and by the fourth day of being so ashamed of this, I finally knew I was at the bottom. I knew I was going to die soon. I told her this, in a dramatic plea to get back into her house so I could act like I had a life again.”

Jimmy stopped to chew on a fingernail.

“There must have been something she remembered about us so long ago, that she gave in, and took me back. An hour later, we were both getting high. We had three straight days of physical and mental abuse, mainly me ranting about how she had thrown me out to die. Such a pathetic sob story, being made up as I went. Yesterday was day four.”

He stopped and studied his gnawed fingernail. After a long pause he continued.

“She is at the hospital with a fractured forearm. She’s full of bruises with a swollen face and throat. In the realization of what had happened, I promised her some kind of justice so she might find peace instead of the shock she is in.”

“I didn’t even notice the moment I changed into a raging monster, demanding everything I wanted regardless of respect for another person.”

“I gave her my parents phone number so we both might tell them I have a serious problem and need help. I’ve asked both our parents help her to file a crime report and determine the charges I’ll face. I can’t imagine anything I can do to right the wrongs I have done to her, I can only hope one day she will be able to have peace again.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

“As for me, after realizing what I did to another human because of the long-term affects of this demonic substance, I don’t care anymore. I know it will stay with me and nothing I can do will save me from hell. I keep reminding myself I really did do this, and it really happened. I can only hope she can recover mentally and physically enough to put my last spiraling rage out of her memory and live a normal life again. I have no other thoughts any more.”

Jimmy leaned forward with his face in his hands. The darkness pushed in closer to the circle of light.

Peter cleared his throat to break the silence.

“Thank you Jimmy. That was quite an admission.” He looked at the group. “The first step on the road out of Meth-ville is to admit you have a problem and it’s your fault. You can’t go around blaming your mother or abusive father or the government or the police or anyone else. The only person who put that powder up your nose is you. No one forced you to do it.”

Several nodded in agreement.

“Who would like to speak next?”

Autumn, a red-haired woman began speaking.

“I had always been an overweight, drunken, pot-head until I was twenty seven. I had already been married and divorced and was the mother of three daughters. I started dating a guy I had known for almost twenty years. He had spent most of his life in and out of prison for Meth. Within six months, I lost my job, my three beautiful daughters, my home, my friends, my family, my self-respect and ninety pounds of weight to Meth. Do you think that was enough to make me stop? NO! I loved the boyfriend. He’d beat on me, cheat on me, and live off me, but never did he care enough to help me.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

She wiped her eyes with a Kleenex.

“I was spiraling downwards fast. One day my ex-husband came to me and sort of kidnapped me. He made me stay at his house until I finally asked for treatment. I attended The Kitsap Recovery Center in Bremerton. Thank God too, because I was wasting away to nothing.”

“Here I am now, two months clean, and it doesn't get much easier, believe me. I still have the cravings, but it's better not to use Meth, than it is to use. Now I am able to live with my decisions. I now see my girls every other weekend, and that time together is better than none at all.”

She paused and looked at everyone in the group and shouted out, “Don't support those in active addiction, and be hard on them... WE need it!”

She stopped, and the room was again silent.

Edna, a tough, weathered thick woman spoke out in a deep firm voice.

“Power is my Addiction!” Edna proclaimed.

“I'm not going to say Meth wasn't my drug of choice. It is. Everyday I tell myself it is my choice because I have to remind myself just what will take me down. I've been doing drugs since the 1960s. I'm fifty-six years old and I have ten years clean. But I have a story that led me on for years. I did drugs through the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s some of the 1990s and have always been able to leave them, BUT... it always called me back. I left the alcohol. I left the coke. I left the pot, but the Meth kept bringing me back to where I started.”

“I would be so self righteous thinking that I had it under control EVERYTIME, yea right. I even learned how to use people to keep my POWER... boy do you have power over people when you got the dope bag. It's

OUT OF DARKNESS

so sad people can give up so much for such a little bag.”

“My biggest withdrawal symptom was losing the power I had when I quit using Meth. I had no respect for money, because it came so easily when you’re selling that poison. I ended up in prison at age forty-five. How embarrassing is that? My poor family. I sat in prison listening to women tell their stories, some doing life in prison over drugs. Eight out of nine of those women were doing time behind bars because of Meth.”

“My big question is WHO’S WATCHING THEIR BABIES... That is a sad reality. Meth has so much power over the people it touches. It destroys so much- families, people, love, and trust. It has no limit to what it will take. I have the knowledge of knowing I will not live as long as my parents did. WHY? Because I have hepatitis C from Meth use. I have a lot of sins I live with now, and I pray that God will forgive me for selling drugs to so many people. I’m sorry.”

“I have a job now that gives back, I counsel adolescents on substance abuse. Everyday I see the horror the drug is still bringing. I’ll do what I have to do to help these kids know what kind of damage this drug can do to their lives and their families. Meth can cause a lot of sorrow, and not just to you, but also to every one who loves you. Think twice before you make that choice of saying yes to ANY drug because that life style will have you facing that devil Meth eye to eye one day.”

John, a balding middle age man spoke up next.

“I’m an on-again off-again Vicodin addict. Any pain killers for that matter. Only a few of my family members knew about the addiction, and I am not really sure why I quit taking the pills, other than I was tired of them controlling my life. I would get down to like five pills

OUT OF DARKNESS

and then I would be on the hunt for them. GOD I HATED LOOKING FOR THEM.....But I had to have them or I would be ill....GOD I HATED THAT FEELING EVEN MORE!!!

“I never really missed much work from it, but there at the end, I was starting to take time off because of how many pills I was taking each day. If I didn't have enough to get me through the day, at the end of the day I'd be so ill. I was so lucky no one ever found out about my addiction (except my sis).

“I ended up getting laid off from my job in 2005. I had about a two week spree where I was unemployed and barely had money to take care of my obligations. Thank God I lived with my sis.... she pretty much told me I had to get off the drugs now or I never would. I stopped when I was heavily using OxyContin. I was so sick from withdrawals - puking and having uncontrollable bowel problems.... it was horrible...I wanted to die. I did finally overcome the addiction to the Oxy.

“But still, two years later I am still battling with the Vicodin addiction. I do not use my last dollar to buy them, but I still do buy them and take them once in a while.... if someone I know has some to sell!

“Honestly lately I have been taking too many and my body can tell...this past week I have slowed down considerably. Like today I only took one Vicodin.

“I know I must get off these drugs eventually. I just hope I don't lose everything when the eventually comes...I know this meeting wasn't about the type of addiction I am going through but hearing these stories has given me some kind of hope that I can get better.... I HAVE WAY TO MUCH TO LIVE FOR!!!”

Peter shifted in his chair and spoke quietly.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Vicodin, Meth, Heroin, PCP, LSD, Oxy, Marijuana.... all the same. They’re addictive and they’ll ruin your relationships, your health, and they’ll kill a part of you. Outside of a doctor’s care, there’s no safe way to use drugs. Barb, you told me a story last week about your experience with Meth, would you share that with us?”

Barb was the only member of the group with a healthy smile and a clean look.

“Over the years, I’ve often wanted a way to let others know just how addicting Meth can be. I’m glad I found your group. If it means I can help even one person decide NEVER to try it.

“By the time I was in my early 20s, I had experimented with marijuana, alcohol and cocaine. None of those drugs really did anything for me and I never found myself ‘needing’ more. Even though I had experimented with some things, I was still very naïve.”

“A friend and I were at a bar one night and we met a girl who said she had something she wanted us to try. She called it ‘crank’ and I just assumed it was cocaine. To this day, I can hardly believe I blindly snorted that stuff without having any clue what it was. I guess that’s what peer pressure does to you. Anyway, we ended up going back to this girl’s place after the bar closed and stayed up all night just talking. I remember being amazed at how wide-awake I was.”

“Before I left her place in the morning so I could head to work (yes, it was a work day the next day) she gave me a little baggy of the stuff and, with a smirk on her face, said, ‘For later, when you start coming down’. Well, while I was getting ready for work in the morning, I decided to use the rest of it. I’ll never forget how dry my mouth was all day at work and how I could not stop

OUT OF DARKNESS

running my tongue around and around in my mouth to the point of it being in pain.”

“Still, I wanted more of the drug. **THE ONLY THING THAT SAVED ME FROM BECOMING A METH ADDICT WAS THAT I HAD NO WAY TO GET MORE!!!** If I had known how to contact this girl or anyone else who could supply the drug, I would have been frantically searching for it once I got off work.”

“Almost twenty years later, I am happily married and a stay-at-home mom with two beautiful kids. My point to all of this is that it **IS** an extremely addicting drug and **NO ONE** should assume it wouldn’t happen to him or her. I apparently have a high tolerance for drugs, but I was no match for Meth after just **ONE** use.”⁹

Tom saw the cluster of addicts turn from casual acquaintances to a solemn band of searchers united by their quest for freedom. The snickering probationers sat still and quiet with downcast mouths. Even they knew there was a better life for them. But they didn’t know how to find it.

Pamela Sawyer spoke softly.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” she looked around for help. “Oh God, no, that’s not what I mean. I do know why I’m here, I just... I just... don’t know how it came to this.”

She looked up toward the ceiling to the only one who could help her.

“I was raised in a good home. My parents loved me and gave me everything I needed. They cared about me, taught me proper manners, gave me the right education. I

⁹ The preceding true stories were used by permission from Meth stories http://www.kci.org/meth_info/letters/2007/April_2007.htm

OUT OF DARKNESS

had everything handed to me in a golden bowl.”

She scratched at a red sore above her left eye that would not heal.

“I don’t know where I went wrong. I picked the wrong friends, I guess. Just like Barb, I was at a party and a friend gave me a hit of Meth. Some friend huh, and I liked it. I liked the way it made me feel. I had energy, I felt good about myself. I felt I was in control of everything in the world. Nothing could hurt me.”

“Boy was I ever wrong. I have never been so wrong about anything. It grabbed me like a sickly ashen alligator piercing my heart and soul with its jaws of pleasure and pain. When the pain came from withdrawal, I covered it with that ugly white powder. When I hated myself, I gave my mind the love of the toxic pleasure of Meth. When I felt guilty about hurting my family, I found solace in my tweaked out druggie friends who were just as messed up as I was.”

“I chose the downward path of addiction that led me away from my God who loves me. It separated me from a family who cares, and because of Meth, I abandoned everything good and true and honest.”

She wiped a small trickle of blood seeping from the Meth sore on her forehead with a napkin. She held it in her lap and looked for answers in the red blood spot on the napkin.

“In the 7th grade I was voted the prettiest girl in my school,” she looked up. “Now look at me.”

Pamela sat silent.

“Thank you Pamela,” Peter said clearing his throat. “I know that was hard for you to say. You are at the start of a new journey. You are at the beginning of a new life. If you stay clean, you can get back all you lost and find

OUT OF DARKNESS

more love and greater happiness than you had before”

Peter stood up and asked everyone to stand. “At the end of every meeting I like to say a prayer for each one of you.”

They held hands as they prayed in unison.

“God, we thank you for being loving and merciful. We come to you with a broken spirit, and ask for help. We believe you will help us. Give us the strength to live each moment free of addiction. Amen.”

Tom poured coffee and set out several cups. A few guests meandered over and took a cup. Part of the group stayed to talk with Peter.

Pamela walked toward the door but stopped when she saw Tom.

“You were at Brett’s house that day after the drug bust, weren’t you?”

“That was me,” Tom answered. “I’m glad you came to the meeting.”

“You talked to my parents too, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I didn’t plan it that way. I was just walking by the house when your dad popped out from behind a rose bush.”

Pamela smiled. “That’s my dad. Always working on his award winning roses.” Her expression turned sad.

“Thanks again. I really want to clean my life up now. I moved back home and will be talking to Officer Spencer tomorrow.”

Tom stepped away from the coffee table to a private corner. “That friend of yours, Brett Baker, do you know where he’s staying at?”

“Believe me, you don’t want to find Brett. He’s been using more and more Meth lately, and I think he’s losing his mind. All he can talk about, or think about, is using

OUT OF DARKNESS

Meth.”

She looked Tom in the eye and leaned close.

“Stay away from Brett. He’s getting more heartless by the day. Before the drug bust, he told me he wanted to do a hot prowl and break into a house when the people are at home. He has some kind of a cruel power complex or something. Whatever you do, stay away from Brett.”

Tom rubbed a bruise on his tailbone. “Well, I have already, sort of, got to know Brett a bit and I’m not looking forward to our next meeting.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 8

CRUEL INTENTIONS

“Did you check it out?” Lester whispered. “Do you think anyone is home?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Brett threw his lit cigarette in the gutter and twisted the toe of his biker boot on it. He reached in his pocket and took out a small glass vial of off-white powder and sprinkled some of it on the back of his hand. He placed his nose to his hand and sniffed loudly, inhaling the toxic pleasure powder with the innocuous name called Meth. The powder invaded his nasal cavity and seconds later was inflicting his brain with the message to force his body to manufacture more endorphins to make him feel better. His tired, Meth drained body robbed energy from his muscles and organs to pump another surge of pleasure into his brain.

His eyes widened, his pulse raced and his mind envisioned the heinous crime he was about to commit. Brett curled his lips into a shape similar to a smile but he looked more like a snarling, angry dog.

Crank peered from behind a holly bush at the house across the street. “There. In the driveway. I see a car. I

OUT OF DARKNESS

think they might be home.”

The small light-green house - and thousands just like it, were built for the returning veterans after World War II. It contained two small bedrooms, a modest living room with a tiny kitchen and one bathroom finished with pink and green wall tiles. The current owners, Charlie and Mabel Zanich bought it second hand in 1957 and have lived there ever since.

“I know what I’m doing so quit your cryin’. Come on let’s go.” Brett hopped off the curb and strutted casually across the street. Undaunted, he walked directly under the single streetlight in front of the house. The Meth made him feel invincible. The amber streetlight lit up the narrow brick sidewalk ending at a plywood wheel chair ramp attached to the front porch.

The three tweakers ambled to the side of the house, as they had done many times before. Just as before, they snuck over the gate and shuffled to the back yard. At the back of the house, to the rear of the kitchen was a small wooden door with a sliding window in the top half. The window was open six inches.

“Easy pickins.” Crank placed the pry bar back into his deep pocket. “I won’t need this.” He punched through the screen with his fist and reached inside to unlock the doorknob. The lock clicked and the door inched open.

They shuffled into the kitchen, filling the small space with their smelly bodies. Never before had so much evil crossed the threshold of this peaceful house.

“Crank, you take the living room. Lester you look in the kitchen cabinets for silver. I’ll take the bedroom.”

Brett slowly stepped down the hallway to a white door that led to the master bedroom. The door was ajar. Brett looked through the crack next to the door jam and saw

OUT OF DARKNESS

two sleeping figures on the bed lying under the blankets. His pulse raced faster. A wheel chair sat in the corner on the far side of the bed. Under the covers, the man's huge belly slowly rose up and down with the rhythm of his sleep. A silent ceiling fan gently churned the night air above the bed.

He pushed the door open, stepped inside and stood over the bed, staring down at the two old people engaged in a peaceful sleep. His boots firmly planted, he faced the bed and imagined he was eight feet tall. He leered down at his victims and felt the power of control permeate his thin frame. His muscles tightened and his face pulled back into a sneer.

There he stood. Tall and lean. Strong. Undefeatable. With great power, holding the very life of these measly old strangers in the palm of his tobacco stained hands. His lips spread further apart revealing black, spongy teeth peppering his mouth. A foul chemical breath flowed in and out over his bleeding gums to provide his lungs the oxygen he needed to stay alive.

He was all-powerful. He was lord over his victims. They were no match for his awesome beauty and strength.

How will I wake them, he thought. Should I scream in their ears at the top of my lungs?

He had planned the perfect hot prowl. His victims were defenseless. They slept soundly as Brett considered their fate.

Should I lift the blanket and throw them on the floor? Should I kick over the lamp and yell fire? I think that I'll....

Brett had his answer. It worked its way into his twisted mind like a rusty corkscrew. When Brett was

OUT OF DARKNESS

eight years old, his drunken father would stumble into his bedroom to wake him violently in the middle of the night. Sometimes it was with a length of rope. Other times it was with a hockey stick. But his favorite way to wake his sleeping child was with his leather belt. Not the soft end of the belt but the hard end with the heavy metal buckle. Brett never knew which night it would be or at what time it would happen. Every night as he fell asleep he wondered if this would be the night for the beating. Every night he cried in fear.

“That’s how I’ll wake you old man,” Brett hissed.

Deliberately he unhitched his belt and pulled the leather strap out of the loops. He wrapped the soft end around his right hand and began to swirl the metal buckle end in the air.

“Daddy’s here,” he warned as he tornadoed the belt into the air and rotated his arms as fast as he could. Wind swished through the metal buckle like a helicopter blade.

When he achieved his maximum velocity, he swung the belt forward and screamed a battle yell at the top of his voice. The belt sailed forward and the buckle impacted the rotating ceiling fan and wedged tightly in the metal connecting flange. The force of Brett’s swing continued downward as his arm pulled the ceiling fan out of the ceiling along with chunks of plaster and lines of copper wire. The fan plummeted down on top of Brett’s head. He lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“What in tarnation is that noise?” The waking man yelled. He reached over to the end table and flicked on a dim lamp.

The light revealed the mighty Brett Baker sitting sprawl legged in the middle of the floor with the ceiling fan blades lodged between his neck and shoulders. A

OUT OF DARKNESS

single wire was still connected to the ceiling, making Brett look like a discarded marionette with broken threads. His greasy hair was sprinkled with plaster powder. The powerful spell was broken and he sat helpless spitting plaster dust from his mouth.

“Get out of here young man,” the woman shouted. “You have no business in our house.”

Brett shook off the dust and looked up at the woman.

“Shut up lady. Both of you stand against the wall.”

“My husband can’t walk.”

Brett looked at the wheel chair and looked at the man sitting half up in bed. He stood up and slapped the dust off his pants.

“Then you get up and help him,” he ordered.

Crank and Lester ran into the room. “What was that noise? Why do you have the light on? What happened to you?”

“Get out of here and load up the stuff.” He waved them out of the room. Crank snickered as he left to finish searching the living room.

“You get out of bed old bag, and help him into the wheelchair.”

“What are you going to do to us,” she pleaded. “Please don’t hurt us. Just take what you want and leave.”

The power was returning to Brett. “Just do what I say. It’s none of your business what I’m going to do.” He picked a broken piece of fan blade from his shirt collar and threw it across the room.

The lady jumped into motion and crawled over her husband to climb out of the bed. Her long sleeping coat drug on the floor as she pulled the heavy wheelchair close to the bed to help her husband. Brett watched and smirked. “Hurry up. What are you cripple or somethin’?”

OUT OF DARKNESS

He laughed at the sick joke.

"What do you want from us?" the woman cried. "Why don't you just let us alone?"

"That wouldn't be any fun. And the fun has just begun."

Brett pulled the glass vial from his pocket and took another hit of Meth. He was nearing overdose with his heart rate up to one hundred eighty beats per minute. Artificial strength and energy surged through him.

The man grunted as his frail wife helped him to the wheelchair. "You need to find peace young man. Jesus is what you need. He can set you free..."

"Shut up!" Brett screamed. "I don't need to be free! I do what I want! Go where I want! Say what I want and TAKE what I want when I want it! Your Jesus can't give me anything I don't already have."

"Peace. He can give you peace and freedom from your demons," the man said weakly. His wife hooked up an oxygen tube to his nostril and wrapped a plaid blanket around his knees.

"Just shut up and sit in that chair old man."

Brett yanked the last piece of copper wire from the ceiling and wrapped it tightly around the wheelchair, securing the man.

"What are you afraid of?" His wife looked up into Brett's eyes. "Do you think he will beat you up?"

Brett glared at her and picked up a length of wire from the floor. He pushed her to the floor and roughly tied her hands behind her back. She whimpered when he tightened the last loop with a final tug.

When finished with his wrapping job, he stood back and stared down at his helpless old victims who were laced up like a pair of old shoes. He had accomplished

OUT OF DARKNESS

what he wanted to do and now it was time for the final humiliation. He needed to feel better than them. He needed to feel superior. He needed to feel he was in charge and refused to admit his wretched life was spinning out of control.

“Who is in charge here!” He demanded in a piercing voice.

The old couple looked longingly at each other, but said nothing.

“I asked you a question,” Brett yelled. “Who is your master!”

“Jesus is our Lord,” the man responded weakly.

“Wrong answer,” Brett bellowed and pulled the silver plated revolver out of his coat pocket.

“I want you to look down the barrel of my gun and tell me again, who is your master.”

The man swallowed hard. “I’ve lived a long life. I’ll be in heaven soon anyway. There is nothing you can do to make me deny my Lord. Jesus is in control of you and me and everything in the universe.”

“Wrong again,” Brett replied smiling. He held the gun two feet from the man and slowly pulled the trigger. He licked his lips slightly and breathed in and out with quick shallow breaths. This is what power was all about. His eyes grew wider as he added pressure to the trigger.

The gun exploded in a red fireball of flame flashing backward into Brett’s face. The finely polished handgun was loaded with old steel bullets with corroded steel casings that had rusted solid into the chamber.

When the bullet fired, the chamber disintegrated spraying hot metal back into his face. Instinctively he back-stepped and tripped over the remnants of the ceiling fan and fell backward to the floor.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“What was that?” Lester yelled running into the room. Brett sat against the wall with his face covered with black gunpowder residue.

“We gotta get out of here,” Crank yelled from the living room. All the neighbors heard that. The cops will be here soon.”

Brett scrambled to his feet blinking to clear his eyes. Through blurred vision, he saw the old couple cowered together against the wall. The disintegrated handgun drooped useless in his right hand. Police sirens sounded in the distance.

“Next time old man,” Brett threatened. “Next time I’ll get you.”

Brett turned and ran down the hall behind Crank and Lester. Lester had a trash bag over his shoulder, full of silverware and crystal goblets. The three crashed through the front door and ran to the street.

“The cops are coming,” Crank yelled. “We’ll never make it to the car.”

A police car rounded the nearest corner and was bearing down on them.

“This way,” Lester urged and the three of them ran to a narrow alley on the side of the house that led to the open space behind the homes.

Lester ran ahead into the heavy brush with the black bag of silver goodies clanking against his back. The bag hooked on a low branch and a corner of it tore open littering silverware on the grassy forest floor. Crank stopped and bent down to retrieve their booty.

“Leave it!” Brett ordered as he ran past them to a tall stand of sapling birch trees. Lester tossed the rest of the goods over a fence into a nearby yard.

“What did you do that for?” Crank asked.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“To throw the cops off our trail,” Lester said as he turned to follow Brett.

The first police car stopped at the house and two officers ran inside to help the victims. A second car skidded to a stop and two officers flew out of the car in foot pursuit of the suspects.

Brett and his thieving companions were already deep into the old-growth forest. The dark night closed around the escaping thieves and soon they were hidden in the dense blackness of the woodland. Supple branches closed in over the path behind them concealing their escape route. More officers arrived to search the forest but the suspects had the lead and disappeared into the overgrown foliage. The search continued until daylight, but they found no one.

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 9

STRANGE EVENTS

“I want you to search this area from one end to the other and collect any evidence you find.” Officer Spencer handed out evidence collection kits containing twelve tamper resistant evidence collection bags and a roll of red sealing tape stamped with “Evidence” to the six Explorer Scouts who volunteered for the assignment.

Tom Proctor took an evidence package and squinted as the morning sun peaking through the trees.

“Tom and Kevin, I want you to start on the street where the suspects were last seen. Our officers may have missed something in the darkness.”

Spencer gave instructions to the rest of the Explorer Scouts, who left in groups of two to search the area.

Before Tom left, he went up to Officer Spencer. “Will the man and woman who were robbed last night be okay?”

“They have some bruises and are pretty shaken up, but they are tough old characters.” Officer Spencer climbed into his patrol car smiling. “I would liked to have watched that gun blow up in Brett’s hand. His mistake

OUT OF DARKNESS

saved their lives.”

He started the engine and turned to Tom.

“You and Kevin search all of the yards in the area and look for anything they may have left behind. If you find evidence, pick it up without touching it, and put it in the evidence bag. We need some clean for positive identification.” He waved to them and sped off to interview a witness who saw the suspects running away the night before.

“Which direction should we go first Kevin?” Tom asked looking back at the house where the break-in occurred. Yellow POLICE LINE - DO NOT CROSS tape draped across the front door. One officer was inside waiting for the crime lab to arrive to collect evidence. The morning sun had crept over the top of the tallest trees turning the damp morning air, hot and yellow.

“I think we should start at the house next door and go to the end of the street. Then we’ll cross over and search the other side.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tom answered.

After three hours of investigating, Tom and Kevin had checked every yard on the block. They also looked in every mailbox, storm drain inlet and every bush and hedge. They felt the hot sun directly overhead as sweat stained their freshly starched shirt collars. So far, the search had yielded nothing.

“Did I pass the test?”

Tom looked at Kevin. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything, I thought you said it.”

“Did I pass the test,” a voice spoke again from a distance.

“Who said that?” Kevin looked around but saw no one.

OUT OF DARKNESS

The air was quiet. Tom and Kevin listened for the sound of the strange voice. Two minutes passed and they heard it again.

“I need to know if I passed the test,” a strained voice called out.

Kevin pointed across the street to a large green bush in the corner of a front yard. “It’s coming from over there.”

Tom and Kevin sprinted over and looked behind the bush. A twenty-five year-old man, wearing only a faded pair of tan shorts, was laying face down on a patch of dirt in the scruffy front yard. Both hands were behind his back and his wrists were tied together with a long plastic zip tie. His eyes were forward and his nose was pressed to the ground as he looked into the dirt.

“Did I pass the test?” he asked in a muffled voice.

“Sir, do you need any help?” Tom stepped beside the man.

“No. I’m okay.”

“Well, I’m not so sure,” Kevin said as he walked to the far side of the man. “You seem to be laying on the ground with your hands tied behind your back.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. I am taking a test.”

“A test?” Tom looked at Kevin and smiled. “What kind of a test are you taking?”

The man stared into the dirt. “I can’t tell you.”

“If you don’t tell me what the test is about, I can’t tell you if you passed it,” Tom said.

Dust was caking around his lips. For thirty seconds he lay there saying nothing. Tom looked the man over and didn’t see any weapons. The front door of the house was open, but no one else was home.

“I really want to tell you if you passed the test or not,

OUT OF DARKNESS

but before I do I need some information,” Tom stated.

“Okay,” he said in anticipation.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“I’m Bill Hanson.”

“Where do you live?”

“Right here. In the house.”

“Does anyone live with you?”

“No. I live alone.”

“Well, perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Hanson, how did you get in this predicament.”

“What predicament?”

Tom looked at Kevin in disbelief. “You are lying in your front yard, wearing only a pair of shorts, with no shoes, and both of your hands are tied behind your back with a zip tie. To me, that looks like a predicament.”

“I am taking a test.”

“I know you are taking a test, but how did you get like this?”

“My neighbor across the street...,” he spoke to the dirt.

“Your neighbor handcuffed you?”

”Yes.”

“Did you have a fight with him?”

“No. I asked him to handcuff me.”

“Let me try to understand this,” Tom continued, scratching his head. “You walked across the street, wearing only a pair of old shorts, carrying a large plastic zip tie, and you asked your neighbor to handcuff you?”

“Yes. That’s correct.”

“And he did?”

“Of course,” the man answered.

“Kevin, why don’t you go across the street and ask the neighbor what happened,” Tom suggested.

OUT OF DARKNESS

The man lay still and said nothing as he breathed heavily into the dirt. A few minutes later, Kevin returned.

“He’s telling the truth. Mr. Hanson asked his neighbor to handcuff him.”

Kevin held his index finger next to his ear and made little circles. “Do you think we should call for a patrol officer?”

“He seems harmless enough,” Tom said and leaned over to talk to Mr. Hanson.

“Do you need any help?”

“No, I don’t need any help. The test is almost over now. Can you take off the zip tie?”

Tom and Kevin looked at each other.

“If I remove the zip tie, what are you going to do?”

“Go into my house. The test is over now.”

“Do you want to hurt yourself?”

“No, of course not. What would give you that idea?”

“Do you want to hurt anyone else?”

“No. But I would like you to remove the ties. My hands are starting to go numb.”

“Well Kevin,” Tom said as he took his folding knife out of his pocket. “Do you think we should untie him?”

“I don’t see why not. No crime has been committed. No one has been injured. No laws were broken. He appears to be mentally unstable, but he doesn’t want to hurt himself or anyone else. He’s just a nutcase.”

Tom opened the sharp blade and stooped down to cut the zip tie. “If I untie you, are you going to do anything stupid?”

“Of course not. I just want to go back in my house.” Tom sliced the plastic tie and the man rolled over and rubbed his wrists.

“Gee thanks,” he said looking up at them. “Are you

OUT OF DARKNESS

cops or something?”

“We’re Police Explorer Scouts and we’re looking for evidence from a robbery that happened last night.”

“I found a bag of silverware in my back yard this morning. Is that what you’re looking for?”

Tom laughed out loud and helped the man to his feet. Mr. Hanson brushed the dirt off his knees and walked toward the house. “I have it right inside if you want to see it.”

Tom and Kevin followed him to the door and Mr. Hanson gave them the black plastic trash bag with a few odd pieces of silverware still inside.

“This morning at about 1:00 AM, I heard a lot of noise in my back yard like someone was climbing the fence. I went outside and found this bag of stuff. I thought that maybe Santa Clause left it for me.”

Being careful not to handle the silverware, Tom placed the stolen property in the largest evidence bag he had. Then he wrote down the man’s name and took a complete statement about how he found the bag. He left out the part about him being handcuffed in the front yard. That was just too weird.

“Thank you for your help Mr. Hanson,” Tom waved as he walked to the street. “And next time you want to take a test, do it without handcuffing yourself.”¹⁰

¹⁰ This chapter is based on a real person I encountered while on duty as a police officer. A very strange character.

CHAPTER 10

DAYLIGHT THIEVES

“We havta’ get out of here,” Brett complained as he crawled out from under the old overturned boat they were hiding under and walked up the riverbank. “Hiding under that rotten boat all night was miserable.”

“If you hadn’t of shot that gun, we would’ve been out of here by now,” Crank complained and sat down to shake the dirt out of his tennis shoe. “Now we got nothing, and the cops are hunting us for attempted murder.”

“Shut up,” Brett ordered and walked away from the riverbank in the direction of a housing complex on a nearby hillside. “Let’s steal a car and get out of here.”

“The best news I’ve heard all day.” Crank shoved his shoe on and ran to catch up with them.

The pathway they were walking on led to the top of the hill and ended at a four-foot high chain-link fence behind a flat-roofed house overlooking the valley. A small, unlocked gate was directly in front of them. Brett boldly pushed the gate open and walked through.

The rear patio screen was closed but the sliding glass door was slid open. Inside of the house, a radio loudly blared out a talk show. The three thugs quietly crept up to

OUT OF DARKNESS

the house and looked through the open door. Brett saw a middle-aged woman, with her back to them, standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes. A large wooden key holder shaped like a skeleton key, hung near the door that went to the garage. A truck key with a distinctive black key cover with 'Ford' written on it hung prominently on the key holder.

"Let's just grab the car keys and get out of here," Crank whispered. "We'll move so fast she won't even see us."

"That sounds stupid, Crank," Lester whispered back. "Just like you. Stupid! Of course she'll see us. You're not the invisible man you know."

"Don't call me stupid!" He raised his voice.

"Both of you shut up." Brett slid the door open and stepped inside.

He took three steps and stopped behind the woman but said nothing. She was heartily scrubbing a greasy pan while listening to the talk radio-man complain about a war in the Middle East, commenting that it was all our fault. She turned around to place the clean pan on the counter and bumped into Brett's soiled, smelly jacket.

"Aiiieee," she screamed. The stainless steel pot crashed to the floor.

Brett grabbed her by both arms. "Stop screaming lady. I just want your car keys and we'll be out of here."

"Thethe keys are over there by the garage door. Take them and get out of here."

Brett drew her face close to his. His pungent odor wafted over her, making her feel like she was going to up-chuck her breakfast.

"No one tells me what to do. With that attitude lady, I might just stay for a while."

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Let’s steal the car and get out of here Big B,” Crank insisted looking toward the door.

“We go when I say we can go,” Brett shot back. “And I say we should stay a while.”

“Just take the keys and leave,” the lady stammered. “Your friend is right.”

“Why is everyone telling me what to do!” Brett pushed her away and raked his arm across the counter knocking the dishes on the floor. The shaken woman backed up to the corner next to the pantry door and began sobbing; her shoulders pumping up and down.

“First I got a whining crank-head. Now I got a cryin’ woman on my hands,” Brett hollered.

The woman opened the pantry door and stepped inside.

“Get out here lady! I’m not finished with you.”

Seconds later, the woman reappeared holding a twelve-gauge pump action Browning shotgun. She raised it shoulder high and let one round go through the patio door.

Boooooommm! The sound echoed through the small kitchen as the glass shattered outward in a cascade of broken shards.

Brett, Lester and Crank ducked down and lifted their hands over their heads.

“For Pete's sake woman, you’re psycho.” Brett extended his hands in a waving motion expecting to calm her down.

“I said, get out of my house,” she demanded and pointed the deadly end of the gun at Lester. She followed him with the barrel as he swiftly crab-walked to the garage door. With the speed of a striking snake, he grabbed the car keys and rushed through the garage door.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Boooooommm! A second shot rang out splintering the door behind him. Toothpick sharp shreds of wood blew through the door and impaled his right calf.

Brett and Crank stumbled into each other as they ran through the blown-out patio door. The distinct metallic clicking noise of the next 12-gauge shotgun shell sliding into the chamber followed them.

Boooooommm! The next round ignited from the barrel and blew a six-inch hole through the stucco wall as they ran behind the house to the side gate that went to the front yard.

Lester dragged his bleeding leg behind him and crawled into the cab of the pick-up truck in the garage. With shaky hands, he fumbled with the keys trying to shove the key into the ignition as the last shot blew a hole through the back of the house.

Lester started the truck, floored the accelerator and jammed the transmission in gear. With the garage door still closed, he held down the accelerator and black tire smoke burned off the rear tires as the truck crept slowly forward like a NASA rocket leaving the launching pad. As if in slow motion, the truck bumper collided with the door, splitting the aluminum panels at the seams freeing the truck from the garage like a moth leaving a cocoon.

Brett and Crank rounded the corner at the front of the house as the truck rolled through the garage door. With adrenaline pumping, they leapt through the air and landed hard in the steel truck bed.

The tires caught traction and the truck squealed down the street leaving two long, smoking rubber tracks behind them. The woman ran out of the garage and trained her long barrel rifle on the truck rocketing away from her. One more shot burst down the hot barrel and peppered

OUT OF DARKNESS

the truck with double ought buckshot shattering the rear window. Brett and Crank lay low in the bed as Lester swerved back and forth on the roadway; his eyes glued open in sheer terror. He forgot to shift from first gear and the engine screamed painfully as the tachometer pegged at 8,000 RPM's.

Brett and Crank slid back and forth like a sack of Bandini Yard fertilizer at each reckless swerve.

"Slow down," Brett tried to scream over the noise of squealing tires and wailing engine.

Lester sat fixed with eyes forward, keeping his foot glued to the accelerator, anticipating the next load of buckshot blowing through the rear window. He flew through a stop sign at sixty miles per hour in front of a black and white police car watching the intersection.

The officer buried the accelerator to the floorboard and fishtailed behind the out-of-control truck.

"Unit 1-23," the officer yelled into the microphone. "I'm in pursuit of a black Ford F150 pickup. We're eastbound in the 400 block of Winterhaven Drive at sixty mph. Do you copy?"

"Copy 1-23," the dispatcher responded in her always-casual voice. "Units 1-24 and 2-24 move over to cover 1-23 who's in pursuit of a black F150 pickup."

"Unit 1-24 copies," the radio crackled. "Unit 2-24 ditto. Both units are from Main and Wilson."

The police officer followed one hundred feet behind the truck, matching it turn-for-turn as the truck careened through the residential streets. The police siren wailed, warning women and children and little dogs to get out of the way.

The truck came to a three-way intersection and swerved left sliding into the center turn lane of a four-

OUT OF DARKNESS

lane road. The high-pitch wail of the police siren matched the tone of the screaming red-hot transmission of the pickup truck. The entire truck shuddered as the overheated engine forced a cloud of white steam through leaking the radiator.

Lester pushed the accelerator down harder forcing more speed from the overexerted engine. The pain from the wood chips lodged in his leg shot up through his body. Oil blew out of the side of the transmission and caught fire when it sprayed on the hot engine. Red flames billowed under the truck as Lester tried to bully more speed out of the dying truck.

“Unit 1-23, the pickup is on fire but still continuing northbound on Wilson Road. There are two suspects in the truck bed.” The officer made a hard right using one hand to steer and the other to hold the microphone.

“Change that. He turned right on Tennessee Street. The truck is slowing. I think he blew the engine.”

With a loud bang, the metal innards of the sick engine exploded and blew two holes in the side of the engine block. Lester tried to steer, but lost control and careened into a tall pine tree in the center of Children’s Park.

Brett and Crank slid forward and smashed headfirst against the back of the steel cab. The front end of the truck collapsed inward as the rear wheels jumped in the air and came down on the grass with a crash. Smoke and fire erupted from the engine engulfing the inside of the cab. Lester screamed in fear as the fire licked around him.

“We need fire and paramedics at Children’s Park. The truck is totally engulfed in flames,” the officer yelled into the microphone as he slid to a stop near the truck.

Brett shook his head to clear his mind and saw flames roaring out the shattered rear window. Lester screamed

OUT OF DARKNESS

for help. Brett ignored him and leapt out of the truck bed, and disappeared in the smoke flowing out of the engine. He ran low and fast toward the nearest home and scampered over the wooden backyard fence.

The officer grabbed a fire extinguisher from his trunk and ran to save Lester. In his panic, Lester tugged and pulled on the door inward, and it did not open.

“Try to calm down!” the officer yelled to him as he pulled the seal on the extinguisher and sprayed the puffy white powder at the flames flowing from under the truck. The flames around the driver’s door retreated for a few seconds. The officer burned his fingers grabbing the smoking door handle and yanked the door open.

Lester fell out of the truck, crawled away on hands and knees and collapsed on the grass next to a picnic table. Hot flames erupted again singeing the hair on the officer’s hands and eyelashes. He placed his hands in front of his face and backed away.

Crank, who was still in the truck bed, recovered his senses and felt the scorching heat coming through the truck bed. He crawled over the rail, stumbled forward and crumpled on the grass.

The officer grabbed his portable radio. “Two suspects in custody. And one suspect ran into a back yard on Texas Street.” He coughed twice. “We need a perimeter set up from Children’s Park, to George Washington Middle School.”

The first cover officer squealed to a stop and ran to handcuff Crank. A second officer slid to a stop and quickly placed Lester in handcuffs. The pursuit officer sat on the ground coughing from the burning, toxic smoke which had damaged his lungs.

A blaring siren signaled their arrival as the big red and

OUT OF DARKNESS

chrome engine truck roared into the park and docked by the picnic benches near the burning truck. Four firefighters in yellow turnout gear jumped out of the fire truck and worked in choreographed unison as they reeled out the hose and sprayed a heavy layer of foam on the truck. The flames were doused and the red inferno transformed into a white cloud of steam billowing up into the sky as the firefighters continued to drown the scene to prevent flare-up.

CHAPTER 11

FOOT PURSUIT

“Did you hear that sound?” Tom asked Kevin.

“Not again.” Kevin rolled his eyes.

“No really.” Tom stopped. “Listen.”

They both stopped and listened to the still afternoon air. In the distance, they heard a fire truck siren that grew louder as it came closer. The sound stopped a few blocks away and the air was again silent.

“Something must be going on over there.” Tom pointed. “There’s black smoke coming from behind those houses.”

His police radio hissed and Officer Spencer spoke. “Attention Explorer Scouts. The suspect in the home invasion burglary just ran from a burning truck at Children’s Park. Keep your eyes open and report anything suspicious.”

“I’ll bet that’s Brett Baker.” Tom placed the radio in his belt holder. “He’s been getting crazier by the day.”

“How do you know about him?”

“It’s a long story.” Tom keyed his radio to ask for instructions. The dispatcher assigned each Explorer Scout

OUT OF DARKNESS

a corner to watch.

The police set up a perimeter around a three-block area near where Brett was last seen. Each Explorer Scout had a police radio and assisted by taking a position on every other street corner. Patrol officers parked black and whites in the middle of the other intersections to deter Brett from passing through. Two officers with German Shepherd police dogs were called in, and they started a yard-to-yard search, looking in every storage shed and each vehicle for the suspect. They were confident Brett was contained somewhere in the cordoned area.

In the failing sunlight Tom stood alone on his corner scanning up and down the street for movement. In a vacant lot behind him, he heard a scraping sound like concrete being moved. He turned to look and saw a figure leaning over in the tall grass working hard to lift a heavy object. Tom thought it was a neighbor so he walked to the side of the street to ask him if he saw anyone suspicious.

“Excuse me sir,” he called out. “We’re looking for a suspect who’s in the area. Have you seen anyone suspicious?”

Without looking up the man mumbled a quick “no,” and continued lifting the object.

“Okay, thanks,” Tom turned to walk back to his position on the corner. An uneasy thought tickled the back of his mind telling him something wasn’t right. *Why is that man working alone on a vacant lot?*

He turned around to ask the man more questions and the dim figure stood erect and then disappeared like a magician in a carnival magic act. Tom blinked twice thinking that the man had just bent down behind the tall grass. But when he didn’t reappear, Tom went over to investigate.

OUT OF DARKNESS

He walked to the weed covered lot and pushed the tall grass aside and saw the round cover of a storm drain manhole pulled to one side leaving a three-foot black hole in the ground. From the dark cavern below, he heard echoing footsteps running away. He took out his mini Streamlight and shined the light in the hole. Fifteen feet down, he saw a junction of three large, round concrete drain pipes, each going in a different direction.

He keyed the microphone button on his radio. "This is Police Explorer Proctor at the vacant lot at the corner of Maple and Birch. I found an open storm drain cover and believe the suspect has escaped the perimeter."

"Copy that," the dispatcher said.

Tom expected help to arrive soon. He scurried down the rusty steel rungs to the bottom to listen to the direction of the footsteps so he could tell the arriving officers which way Brett fled.

Tom didn't know, at the exact moment he was speaking on his radio, another police officer was also giving a report, and Tom's important information never went out over the air. The "Copy that" reply was for an officer across town who started speaking a millisecond before Tom. Both radio reports ended at the same time. No one heard Tom's call for assistance. Help was not coming.

He reached the damp, musty bottom and listened as the footsteps echoed in the distance. A small stream of water several inches deep converged at the junction and flowed away down the largest tunnel. Unsure of the exact location of the footsteps, he stepped into the most likely tunnel and proceeded deep into the matrix of the underground concrete drainage system. The sound of footsteps became clearer, and Tom followed. When he

OUT OF DARKNESS

was confident he knew which way Brett was going, he keyed his radio and gave a follow up report telling the dispatcher the information. But the thick concrete and steel encased tunnel blocked the transmission. No cover officers were coming to assist Tom.

Steady receding footsteps echoed away from him down the largest tunnel. Tom covered part of the Streamlight lens with his hand to dim the light and started walking. Ducking low, he straddled the flow walking with his feet on the sides to keep his shoes out of the narrow stream of water trickling in the center. He came upon a five-foot by five-foot square room that had a round concrete shaft going straight up to a manhole cover at the surface. At the bottom of the shaft, three feet of dirty water filled a catch basin.

Tom eased his way around the catch basin on a six-inch wide slippery shelf. Slowly he shuffled sideways along the narrow green, slimy ledge. His left foot had just touched the far side of the when his right foot slipped on some brown goo throwing him off balance. Twisting around in mid-air he grabbed for the nearest metal ladder rung but missed it and fell sideways into the murky pool. The cell phone on his belt smashed against the sharp concrete ledge shattering the dial pad. His police radio flew out of the holder, sank to the bottom of black murky water and shorted out. Tom reached out and clung to the slippery edge to stop from sliding to the bottom of the pit.

He pulled himself up, and with wet feet and soggy pants, leaned against the side of the tunnel.

“My mom is gonna kill me for this,” he whispered.

Ahead, he heard the loud clank of a manhole cover being lifted. A thin ray of light filtered down from the end of the tunnel. Far ahead, Brett climbed out of the

OUT OF DARKNESS

tunnel and escaped the perimeter set up by the Oak Hills Police Department. Tom was the only person in the world who knew where Brett went.

Tom stood up and slogged his way down the tunnel to the open access shaft and looked up at the graying sky above him. The dim light caused him to blink after being in near total darkness for thirty minutes. He grabbed the first rusty rung and boosted himself up the ladder. At the top, he stuck his head out like a gopher getting his bearing after digging a backyard tunnel. Scanning in all directions, he noticed movement in a stand of wild tobacco bushes one hundred feet away.

Tom pulled himself out of the shaft and followed from a safe distance.

OUT OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 12

SAD TALES

Tom walked low to the ground and stopped behind a large boulder. In the distance, he saw Brett climb up the twenty-foot high gravel levy and disappear into the thick overgrowth in the river bottom area on the other side. During heavy rains, the entire valley was under water but through the summer, the valley stayed dry except for a small stream flowing over the rocky bed. Tom snuck out from behind his hiding place and followed just far enough behind so he wouldn't be seen.

Tom came to the top of the levy and looked into the valley. Thick green brush and tall cottonwood trees filled the quarter-mile wide river basin. The massive trees left long shadows as the retreating sun slowly ended its circuit for the day. One hundred feet away, Tom saw movement under a large green willow tree.

He crouched low and silently slid down the other side of the bank and pushed aside the brushy vale that led into the valley. Walking low and quiet, he traveled toward the movement. The last thing he wanted was for Brett to turn back and sneak up on him from behind.

OUT OF DARKNESS

As he entered a heavy stand of trees, the brush thinned and Tom saw a small campsite under the tall, overhanging willow tree. He drew closer and noticed two men sitting in saggy lawn chairs facing a flickering campfire. Neither man was Brett Baker. Tom approached slowly with no intention of surprising the campers.

“Hello in the camp,” he greeted when he was still twenty feet away.

A bearded man wearing a long sleeve plaid shirt turned to him. “Who goes there? What do you want?”

“I just want to talk. That’s all. Do you mind if I come in your camp?”

“Naw, go ahead,” the second man growled in a rough voice. He wore dirty green pants and an old baggy shirt that was once blue but now looked gritty brown. He lifted a bottle in a paper bag to his mouth and took a drink.

“How long have you guys lived her?” Tom scanned the camp and saw two lean-to sleeping tents made from scraps of plastic and black roofing paper.

“I don’t live here,” the second man said as he picked up his wine bottle and took a swallow. “I’m just staying here for a while until I get my life back together.”

“And how long has that been?” Tom asked.

The dirty green pants guy laughed and choked on his drink.

“About twenty years, wouldn’t you say Harry?”

Harry wasn’t so thrilled at the laughter but said nothing.

“What are you doing here kid?” Harry cradled the wine bottle in his arm and turned to look at Tom.

“Actually, I’m searching for someone.” Tom sat down on a thick, gnarly root ball left there by a fallen elm tree.

“Aren’t we all,” the dirty man chuckled.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Is that all you can do, is try to be funny Maynard? Can’t you see that this kid has lost something?”

He turned to Tom. “Tell me son, what are you looking for. Is it your little lost dog or something?”

“Not exactly.”

“Maybe he lost his senses,” Maynard joked. “There’s a lot of that missing around here.”

“Ignore him,” Harry continued. “He’s just an old drunk.”

“Yeah, and what are you Harry? Prince Charles?” He took another drink from his bag with his little pinky finger sticking out like he was at a tea party.

“I don’t know if I can help you kid, but God only knows... we all lost something.”

“You can call me Tom. And it wasn’t a pet I lost...”

“Maybe he lost his good sense,” Maynard interrupted. “I don’t know where mine is.” Maynard looked around on the ground pretending to look for something.

“Actually, I’m looking for a man.”

“Ain’t no real men here,” Maynard said sarcastically. “Just a couple of old losers.”

“What I’m trying to say... is that I’m looking for a suspect in a crime.”

Harry looked at Tom’s dirty uniform. “Are you a cop or something?”

“I’m a Police Explorer Scout and I’m...or I was...trying to track down a violent criminal who robbed two homes in the last twenty-four hours and terrorized the people who lived there. I lost sight of him when he walked into the river bottom.”

“It’s a big place down here. Lots of places to hide. I didn’t see anyone, did you Maynard?”

“I didn’t see nuthin’, I don’t know nuthin’ and I ain’t

OUT OF DARKNESS

telling nuthin’,” he slurred.

“We’d help you if we could kid....er, I mean Tom, but no one came though here.”

Tom sighed. “It’s just as well then. I shouldn’t be chasing him alone anyway. If my mom knew where I was right now, she would have my hide.”

“Your mom doesn’t trust you?” Harry asked as he put his wine bottle on the ground.

“Oh, she trusts me. She just worries a lot.”

Harry looked at the ground sadly. Maynard burped.

“We all should have people who care about us. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t be livin’ in this swamp with Maynard. I’d have a good job, and a nice house and live like everybody else.”

“Well, why don’t you?” Tom asked.

Harry looked up at him. “Because I’m a drunk. My father was a drunk, his father was a drunk and his father before him was a drunk also. We all are just a bunch of drunks”

“Halleluiah,” Maynard shouted.

“You don’t have to stay that way if you don’t want to,” Tom encouraged.

“Oh yes I do.” Harry reached under his lawn chair and pulled out a stained backpack. He opened the top, shuffled through a pile of old papers and pulled out a small picture frame.

“Let me show you something.” He tenderly held out the picture for Tom to look at.

The last rays of daylight filtered through the leaves showing an aging, color photograph of a little girl with short brown hair, framed in a three-inch by five-inch 24-karat gold picture frame.

“This is the only thing that I own of any value. I

OUT OF DARKNESS

would give my life for it.”

Tom held the picture reverently.

“When my little girl, Jenny, was five years old we had a fire in our house. I don’t know how it started, maybe bad wiring or an old chimney, but anyway, when the fire started,” he stopped and swallowed a lump in his throat. “When the fire started I was passed out drunk on the living room floor.”

He stopped and wiped his face with chapped hands. “I was so drunk I didn’t even wake up when the firemen dragged me out of the house to save my life.”

Maynard burped.

“I wasn’t man enough to take care of my little girl when she needed me the most. She lay upstairs sleeping while the fire blistered up the staircase. I have nightmares about her waking up screaming as the fire burned through the door into her bedroom.”

He put his face in his hands. “And I was just lying drunk on the floor and did nothing to help her.”

Tom sat silent. The last bit of yellow sun died in the trees.

Tom studied the photo. “That’s a sad story. You loved her a lot.”

“She was the light of my life,” Harry whimpered. “Her mom and I never got along too well. After the fire, she hated me, so I just walked away and never went back. All I have left is this picture of my little girl.”

Tom handed the photo back to him. “I’m sure there’s some way to forgive yourself. I know of a man named Jesus who can forgive anyone.”

Harry looked at Tom with pleading eyes.

Cursing sounds exploded from behind a large bush to the right of the camp. Tom turned to look, lost his balance

OUT OF DARKNESS

and fell behind the large fallen tree trunk he was sitting on and banged his head on a log. The sounds of the echoing shouts became distant for him.

“Curse these thorns and bushes,” Brett yelled as he stumbled into the camp. He had not seen Tom who lay dazed behind the tree stump.

“You got anything to drink?”

Maynard sat stone eyed and held out his paper bag for Brett. Brett yanked the bag out of his hand, tilted his head back and drained the last of the whiskey in three gulps.

“Ahhhh. That’s better. How about you old man,” he turned to Harry who was still holding the picture. “You got any booze?”

Brett stepped closer and saw the picture Harry was holding.

“Hey, what you got there? You got something pretty for me.”

Harry pulled his hands inward and held the picture to his chest.

“It’s nuthin, just an old photograph. Nuthin’ you would want.”

“I don’t know about that,” Brett stood over him looking down. “Maybe I like old pictures.” He reached out to take it. Harry pulled it closer.

“Please mister. This is all I have left of my little girl. Just let me keep it.”

“Let me see it first. Then I’ll decide if you can keep it.”

Brett grabbed for the golden frame and Harry clenched his hands tightly around it. Brett leaned forward, and the lawn chair collapsed and Harry fell in the midst of aluminum and vinyl straps still clenching his valued treasure with Brett on top of him.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Let me have it,” Brett punched Harry twice in the mouth. “Let go old man, or you’re gonna get hurt.”

Brett pulled on the picture and twisted against Harry’s clasped hands tossing him back and forth among the chair rubble.

“Let go you useless drunk!” He punched him once more and wrenched the picture from Harry’s grip.

Harry lay motionless on the ground breathing heavily. Brett brought the picture close to his face and studied the frame as it glittered in the firelight.

“This frame is almost pure gold. It must be worth a hundred bucks,” he said eagerly.

He kicked Harry lightly. “You don’t need gold you old drunk. Go beg on the street corner and buy another bottle of wine. That’ll make you feel better.”

Harry lay sobbing on the ground. What Brett said was true.

“I gotta get out of this jungle,” Brett stomped to the edge of the camp. “And if you see that kid around here anywhere, you tell him to quit following me. If I catch him, I’m gonna hurt him bad.”

Brett beat his way through the bushes looking for a way out of the river basin.

Tom shook his dazed head to clear his mind, heaved himself up and went over to help Harry. Harry pulled away when Tom tried to help him up.

“Leave me alone kid.” He waved him away. “You’re the cause of all this. If I hadn’t shown you the picture, this never would have happened.”

Tom stood up and looked to Maynard for reassurance. Maynard pulled a new whisky bottle out of his pocket and twisted the cap off.

“I’m sorry this happened Harry. I’ll get your picture

OUT OF DARKNESS

back.” Tom promised.

“You’ll never be able to get it back from that creep.” Harry sat on the ground slapping dust off his pants. “You’re just a kid.”

Tom felt like *just a kid* right then. But this kid knew God was on his side.

CHAPTER 13

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Tom followed the sound of the crunching bushes. Brett beat his way through the brush as Tom worked his way behind him, weaving in and out through small openings in the underbrush. The vegetation cleared near the bank of the levy and Tom ducked behind a thick sage bush and watched Brett climb up the bank. A full moon peeked over the horizon creating a black and white shadowy world. When Brett cleared the top of the levy, Tom ran forward to follow.

He scurried up the sandy mound and leaned forward pulling on shrubs with both hands to help him up climb the steep bank. When he reached the top, he stood up.

“Why are you following me kid?” Brett demanded blocking his way.

“I’m...”

“You’re the same kid I saw in the alley aren’t you?” Brett interrupted.

Tom circled left and Brett turned with him, keeping Tom directly in front of him. The steel toe of his black biker boot kicked a thick branch on the ground. Brett squatted down and picked up the eight-foot long branch.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Tom backed away to the far edge of the levy road.

“It’s time to finish what I started.” Brett swung the branch around his head in a wide arch. Tom twisted and swerved to avoid the impact but the heavy branch whacked him in the center of his back and launched him headlong down the other side of the levy. He somersaulted down the sandy bank seeing moon-dirt, moon-dirt, moon-dirt, moon-dirt then silence as loose rocks dribbled around him. Dust and grit sloughed off his matted hair. Tom shook his head to clear the sparkly stars in front of his eyes as the first stars of night peeked out overhead.

“Home run!” Brett shouted gleefully and slid unsteadily down the bank still gripping the long tree branch in his hand.

Time for a choice, Tom thought. Fight or die.

The decision was obvious but his reeling mind refused to obey his command to fight. Brett closed in and raised the heavy branch for a deathblow. Tom’s fight reflex took over and he did exactly as he was trained to do in his karate class. From the ground position, he lashed out with a sweeping leg kick and smacked Brett on a sensitive nerve just above his anklebone.

Brett screamed and fell down backward grabbing for his ankle. “You broke my ankle!”

Tom jumped upright and sprinted in a straight line away from Brett toward a new housing development under construction on the outskirts of town. Brett squirmed on the ground clutching his wounded ankle screaming in pain as Tom jogged past the freshly painted sign that read OAK KNOLL HOMES. He slowed and climbed over a chain link fence surrounding the construction site. The newly graded street was still a dirt

OUT OF DARKNESS

road, and on two sides stood skeleton like wood-framed homes waiting for their final skin.

Brett cursed at the moon and at God and at the pain in his leg. "I'm gonna make you sorry you did that," he screamed at the night. He hopped up, favoring his uninjured leg to ease the pain.

"What did I get myself into God?" Tom spoke to the night air. "You gotta show me a way out."

There was no time to be afraid so he trusted that God would take care of him. Even if that meant another face-off with Brett Baker.

"Your will be done," he whispered and dashed toward the nearest house.

The two-story, unfinished house closest to him looked like a safe place to hide. Every house was identical and it seemed it would be impossible for Brett to search each one. Tom hoped if he stayed quiet long enough, Brett would give up his chase and leave.

Tom entered through an empty, open doorway that would one day hold a richly stained Mahogany door. The plywood staircase in front of him rose to the second floor. Tom slowed to a tiptoe and snuck up the stairs to the landing. In the shadowy light, he could see through the open two-by-four wood framed walls to the rooms at the back of the house. The master bathroom was partially finished with a white bathtub and fiberglass insulation on three sides. Tom slipped through the open stud walls and turned to hide behind the bathtub out of Brett's eyesight if he chose to search this house.

Looking over his shoulder at the staircase behind him, he stepped backward into the bathtub and felt something soft and warm under his foot.

"Aeeiii," he tried to whisper.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Get away amigo,” the black shadow in the bathtub spoke.

“Who are you?”

“You woke me up.”

“Shhhh. I’m being chased,” Tom hushed.

“Is that you crazy amigo?”

“Pedro?”

“Tom?”

“Quiet, Pedro. Brett is chasing me.”

“Again?”

“Quiet, or silencio, whatever. He’s crazier than ever.”

“What should we do?”

“Be quiet for one thing.”

“You’re the one making all the noise. I was sleeping.”

Tom got the message and stopped whispering. The metal chain on the security gate rattled as Brett climbed over the fence into the construction site.

“Come out here you punk kid,” he yelled to the line of unfinished homes in front of him. “Nobody cripples me and gets away with it.” He limped forward favoring his good leg. Brett stopped in the middle of the dirt street and took a small glass vial from his pants pocket. He put a teaspoon size pile of white powder on the back of his hand and sniffed it deep into his nose.

“Oohh- whheee! That stings!” He shook his head, and with the back of his hand wiped away a dribble of blood coming from his nose. When the Meth hit his brain his pupils enlarged and the dark world around him lightened to a pale orange. He forgot the pain in his leg and scanned the unfinished housing development looking for his prey. His heart rate doubled, and he sucked in air and puffed it

OUT OF DARKNESS

out in rapid, stinky breaths.¹¹

Tom and Pedro scrunched together in the small bathtub, breathing softly.

“Where did you go little boy?” Brett taunted as he studied each wood framed house carefully. He had not slept for four days and was running on artificial stimulants to keep him going. He ran his tongue around inside his dry mouth and stopped when he felt a back molar that had been bothering him. With dirty fingers, he reached into his mouth, pulled out a mushy black tooth, and tossed it away. Meth Mouth was eating away at his blackened teeth and bleeding gums.

“I think that you are..are...are...” he waved his hand around, lifting it over his head in an semicircle and stopped with his arm pointing directly at the house Tom was hiding in. “Right there!”

Whether is was good luck for him or bad luck for Tom or if he was being directed by some evil, external force did not matter. He started moving again and lurched forward like a possessed Frankenstein monster on a beeline to their upstairs hiding spot.

He clamored through the entry way and yelled to the darkness, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Tom and Pedro sat frozen, silently praying he would

¹¹ Meth fact: Chronic abuse produces a psychosis similar to schizophrenia and is characterized by paranoia, picking at the skin, self-absorption, and auditory and visual hallucinations. Violent and erratic behavior is frequently seen among chronic, high-dose methamphetamine abusers. The most dangerous stage of the binge cycle is known as "tweaking." Typically, during this stage, the abuser has not slept in three to fifteen days and is irritable and paranoid. The tweaker has an intense craving for more meth; however, no dosage will help recreate the euphoric high. This causes frustration and leads to unpredictability and a potential for violence..."
<http://www.lansingpolice.com/site/sforces/sos/methamphetamine.htm>

OUT OF DARKNESS

go away.

“I have all night ya know!” Brett said confidently as he slowly walked through the kitchen area on the first floor. “No one’s here to rescue you.”

Tom wished he had his police radio with him, or a MAC-10 machine gun.

“Amigo, do you think we can fight him?” Pedro barely whispered.

Tom felt the large bruise growing in the center of his back from the blow of the tree branch. “I’d rather not.”

“Where, Oh where could that rotten kid be,” Brett sang out. “Won’t he be sorry when he meets up with me.” Brett laughed loudly.

“Let’s go!” Tom jumped out of the tub pulling Pedro up with him. They ran to the back of the house and twisted through the opening between the exterior wall made of two-by-four studs, and held on to the outside of the house like bats clinging to a cave wall. Brett heard the noise and bounded up the stairs two steps at a time.

Tom and Pedro ladder-walked down the outside of two-by-four wall and slid to the ground below. As soon as their feet hit the dirt they dashed away in the direction of a three-story wood framed apartment building under construction one hundred yards away.

“Get back here you little brat!” Brett screamed through the open wall. “Who is that with you?”

Brett turned to look behind him expecting to see more kids. Paranoia struck him like a block of ice and he rapidly looked left and then right and up to the attic, and back out through the wall to see Tom and Pedro running away. A mouse ran across some construction paper on the floor and Brett jumped up banging his head on a wooden block in the wall.

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Ouch!” He winced rubbing his head. Paranoid delusions slipped inside his mind.

“I’ll bet the cops are here! No, that’s not true,” he said out loud. “You’re just getting tense. Maybe that kid is a cop. Maybe the CIA has this place bugged. No, that’s stupid.”

Brett argued with the fearful half of his brain while Tom and Pedro fled to the concealment of the large, unfinished building.

“Get control of yourself,” Brett scolded and took another nose-full of Meth from his glass vial. The shock from the blast of Meth shook him back to action but did nothing to relieve his paranoia. With fear trailing behind him, he retraced his steps and stumbled down the staircase continually looking over his shoulder as he went.

At the top of the stair, he saw a vision of a black robed demon with hollow white eyes, pointing a withered white hand toward the apartment building. Cold chills ran down his spine as he felt the bitter dead eyes of the demon peering into his dark soul. The black demon beckoned again with outstretched arms and then faded away into an unsettled mist. Brett turned in fear and ran out of the building knowing he would face his demon again.

His battered soul was broken by years of fatherly abuse multiplied by his rabid addiction to alcohol and Meth. He had not seen his father in two decades, and swore he would never forgive him for his cruelty. His anger toward his father fueled his hatred for Tom and his intense desire to crush him.

* * *

OUT OF DARKNESS

“This building is muy grande,” Pedro said as they hurried into the unfinished apartment courtyard that would one day be lined with fluted limestone columns and stately, green cedar trees. Tonight, it was only a large, empty dirt lot between two tall, unfinished buildings. The rising moonlight filtered through the open stud walls casting scattered light over the clumpy dirt pathway.

“No time to look around,” Tom urged. “Let’s get as far from him as we can.”

“I agree compadre, but I don’t think your friend is going to give up.”

“He’s not my friend.”

“Then why does he want to be with you so much?”

“He doesn’t want to make friends with me, he wants to hurt me.”

“Maybe you just have to get to know him better. If you are nice to him, maybe he will be nice to you,” Pedro said with a grin.

“God says to love our enemies but I don’t feel very loving at this moment.” Tom climbed up a rickety, wooden ladder that went to the walkway on the second floor. In front of them, a long, dark hallway with white sheets of drywall on both walls ran through the entire length of the building. Brett came into the courtyard as Tom and Pedro stepped off the ladder to the landing.

“Let’s push the ladder down amigo.” Pedro kicked at the temporary wooden braces and forced out the nails securing it to the landing. They both pushed and the ladder leaned outward and clattered to the ground.

“That will slow him down,” Tom said as he turned around and ran into the dark corridor and tripped over a stack of boxes full of gooey, white, drywall compound

OUT OF DARKNESS

and fell headfirst into a loose roll of thin, galvanized line-wire that snarled around his shoulders and neck.

“Get me out of here!” he pleaded as he struggled against the wire.

Pedro felt around for him in the darkness and touched Tom’s head and found the tangled mess of wire twisted around him.

“This is a good thing you found the wire.” Pedro pulled at the wire, freeing Tom’s left arm.

“What do you mean ‘a good thing’? I want to get out of this awful mess.”

Tom tugged at the wire and freed his other arm.

“It is good you found this because we can make a trap. Sometimes I use this wire to make a trap to catch something so I can eat.”

“You want to trap Brett? And eat him?”

“No, señor. I just want to tangle him up like you, so we can run away.”

“I understand,” Tom said. “That’s a good idea. Pull me up and let’s get to work.”

Tom felt around in the dark and found the end of the long line of coiled up thin wire. He turned on his small Streamlight flashlight that spread out enough light to help them devise their trap. He wrapped one end of the wire around a loose nail in one wall and tied a loop around a scaffold brace near a doorway on the opposite wall. Together, they walked backward, criss-crossing the wire across the hallway securing the steel line around nails, electrical stub outs, loose screws, fire hose boxes and anything they could find to make a wire net. Soon, twenty feet of hallway was a woven mass of strong, thin wire wrapped tighter than a spider’s web.

Brett stumbled into the dirt courtyard following their

OUT OF DARKNESS

unseen footsteps like a bloodhound. Dark forces were at work that night pushing Brett toward a final showdown with Tom. Brett tripped over the wooden ladder in the courtyard. He picked it up, raised it against the landing, hustled up to the top and stepped on to the second floor.

“Rápido,” Pedro urged as they hurried to the far end of the hallway. Behind them, they heard loud running footsteps that sounded like a crazed wild boar rushing toward them.

“What...,” Brett managed to shout as he fell into the twisted wire web. Wire looped around his feet and wrists as he fought against the trap like an untamed coyote. Falling forward, he stumbled into more wire, which added to his rage.

“I am going to tear you apart!” Brett howled as he fought with the wire, tearing out the screws that held it in place. The thin wire slipped over his skin cutting straight gashes in his hands and arms.

Tom and Pedro turned left, ran up a steel fire stairway and climbed to the third floor. Fierce, brutish screams echoed through the large building as Brett fought his way through the woven trap.

“Look at this.” Tom pointed to a pallet loaded with small cardboard boxes filled with drywall compound.

“Grab a box of drywall mud and throw it on the staircase below so he will slip on the mud. That wire won’t hold him forever.”

Pedro tore the top off a thirty-pound box of pasty drywall mud that looked like vanilla yogurt, and dumped it on the stair. Tom took a second box and threw it over the steel rail smashing it open on the stair treads below. They threw four more boxes of drywall mud over the rail coating the stairs and railing in a thick layer of slimy,

OUT OF DARKNESS

white drywall compound.

They turned and climbed up a steel access ladder that opened to the roof above and climbed on the roof.

Heavy boots thumped down the corridor two floors below. Still wound up with fifty feet of thin wire looking like a shark tangled in a fishing net, Brett turned the corner and charged up the stairs. He made it to the second step when he stepped on the slippery white mud and his boot slipped out from under him. He flew in the air and for a millisecond he hung suspended with the wooden ceiling above him and the cold steel landing below him.

Gravity sucked him downward and slammed him back first on the hard steel grate of the landing. The impact forced all the air out of his lungs and left him momentarily paralyzed as he lay on his back trying to suck in oxygen. His eyes bulged in their sockets as he instinctively reached for his throat in the universal motion of choking.

Above him at the top of the stairs, the demon monster beckoned him forward. A pale, boney hand reached out like a wisp of smoke motioning for him to advance. The fear of the demon was greater than his fear of suffocating so, still breathless, he pushed himself up and stood looking into the sunken white eyes of the beast. With a sound of an imploding tornado, he painfully sucked in six liters of air.

Still gasping, he inched upward clutching both handrails, afraid to look up at the beckoning image. Stepping gingerly on each step, he reached the landing and looked up expecting to meet the monster, his heart crashing against the inside of his chest in fear. The demon had vanished.

“Stinkin’ kid. Now you’re gonna pay.” Looking up,

OUT OF DARKNESS

he saw the open roof hatch and crawled up the steel rungs that went to the roof.

* * *

“Where do we go now?” Pedro asked as he looked down over the low wall on the edge of the flat roof. A mound of sharp, splintered woodcuttings lay piled in a heap thirty-five feet below them.

“Now is a good time to say a prayer.” Tom ran to the corner of the building hoping to find a ladder.

“Look!” He pointed to a fifteen-ton, high-reach telescopic forklift parked eight feet from the building. Two flat, metal forks rested in midair parallel to the edge of the roof. “Do you think I can jump that far?”

“I think you are loco in the head.”

“Do you see another way?”

Pedro looked around for an answer. Brett popped his head up through the roof hatch snarling. Loose strands of wire trailed behind him.

“Let me go first,” Pedro insisted.

Pedro stepped backward ten steps then ran forward in a full sprint and leapt off the edge of the building and slammed his chest against the flat side of the steel forks suspended high above the ground. With his left hand, he caught the fork, but his right hand slipped off, twisting him around backward. The twisting motion curled his sweater around the fork leaving him dangling thirty-five feet in the air by the thin fabric of his pullover sweater.

“Hold on Pedro,” Tom shouted as he put one foot on the edge of the roof parapet and shoved off over the void. With greater than human ability, he cleared the distance and landed with both feet on the closest fork, waving both arms in the air for balance. He grabbed tightly to the forklift mast with his right hand and stooped down to grip

OUT OF DARKNESS

Pedro's sweater with his other hand.

"You must be Superman, amigo. No one can jump that far."

"You did."

"Yeah, but look where I am now. Pull me up."

Tom gripped the sweater with one hand and pulled Pedro up far enough for him to grab the steel fork. Together they tugged and pulled and finally Pedro was up on the forks with Tom.

"Hello boys," Brett growled as he glared at them from across the precipice.

"Goodbye Brett." Tom wrapped his arms around the long boom and slid down the greasy telescoping piston. He stepped on the metal roof above the cab and leaned over, holding on to the edge with his arms, and somersaulted into the cab of the tractor.

"Get down here rápido," Tom yelled to Pedro as he reached for the ignition key and turned the engine on. The one hundred twenty-five horsepower Turbo diesel engine burst to life and churned out black smoke from the overhead exhaust pipe. Pedro slid down the hydraulic ram and landed hard on the metal roof. Brett stepped back ten steps and cocked one foot back to begin his run for the edge.

Tom scanned the controls and grabbed the Boom Control and Fork Tilt Joystick. He twisted the stick hard to the left and smashed the heavy steel boom against the side of the building. The entire building shuddered, and Brett lost his balance and fell down. Tom twisted the control again and the boom swung to the right and then he returned it quickly to the left smashing into the building splintering the wood on the parapet. Brett tried to get to his feet but stumbled again when the building

OUT OF DARKNESS

quaked beneath him.

“Go get him!” Pedro yelled.

Tom jammed the transmission in gear and stomped on the accelerator plowing the pointed steel forks into the side of the apartment building. Lumber cracked and splintered, weakening the structure. Using the joystick, he twisted the forks down, pulling out a large section of the wall. Shattered chunks of wood, loose strands of electrical wire and black plumbing pipes cascaded to the ground.

Brett ran forward to reach out for the fork but Tom tweaked the control again and smashed the heavy steel against his chest. Brett flew backward and landed on the flat plywood roof, embedding sharp wood splinters into his back.

Red rage filled his wasted, Meth-crazed mind with only one thought. Kill! Kill! Kill! The black robed, demon thing stood at the edge of the roof pointing at Tom.

“Do it again!” Pedro urged.

Tom smashed the boom against a main steel support post on the first floor. Tom twisted the forks against the post bending it into a pretzel and the building creaked like a sinking ocean liner hitting an iceberg.

Brett lurched forward but fell again when Tom smashed the post a second time. Brett lay facedown and held both arms out, trying to grip the plywood as the building shuddered with each crushing blow.

Tom knocked out the post and the flat roof deck settled to one side creating a gaping hole in the center. The plywood nails screeched as the roof was sucked into the growing dark hole three stories deep. Brett turned his head toward the hole and saw the black demon fall

OUT OF DARKNESS

backward into the darkness, followed by shattered pieces of the building.

Crash! Crash! Crash! Tom smashed the weight of the fifteen-ton steel beast against the building. Through the hole in the wall, he saw Brett holding on to the collapsing sloping roof by his fingernails and sheer determined anger. He growled like a dog as blood ran out of his methamphetamine tortured sinuses.

Tom didn't want to kill anyone but he had to know Brett wouldn't be able to follow. He backed the tractor up, switched to first gear and drove full speed at the building, sinking the forks deep into the wooden structure ripping apart the last stronghold of support. The final support beams gave way and an entire section of the building collapsed inward and swallowed up everything into a gaping black hole. Dust flew into the air enveloping Brett as gravity sucked him backward into the twisted pit of metal and wood.

With a deafening thump, the rest of the building fell inward pulling the tractor forks with it, tipping the telescopic forklift forward into the outer edge of the debris.

Pedro held on to the cab roof to save his life. Tom braced himself with both arms locked on the steering wheel. In a last groaning breath, the building heaved downward leaving a large pile of rubble surrounded by the few remaining exterior walls. The forklift slowly tipped forward and rested against the rubble, as tractor engine thumped out a steady idle from the heavy diesel pistons. Tom turned off the key and silence covered the night.

“Are you okay Pedro?”

“Si' senior.”

OUT OF DARKNESS

“Wow.”

“Si’ ... Wow.” Pedro climbed off the roof and lowered himself to the ground. “I have never seen such a thing happen.”

“Me neither. I don’t suppose they will be too happy about this.”

“Si’ senior.”

Tom saw a shinny object on the ground by the tractor tire and stepped down from the cab to pick it up. Under a piece of broken plywood, he found the gold picture frame that Brett stole from Harry.

“All this for a piece of gold.”

“What did you say amigo?” Pedro asked.

“Oh, nothing. I just need to stop at the river bottom for a minute before going home. I have something to give to a friend.”

Pedro looked over his shoulder at the picture. “That is muy bonito. I’ll bet it cost a lost of money.”

“The value is not in the gold Pedro. It’s in the memory.”

Pedro looked at the picture of the little girl but did not understand what Tom was saying.

“No comprendo senior.”

“It doesn’t matter. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

CHAPTER 14

FACE OFF

The sleeping security guard stationed in an old trailer on the far side of the housing complex jumped to his feet at the sound of the imploding building. He looked out through a dirty window and saw thick dust billowing up from the building like smoke. Grabbing the phone, he punched 9-1-1 to summon the police and fire department.

Tom and Pedro climbed over the chain link fence and walked back toward the levy. Fatigue swept over Tom and the pain of the battering he received grew sharper with each step.

“Brett won’t bother either of us anymore,” Tom sighed. “But inside, I hope he survived.”

“My mama used to say to me to be careful what we hope for. Sometimes it will come true.”

“It’s impossible for anyone to walk out of that kind of destruction, isn’t it?” Tom was sorry he posed the question.

Changing the subject he asked, “So tell me Pedro, did you ever find your parents?”

“I hope to see them soon. I am told they are coming

OUT OF DARKNESS

back for the harvest.”

“Maybe you can live in a real house someday instead of living on the streets and river basins.”

“That would be muy bueno. It is hard to live this way.”

“You can always stay with me if you want.”

“I’ll wait one more day for my madre and padre. Then maybe, if they do not come I’ll live with you. I am very tired.”

“Amen to that.”

They continued walking together listening to the cricket’s friendly chirp and the frogs softly croaking out their song to the moon and stars. The smell of cooling field grass perfumed the still air as small bats swirled above them catching tiny insects. Only moments before, their world was filled with chaos and clamor and now it was as serene as a summer night could be. Tom wondered how he was going to explain this to his mother. She expected him back hours earlier. His soiled and tattered uniform was beyond repair. The remnants of his smashed cell phone hung useless in his belt holder.

As soon as he returned the picture frame, he would high-tail it to the nearest phone and call the police. Someone had to go back to look for Brett, and without a doubt, that was a job for the police.

“I really appreciate your help Pedro. I would’ve been a dead duck without you.”

“You would have found a way. I think that maybe God lives with you.”

Tom remembered his earlier prayer for help and thanked God for rescue.

“Here we are.” Tom started the short climb up the dirt bank of the levy. You don’t have to go if you don’t want

OUT OF DARKNESS

to.”

“I have to leave you now. I want to go to the camp by the river where the other field workers live to ask if anyone has seen my family.”

Tom and Pedro reached the top of the levy and stopped on the dirt road.

“Thanks again for your help. You have my address and phone number. Be sure to call me if your family doesn’t come soon.”

Pedro reached out and shook Tom’s hand.

“And besides. I may need someone to collaborate my story. No one is going to believe this one.”

“Adios my good friend. I know we will meet again.” Pedro slid down the far side of the bank, walked into the valley and disappeared into the heavy brush.

Tom stood silent looking up into the night sky at the glory of God’s heaven. Large moon craters beamed down moonlight so bright that Tom could almost feel the heat of the reflected sunlight traveling from the far side of the earth. He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep cleansing breath of fresh cottonwood scented air.

“Hey punk,” a raspy voice uttered.

“Impossible,” Tom gasped as he turned slowly and faced the shattered visage of his rival Brett Baker. Brett was holding a broken two-by-four in his hand with the splintery end pointed toward Tom. Dust and drywall powder covered him from head to foot. Bloody splashes seeped through his clothing turning the powder a deep red color. An evil influence that gave him supernatural strength, along with excessive use of methamphetamine kept him standing and ready to fight.

“I told you I would get you.” Brett cold-cocked Tom on the side of his face with the two-by-four, knocking

OUT OF DARKNESS

him backward. Brett swung again, but Tom deflected the next attack with his left arm and responded with a fake punch and then machine-gunned jabs at him to the front of his neck. Brett stepped backward and tripped over a rock.

Tom could not run away this time. It was time to face the demon.

“Curse you,” Brett hissed through his damaged larynx. “Why can’t I beat you?”

“Because God is on my side.”

“God!” Brett roared out like it was a dirty word. “God won’t be able to help you now.”

With surprising agility, he jumped to his feet and stalked toward Tom.

“God can’t help you,” Brett hissed. “And he can’t help that little Mexican kid that I’ll find and destroy when I’m finished with you.”

Brett swung again and Tom ducked just as the two-by-four was about to smack a hole in the side of his head.

“And when I’m done with him,” Brett twisted back for another strike. “I’ll track down those bum friends of yours and take care of them.”

Tom anticipated the next attack and countered with a straight kick to Brett’s diaphragm.

Brett gasped, doubled over, but quickly regained his balance and rushed toward Tom piling the full weight of his six-foot frame into him. They fell backward, with Brett falling on top of Tom. Brett punched with one fist and Tom held back the two-by-four with his left hand and blocked as many punches as he could with his other hand.

Tom twisted back the hand holding the two-by-four and forced Brett to smack himself on the face. The impact startled Brett so Tom lurched upward throwing Brett to

OUT OF DARKNESS

one side. Brett lost his balance and fell face first on the gravel. Tom rolled on top of him, pulled both of Brett's arms behind his back and jammed his knee hard in the middle of his neck. Brett's face ground into the gravel roadway.

Tom always kept a plastic cord cuff hidden behind his belt, but needed to get Brett to emotionally give up so he could retrieve his police zip-tie and bind his hands together.

"Brett Baker, you are under citizen's arrest for aggravated assault, possession of methamphetamine, burglary, robbery and a couple of things I can't think of right now."

Brett squirmed like a giant boa constrictor so Tom leaned harder on his neck to hold him down and tightened his grip on Brett's hands.

"No stinkin' little junior cop kid is gonna put me in jail," Brett bellowed into the gravel.

He opened one eye and saw his demonic vision standing over him. For the first time he was able to see the tormented face, which was the distorted image of his own Meth, tortured face. Blank, white eyes glared at him as red blood drops rhythmically fell from its acid eaten nose. A disapproving expression silently screamed at him from its thin, down-turned mouth.

Renewed strength flowed through him. Strength stolen from the last ounce of adrenaline siphoned out of his shriveled adrenal gland. He pushed his face further in the gravel and arched upward throwing Tom backward to the ground. At near light speed Brett jumped up, picked up the two-by-four and resumed his attack. He leaned over Tom swinging the broken two-by-four downward with sadistic aggression.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Tom shifted right and then left as each attack rained down on him. At each lunge, the board missed him and smashed against the gravel, throwing bits of rock and sand into Tom's face. Crawling backward on elbows and heels, he kicked upward against Brett's lower legs trying to trip him up. Brett had become immune to pain as his unchecked anger consumed his soul to push out all feelings. Tom's repeated kicks were a valiant effort but the constant exertion was wearing him down.

Brett aimed the board and swung hard. Tom dodged left and the board missed. Brett pulled his arm back for another swing and Tom dodged away again, this time the board grazed his ear.

Brett leered at him showing an evil smile of blackened teeth. Wild eyes looked forward in a vacant stare. It was as if someone else was controlling him as he methodically and tirelessly aimed and swung, aimed and swung, aimed and swung like it was a game. He was playfully toying with his prey before striking the final blow. Tom was tired from the battle and he knew the final blow would come soon.

Please God, he prayed between strikes as the sharp gravel cut into his back. Deliver me. Strike! But no matter what happens to me. Another strike. I know all this is part of your plan. Strike!

Brett stood upright, holding the board above his head and turned to look over his shoulder toward the brush that filled the river bottom. Rustling noises came from the bushes, sounding like an invisible army stomping forward. A shout came up from the last line of bushes as the moonlight illuminated an army of field workers running at full speed up the sandy levy. Mechanically, Brett turned to face the army and was instantly

OUT OF DARKNESS

overwhelmed with a cascade of plaid and denim shirts worn by dozens of migrant workers who were camped out in the riverbed. Pedro pulled up the rear yipping loudly in a victory yell.

The throng piled on top of Brett, burying him under their bodies. Muffled curses from Brett came through the crowd and they ranted back in their Spanish language returning insult for insult.

Pedro ran over to Tom, leaned over and placed his hand behind his head.

“Amigo, I brought some friends to help you.”

The mass of bodies struggled together in a confused heap as Brett expended his last bit of outworldly anger.

“You got here just in time. I just ran out of steam.”

“Relax Tom. Mi amigos will take care of Brett.”

Distant sirens heralded the approach of reinforcements.

A cloud of dust rose over the tangled battle and then suddenly, all was silent. The worker army stood up in unison to reveal the mighty, invincible Brett Baker tied hand and foot like a wild hog with shoestrings, produce ties and bandanas. One large blue bandana was wrapped tightly over his mouth and tied behind his head to keep him quiet.

“We have to go now,” Pedro stood up as the sirens neared.

“I am sure the police will understand. You should stay.”

“We are afraid of the policia. I will see you soon amigo.”

The silent troop slid back into the safety of the heavy brush, disappearing as quickly as they arrived. Tom lay back exhausted, staring up at the bright summer moon.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Brett squirmed and muffled his final protest, as he lay tied up and helpless in the dirt.

The stillness of the dark was shattered when the deafening sound of rotor blades filled the night air as the SkyVision police helicopter descended on the scene blasting 15,000,000 candlepower of white light over Tom and Brett. A symphony of shrill police sirens heralded the arrival of a squad of armed officers coming to his aid.

Tom closed his eyes against the glare of the helicopter searchlight and took in the sounds of the rotors beating the air as the sirens closed in.

That is the sweetest sound I've ever heard, he thought to himself. *Thank you Lord.*

With tires smoking and engine wailing, Officer Spencer charged down the gravel path, slammed on the brakes; the police car skidded twenty feet and stopped just short of where Tom lay. He burst out of the and rushed over to check on Tom.

“Are you okay?” He urgently asked and knelt down next to him.

“Yeah. I think so. A little bruised is all.” A purple welt was growing on his right cheek where he was smacked with the board.

Officer Spencer surveyed the scene, seeing Brett Baker tied up like a poorly wrapped Christmas gift. He then looked back at Tom.

“I wonder how you are going to explain this one?”

EPILOGUE

Back at the Oak Hills Police Station, Tom stretched out in the chair and chugged down a cold glass of ice water. Paramedics had bandaged his wounds, told him with assurance that “there were no serious injuries” and released him with the advisement to see his own doctor.

“Tom, you had quite an ordeal tonight,” Officer Spencer put his pen on the desk. “Not something I would recommend you do every day.”

“Believe me, I hope I never have to face Brett Baker again. He’s crazy. Sometimes it looked as if he was seeing a vision or something.”

“Meth will do that. Especially when you overdose and go four days without sleep like Brett did.”

“He just couldn’t get enough, could he?” Tom rolled his jaw to relieve some of the pain in his cheek.

“Meth users never get enough. It’s their life, their religion, and their sole purpose for living.”

Tom looked through the window in the door and saw his parents walking toward him with grim expressions. He stood up and reached for the doorknob.

“There is one more thing I want to ask you Tom?”

Tom turned back. “Yes?”

“There has been a lot of drug activity at Emerald Valley High School and we just can’t seem to locate the dealer.” Officer Spencer stood up and looked Tom in the eye. “We’d like you to go undercover at the school to help us track down the drug dealers.”

Tom rubbed the bruise on the side of his face and thought for a half-a-second. “Let’s do it!”

OUT OF DARKNESS

Read the next adventure in
The Police Explorer Series to find out what happens!

* * *

Pedro found his parents, and they now live a little white house with the white picket fence with a brand new red door in the front.

Good Kids Use Drugs Too

A Warning for Parents

By

Byron Mettler

Originally published in *Living With Teenagers* magazine
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Last month, 19.7 million Americans aged 12 or older were regular illicit drug users

– In 2005, there were 2.4 million cocaine users

– There were 9 million people aged 12 or older (3.7 percent) who were current users of illicit drugs other than marijuana

– 3.4 million persons used marijuana on a daily or almost daily basis over a 12-month period

– About 10.8 million persons aged 12 to 20 (28.2 percent of this age group) reported drinking alcohol in the past month.

Living in a good home doesn't provide an impenetrable shield from temptations. Parents must be aware of the common signs of drug use.

I was a city cop. I dealt with drug users daily - many were juveniles. After the arrest, it was my job to inform their parents of the arrest. I can still see the pained expression on their faces when I told them their child was arrested for using drugs.

Their first words were, "I didn't know."

There are five common signs of drug use. A Change in Attitude, Bad Friends, Becoming Secretive, Drug Paraphernalia and Symptoms

1. A CHANGE IN ATTITUDE.

The first curious manifestation is a sudden change in attitude. Drugs push the body to perform in ways that aren't normal. The "getting high"- euphoric feeling, is produced by the drug forcing the release of natural body chemicals.

Cocaine, Crack Cocaine and Methamphetamine work directly on the central nervous system to stimulate the release of dopamine in the brain. The heart rate increases and the person feels energetic, believing they can accomplish anything. Soon after, the dopamine and endorphins are depleted and the body suffers a serious chemical imbalance. In short, their brain is wrung out like a dishrag.

When the drug wears off, the user becomes tired, depressed, and irritable. They will either sleep it off, or in the case of the addict, use more drugs. Prolonged use will cause radical mood swings, ranging from depression to euphoria.

2. BAD FRIENDS or MISERY LOVES COMPANY

If you have a sweet dessert you enjoy, you will want to share that tasty indulgence with others. For me, its chocolate chip cookies. If you come to my house, I'll offer you a plate of cookies and I'll be delighted when you enjoy them with a cup of coffee.

The same thinking process applies to drug users. To

OUT OF DARKNESS

them, drugs are like candy. It makes them feel good and they want others to share in that experience. They will always find friends with a common drug interest.

Drug use makes a person feel good. Everyone wants to feel good. That's why drugs are so popular. It's the devastating side effects that make the addict miserable. Their minds are so messed up they don't even know they are miserable. Drug users stay close to druggies to get high together and to have their supply readily available.

3. BECOME SECRETIVE

When a child comes into your house, walks past you directly to their room and locks the door – that is secrecy. When people call but won't give a name - that is secrecy. When you are cleaning your child's bedroom and they walk in and have a convulsion fit - that is secrecy. Bells should be going off in your head, warning you that they are hiding something.

When your child was young, they trusted you completely. You were the greatest person in the world. They wanted to share their experiences and dreams with you, and they wanted you to be part of their world.

When children get older, they tend to move away from that relationship and to find their own "space". That is normal. Healthy independence is okay

But if you suspect something is not right, search their room. There is no right to privacy in the Constitution that applies to your child's bedroom. You have free reign to go anywhere in your house and look everywhere. But, what do you look for?

4.PARAPHERNALIA

This is a list of items you are apt to find if your child is using drugs.

Marijuana- Green leafy substance usually packaged in a small plastic baggie. When burnt, it smells similar to burning grass.

Marijuana pipe- Usually a small pipe with thick black residue in the bowl. Made of porcelain, wood, metal, or can be contrived from a soda can, plastic bottle, drainpipes or anything that will hold leaf.

Marijuana "Bong"- A water pipe.

Roach Clip- An alligator clip (electrical clamp) used to hold the end of a marijuana cigarette.

Cigarette rolling papers- Zig Zag brand are commonly used.

Cocaine- A white powdery substance usually stored in a small plastic bag, a small glass vial, or folded paper.

Razor blade- To chop the powdered cocaine or methamphetamine into fine powder.

Small mirror- The powder is chopped on the mirror and put in a small "line."

Short straw- About 3 inches long. Used to inhale the line of powder into the nose. What else is a short straw good for?

Methamphetamine- White or off-white powder. The paraphernalia for use is the same as cocaine.

Crack Cocaine- It looks like small tan or brown rocks.

Crack pipe- A small glass water pipe used for smoking crack, with black carbon on the bottom where the heat is placed.

OUT OF DARKNESS

Drug Literature or Symbols- Magazines, posters or patches that show drugs or drug use are a good indication that drug use is present. Drug users frequently read High Times magazine.

LSD- Small bits paper 1/4 X 1/4 inch with designs on them. Often stars or cartoon characters.

PCP- A powder or a liquid. Usually smoked with marijuana or on cigarettes. Has a strong chemical odor.

Heroin – A black tar or white powder stored in plastic or paper.

5. SYMPTOMS

Marijuana- Bloodshot, watery eyes, sometimes dilated pupils, marijuana smell on clothes and breath, relaxed attitude.

Cocaine, Crack, Methamphetamine- Dilated (extremely large) pupils, increased pulse and respiration, agitation (can't sit still), violent behavior, nose irritation.

PCP- Extreme behavior. Either very violent or very relaxed. Users will often hallucinate or remove clothing.

LSD- Hallucinations, paranoia, delusions, confusion.

Heroin – Constricted pupils, hoarse voice, sleepy attitude, needle marks.

CONCLUSION:

Drugs are everywhere. Sooner or later, someone will offer your kids drugs. Pray they do not fall to the temptation.

If you suspect drug use, your local Sheriff, Police Department or school district has free resources available and are willing to help.

You have invested a lifetime raising your child. Don't wait for a call from the police to learn that your child is using drugs. Seek help now, while there is still time.

OUT OF DARKNESS

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Personal experience. Ten years as a Police Officer for the City of Chula Vista. I taught gang and drug awareness classes at the elementary school level. While employed in law enforcement, I was a Certified Narcotics Expert in the State of California.

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