

# ESCAPE CLAUSE



Hank Lee, a field representative for a large construction corporation in Orlando, Florida, is having a drink in a bar one night when he spots a woman who reminds him of Sally Burns, the love of his life he'd foolishly let slip through his fingers seven years earlier. Before he can find out if it is truly her, the chain of events quickly turns chaotic, and Hank fears the woman of his dreams could be in grave danger.

Following the trail she's left behind, Hank discovers Sally is now married to one of the richest men in the state. But when he goes to tell the software king Sally's turned up missing, he finds the man oddly unconcerned, and wonders if he knows more about the situation than he pretends. As Hank digs further to find out what happened to Sally, he suddenly finds himself in danger too, and realizes corporate politics can be murder – literally.

Sally's fate depends her wits and ability to survive, and on Hank's tenacity to find out the truth and find *her* before it's too late. If there's a contract on her life, what she needs – what they both need – is an *escape clause*.

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*by*

**David Berardelli**

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**David Berardelli**



# PART I

## *The First Day*



## Chapter 1

### *Old Enough to Know Better*

The neon lights flashing *Pleasure Palace* splashed onto the hectic crowd bullying its way through the front doors. Hank Lee parked his Caddie in the crowded front lot. He followed the thinning line toward the garish building, paid the cover charge, and squeezed past the well-dressed steroid freaks guarding the entrance.

Hank never came to strip joints. In his view, tossing hard-earned cash at a bunch of half-naked females he wasn't allowed to touch was expensive and plain stupid. But he wasn't here to touch or even look at half-naked women. He was here to find a man – someone who hadn't exactly been using the brain cells he'd been born with.

Amos Miller, a surveyor with Anderson & Associates, one of Orlando's major architectural firms, had been in trouble before, and women and alcohol were usually the cause of it. As Executive Field Administrator for A&A, Hank supervised the crews working the construction site. His duties dealt with overseeing the surveying operation and making sure things ran smoothly for the life of the project. During the last few weeks, Amos had been making things difficult. Broken up over his young wife leaving him, he was hitting the bottle more than usual and had been thrown in the drunk tank twice during the last two weeks, which made it difficult for him to show

up for work.

Like most rough, hard-living men, Amos could attract women, but had no luck keeping them. His clever lines and clowning-around tactics were effective in the beginning, but not sufficient to sustain a lasting relationship. And it didn't help that he consistently attracted women who weren't looking to make a lasting commitment.

Judging by what Hank had learned from the other surveyors, finding Amos and sobering him up would not be easy. His latest wife, April, was more than thirty years his junior, flirted constantly, and had supported herself quite well dancing naked when she met Amos here, at the Pleasure Palace. Whether she'd gone back to her former trade was anyone's guess, but he figured it was a logical place to start his search.

Inside, the big dark room exploded with spectacular neon. It took him a little while to acclimate his eyes to the flashing multicolored glare. While he waited for his vision to return, he considered his options. The only way to help Amos was to convince him April wasn't worth this aggravation, to make him believe all women were the same when the lights were out. Why would any man put himself through hell for one particular woman, when there were so many others to choose from?

It was a sexist, chauvinistic attitude – one Hank didn't believe at all – yet it was the only thing he could come up with that might penetrate the thick skull of a hard-drinking construction worker. No matter what he might say to Amos, he doubted any well-meaning words of wisdom or sexist generalities would work. Love could be tough and unforgiving under the best of conditions, and ten times worse when it was as messed up as this. Hank knew trying to pound sense into a lovesick man pushing sixty was going to be like banging his head against a brick wall.

Looking around, Hank spotted a couple middle-aged guys in loud Hawaiian shirts ogling the gal gyrating on the nearest dance platform. A scantily-clad roving waitress came up to him and asked if he'd like a drink. He ordered Jack's on ice and continued looking for Amos. Finally he found him perched on a barstool in front of a dance platform at the far end of the main room, his bald head pulled back far enough to pop a disk in his neck. A bottle of Budweiser sat on the counter in front of him. He was no prize package – that was evident – but he was oblivious to everything except the near-naked strawberry blond dancing on the sparkling pedestal in front of him.

Hank sat down beside Amos and could tell by the older man's glazed expression that the only thing that could get him off his stool would be a baseball bat to the back of his head. Amos was a hopeless addict, and the dancing blond before him was the drug that had him by the balls.



“Amos.”

No response.

Hank tapped the man on the shoulder.

Startled, Amos yanked himself out of his trance. “H-Hank?” He squinted. “I didn’t know you came here.”

“I don’t.”

Amos blinked and turned back to the blond.

Hank hoisted the drink as soon as it was placed in front of him. Thankfully it was strong. “That April?”

“Yeah. Ain’t she something?”

“I’m developing a serious zit just watching her.”

She gyrated her hips and jiggled her small round breasts. Ignoring Amos, she smiled down at Hank. That was all he needed right now – another man’s ex coming on to him. He turned away from her and faced Amos. “I’ll make this short and sweet,” he said. “Dragon Lady wants your ass. I told her you’d straighten out.”

Amos glanced at him, dazed.

“You need a break, and I’m gonna give you one. If you fuck it up, it’s my ass too.”

Amos turned back to April dancing before him.

Hank sighed peevishly. He had better things to do with his time than hassle with a drunken, lovesick old man. But he knew what Amos was going through, and he really did want to give him one more chance to clean up his act and save his job. The last thing Amos needed was the company manager, Colleen Moore, swooping down on him with her razor-sharp talons. For Hank, getting through the month without throttling Colleen had become a personal challenge. The image of his hands closing around her swanlike neck and squeezing until her beautiful face turned blue made his mouth water. He took another gulp of his drink, avoiding the moisture ring on the bar near his elbow.

Colleen had been running Anderson & Associates the last three years and genuinely loved her role as the Stone Bitch. The office workers referred to her as Cat Woman. The construction crew called her Dragon Lady. The A&A execs didn’t care what she was called, because she always seemed to know what she was doing.

Colleen projected an image of competence and professionalism – two important qualities the project manager of a major architectural firm desperately needed. The company, a subsidiary of Division Development Association, based out of Columbus, Ohio, kept offices in half a dozen states. Anderson & Associates specialized in high-rises and had been making a killing in the Orlando area for more than twenty years.

Colleen viewed Amos Miller as a fly in the ointment and would not tolerate such ‘avoidable irritations.’ She took her work seriously and considered the project her own personal creation. Anything compromising the work drove her into a rage. Hank had been called into her office half a dozen times in the past two days to discuss Miller’s fate.

“Fire him,” she’d told him that morning. “He’s compromising my project. At this rate, we’ll lose our next contract. We’re talking Disney for the second quarter of next year. *Disney*, for God’s sake.” The famous name – Disney, not God – had flowed softly and reverently from her pouty collagen lips, as if in solemn prayer. “We all know how they feel about slipshod operations. They want two mega complexes, and they don’t care about price. Between nine and ten figures has already been mentioned. We’re talking *billions*. I refuse to let one drunken loser screw us out of such a huge contract.”

Hank couldn’t understand why Colleen had singled out Amos. Construction crews were a wild, horny bunch. Everyone knew that. “All those guys drink,” he told her. “Take a peek in some of the local bars tonight, and you’ll see quite a few familiar faces.”

“I don’t care how much they drink, as long as they do their job while they’re on the site. Miller’s not doing his job. He’s jeopardizing the project.”

“How can one man jeopardize a huge contract like this one?”

“The publicity, Lee. If Disney suspects we tolerate drunks, that’ll be it. They’ll take their gold elsewhere.”

“He’s going through hell. Give him a break.”

“Everyone’s got problems. We’ve all learned to deal with them. Miller’s old enough to be my father. Why should he get any more consideration than the rest?”

“I know what he’s going through.” Hank had survived similar circumstances himself. He wasn’t about to let her kick a man while he was down.

“Drunks are trash. Believe me. I lived with one. You’re my field man. Handle it.”

Now things were clear. This had become personal. “So you want Amos nailed to the cross because you had a bad experience with a drunk?”

Colleen’s large, dark almond eyes blazed. “Get him to deliver. He was a good surveyor once. Talk to him. Tell him his ass is on the line.”

“He won’t listen.”

“What makes you say that?”

Hank turned to her large square office window. The sun was high and bright, the heavy tinting barely able to keep down the powerful glare. In spite of the wide-open view, he felt trapped. Confined. “He’s been screwed. When

a guy's been screwed, he doesn't listen.”

“Nobody ever said life was fair.”

He sighed. The situation with Amos was just like what he had endured several years earlier, when Heidi drained his checking and savings accounts before walking out. Those were dark, unforgiving days. The bottle thundered into the picture, numbing things and blurring them just enough to help him sleep through the nightmare that had become his life. He'd desperately wanted someone to help him out of the gutter and tell him things would get better. Someone had – at least she'd tried. But, like Amos, Hank hadn't been able to listen. His self-pity had automatically drowned out everything – and everyone – around him.

“I just think we could all use a break,” he'd said to his reflection in the window.

“Talk to him, Lee,” Colleen had ordered. “People with engineering and teaching degrees are working at Burger King for a lot less than we're paying Miller.”

Now, as Hank sat finishing his drink, he knew it would be much easier to strangle Colleen Moore than give an ultimatum to Amos Miller, whose guts had been ripped out by a selfish young woman.

Amos poured some beer down his gullet and set the bottle shakily on the counter. “April ... she ... don't want me, Hank. Told me yesterday. Wants somebody that makes the big bucks. Somebody younger, wears a suit, drives a nice car.” He frowned at Hank. “Somebody with thick, bushy *hair*.” Amos reached up and touched his own bare scalp.

“Weren't you bald when she met you?” Hank knew, the moment he said it, how ridiculous that sounded.

“She saw you the other day when she picked me up at the site. Asked who you were, then said I ought to shave once in a while.” He shrugged. “I shaved. Then she moved out.”

“Listen, Amos...”

“She was planning all along to move out, but was scared to tell me. Thinks I'll do something drastic. I came over tonight to tell her it's okay, I understand. Soon as she's done with her number.”

“How long were you two married?”

“Two years.”

Hank shrugged. “You'll find someone else.” He couldn't believe how much he sounded like Bing Crosby in an old Father O'Malley movie. But Colleen hadn't given him much choice.

“I dunno...”

“Hell, you've still got some juice left. The ratio of women to men is at least three to one here in Florida. It may be higher now, women starting up

companies and all. You can find someone better. Trust me.”

“Not like her. She can go all night long, make you think you died and went to heaven.”

“A lot of women can do that.”

Amos shook his head.

“Give someone else a try. Maybe shop around in a better place.”

“Like where?”

Hank couldn’t believe how few brain cells this man was using. “Someplace where a girl has to wear clothes and doesn’t have to show anyone how close she shaves her mound.”

Amos just sighed and gulped more beer.

Hank couldn’t blame Amos. This was no different from when Heidi decided she needed a drastic change in her lifestyle.

Hank dropped a crumpled ten on the counter and stood up. “You gonna be all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Be at work tomorrow morning, then. Eight o’clock.”

“Sure thing.”

Hank pushed through the crowd and squeezed past the bouncers at the door. As he pulled in some fresh evening air, he hoped the residual thumping in his head from the loud music would go away.

Amos’s beat-up white Nissan pickup sat just six spaces down from Hank’s Caddie. A sticker that said *Surveyors Get it Done Right!* showed prominently on the rear bumper.

Hank edged down the gravel aisle. *If he doesn’t show in fifteen minutes, I’ll go back in and haul his ass outside.* He sincerely hoped he wouldn’t have to go back in. Paying a cover charge twice to rescue a grown man who should know better was ridiculous.

He slid behind the wheel of the Caddie, sat back, and pulled down the knot of his tie. His scalp began to itch. It always did when something wasn’t quite right. In Saudi, it itched constantly. Since he’d come home, that quirk had saved his bacon a couple of times, prevented him from embarrassing himself several times, and kept him out of trouble most of the time. But even though it always rang true, it still worried him.

## Chapter 2

### *A Fate Worse than Death*

Seated at her vanity, Sally Bascomb carefully applied mascara. These days it took a little longer to get it right. It also took a steadier hand – not to mention a tad more makeup.

She'd first noticed the crow's feet about a year ago, spotting them one morning when the sun peeked in through the bathroom blinds while she brushed her teeth. Back then, she had to squint and move close to the mirror to see them. But lately squinting proved unnecessary. Now she could see them clearly, even five feet from the mirror, without the sun shining on her face. The little buggers had decided to dig deeper and widen, as if getting ready to build an interstate bypass around her eyes.

Sighing, she inspected her handiwork. Not exactly breathtakingly fresh, but still good enough to turn her husband's head – if only he'd look her way. She couldn't imagine how much longer this semblance of self-confidence would stay with her. It was a miracle she had any left at all, thanks to the mood swings Warren had been demonstrating lately.

She couldn't help thinking it was somehow her fault. She tried telling herself during the last couple of months that nothing was wrong. Business pressures were responsible for Warren's foul temper and lack of interest in her. Long hours, deadlines, dealing with uncooperative people all over the world could easily take a toll. But each day brought about new fears. The evidence proved frighteningly clear. Warren spent longer hours at the office and less time at home. Their conversations invariably turned into heated arguments. Worse, they hadn't had sex more than five times in the last twelve months. Not that she really missed it. After they were married, Warren had turned into an incredibly insensitive and selfish lover. But if he wasn't looking to her for satisfaction, where was he going?

Forcing herself back to more practical matters, she pushed a comb through her heavy blond mane, thanking God it was still thick and full. If she let it fall freely, with stray curls touching her cheeks, she could hardly notice the crow's feet.

But despite her hair, her still youthful appearance, and her slim, taut figure, some things refused to cooperate – such as that unwanted monster

she'd been dreading for years. That horrid beast that would arrive, in spite of her all efforts, in just three years. The dreaded Four-O. Every woman's mortal enemy.

Back when she'd dropped out of college to work as a swimsuit model for JCPenney, she was twenty-one, whippet-thin and didn't have to worry about wrinkles or sags or what an added pound would do to her perfect figure. Everything looked good on her. Heads turned wherever she went. Forty was so far away, she didn't even give it a second thought. Little did she know how quickly that freedom from worry would vanish.

Now she was struggling not to lose ground. But Bally could only do so much. Three weekly sessions of aerobics, combined with twenty minutes of sheer torture using their sadistic weight machines, would send anyone scrambling for the nearest plastic surgeon. And if that wasn't enough, she took brisk walks around the block each night after supper to burn off any unwanted calories. Her regimen kept her weight down and made everything tight and firm. It also stopped her hips from spreading, and the wattle from pulling her chin loose. Those who didn't know her guessed her at around thirty. But when her husband spent so much time with rich, important men walking around with gorgeous, slender women half their age hanging on their arms, she realized just how demanding and unforgiving the battlefield actually was.

She wondered if her physical changes could be the main reason for Warren's attitude change ... why, after nearly seven years of marriage, he no longer seemed interested. Things could be worse, but a girl didn't think of stuff like that when her husband stayed away more, and tended to her less.

The episode three days ago continued eating away at her. Muriel had, as usual, planned supper for seven and was having a terrible time keeping the Porterhouse steaks from becoming desiccated chunks of charcoal. Warren's explanation for his two-hour tardiness – *corporate nonsense* – was tossed casually over his shoulder as he headed straight for the wet bar. While he fixed his drink, Sally waited for more of an explanation. When he didn't provide any, she did her best to fill in the blanks. Last-minute meetings. Conference calls. A crisis at one of the overseas plants. Labor conflicts. Management difficulties. Union troubles. Stockholder problems. Any one of dozens of possibilities could have sufficed, but he didn't bother to elaborate by offering any of the various choices as possible excuses.

As founder and CEO of Bas-Com, Inc., the Orlando-based software conglomerate, Warren had his plate full. He'd single-handedly started up the works and was directly involved in every aspect of the business. He would not tolerate anything happening without his knowledge. Working close to eighty hours each week had never been much of a challenge.

As his wife, Sally realized this. She also took into account the pressures her husband encountered during the average workday. She could sympathize with him, support him, and certainly didn't want to make the situation worse by demanding explanations when she knew how busy and difficult his schedule was. So she'd stood there silently while he made his drink, patiently hoping he'd glance her way, notice her pleasant smile, and soften. But he'd merely gulped his drink and wandered off to his study.

Her father had acted similarly while she was growing up – coming home, saying little, fixing a drink, then plopping in his favorite armchair to read the paper while Mom finished fixing supper. Growing up this way had primed her for this sort of lifestyle. Although she'd had only a few relationships before Warren – most of them casual, with one serious affair that ended horribly – she'd known men all her life and was familiar with their attitudes and moods. But even though she was nearly thirty when she married Warren, she still wasn't prepared for her husband's sudden change in behavior.

She feared he might be going through a crisis. After all, he'd turned fifty last August. As far as she knew, he hadn't experienced that silly midlife male thing. But since he was over forty when they'd met, and had recently been divorced, he might have suffered one earlier.

Thoughts of another woman briefly entered her mind. While part of her knew that could be a definite possibility, her more practical side dismissed it. Unless Warren was having a clandestine relationship in his office, he simply didn't have the time. And he wasn't the sort of man who sneaked around.

For Warren, a divorce meant inconvenience and a hefty outlay of money. He'd been divorced three times before. Each time had cost him more than a million dollars, plus stocks and other perks. Warren was worth half a billion dollars. Though he could easily afford such costs, she figured the inconvenience of divorce proceedings and court appearances meant much more aggravation to him than handing over large sums of money.

Divorce meant something much worse to Sally. Though their prenup would leave her in terrific shape financially, she'd be forced to face the rest of her life alone – just another divorced, middle-aged woman whose best days were behind her. The image made her cringe.

She'd never wanted money to become a major factor in her future. She hadn't even known Warren was rich when she first met him. She'd wanted only love and companionship. If the money was there, fine. If not, it didn't matter, as long as love dominated the picture.

She'd met Warren on the rebound from a passionate relationship with a terrific guy with too much baggage, who couldn't forget what his ex-wife

had done to him. Although their union had resulted in the greatest relationship and the best sex she'd ever known, Sally could not compete with a memory. And after enduring the agony of watching the man she loved crawl back to his former love, Sally forced herself out of the picture.

But that was another matter, in another life. A life she no longer thought about – not much, anyway.

She knew things would be even worse if she'd been able to bear children. With Warren, this had never been an issue. He had two grown offspring from a previous marriage and had expressed no interest in bringing anyone else into the world. This was good, because she'd never wanted kids either. As a child growing up with parents who frequently fought, watching them silently avoiding one another was not something she fondly remembered.

With one last glance in the mirror, Sally declared herself presentable. Maybe not as ravishing as she was just a few years ago, but certainly attractive and pleasant enough to greet her husband with a warm smile and a tender kiss.

Sally hurried off to the kitchen to see how Muriel was coming along with supper.



## Chapter 3

### *Waiting*

Standing between two pine trees, Bill Landry directed the thick stream onto a giant mound of fire ants. *There ya go, you little bastards. Run or get pissed on...*

When nothing was going right, he wanted to kick ass whenever he could. Pissing on anything – even a bunch of stupid fire ants – instantly made him feel better, giving the illusion he was getting even. Sometimes that was the only thing that really mattered.

The ants scurried away, finding sanctuary beneath some dead leaves and a pile of pine needles. They'd come back. Ants always did – they didn't know any better.

He zipped up and turned around. Still nothing going on at the estate. There hadn't been any traffic at all during the last hour, which wasn't unusual in a place like that. The ritzier the neighborhood, the quieter it was. Bankers and investors relaxed in their leather-lined studies, sipping imported brandies while their brats were away at Harvard or Yale, getting drunk and high between exams. *Keep everything nice and quiet to relieve the stress of handling millions of bucks each day. When you're a fat cat, you don't want any fuss going on near your multi-million-dollar pad. That's what mega-taxes are for. Something bugs you, you just picked up the cell, and the rent-a-cops magically appear.*

Heading back, Bill tossed his spent smoke onto the pile on the sandy ground beside the rented pickup truck. He reached into his shirt pocket and coaxed out another Marlboro from the crumpled pack. *Only six left. Shit.* He couldn't remember if he had a fresh pack in his duffel bag. Right now, he could barely remember his own name. *William, Bill, Billy, Landry ...* none of those familiar monikers fit him at the moment. *Sucker* felt more like it. Or just plain *Idiot*.

He climbed back into the pickup and slammed the door, rocking the truck, but Tommy didn't notice – he was still slouched in the passenger seat, glassy-eyed and stupid from that shit-smelling Colombian weed he'd pulled out of his shirt pocket ten minutes earlier. *Schiller and his stash. Why can't he stick to the coke? At least it doesn't stink.* He would never understand how anyone could smoke something tasting that bad. It seemed like everyone they worked

with went for that shit – especially the programmers and half the program analysts.

*Might as well suck on fresh dog shit. Tastes and smells like it – and it'll even turn your brain into dog shit.* Schiller's brain was already mush – why coax things along? At least beer tasted better – and right now Bill felt like he needed one, or two, maybe even three. He'd had two a couple hours ago, but it wasn't enough to get him through this. Beer was about the only thing that relaxed him these days. Beer and two or three shots of Wild Turkey. Schiller, however, didn't go for beer or whiskey. His vices ran more expensive – a line of snort was required to put all his worries to rest. Snort and one or two of his pills.

But who gave a shit anyway? Like it or not, Schiller was his partner in this evil deed – even when the dumb-ass sat there, playing with his hair, twirling a thick red clump of it around his skinny index finger as he tore off another piece of thumbnail from his other hand still holding that smoldering, stinking roach.

Dragging his hands down his sweaty face, Bill couldn't ignore the constant chewing noise – sounded like some rat in a wall. He glared over at Schiller. “Do you *have* to do that shit?”

Schiller lowered his hand. “What shit?”

“Eating your fingernails like that.”

Schiller shrugged. “It's the only way I know to eat them.”

Bill hated it when Schiller chewed his fingernails – hated it even worse when he found jagged slivers on the dash, or on the console, or on his seat. He felt like decking him or showing him outside onto the pavement. Dumb-ass kids could get away with stuff like that, not a programmer pushing thirty, for Chrissake. It just wasn't dignified behavior for a competent adult ... not that Schiller was all that competent. “Why the hell do you have to do it at all? It's gross.”

Schiller shrugged, stuck his thumb back in his mouth, and started chomping again.

“Next time we stop at a 7-Eleven, I'm gonna buy you some Life Savers. Or gum.”

“Life Savers don't last very long.”

“They will if you suck on them instead of chewing them up.”

“Rather just eat them. And gum ... I just swallow it as soon as it loses its flavor. Don't chew it anymore.”

Landry huffed impatiently, wanting to ask why he didn't just spit out old gum like a normal person, but he didn't bother. Schiller wasn't normal, and asking would be a waste of time. Anyway, it wasn't worth getting mad over. The asshole to get mad at wasn't even home yet.

Bill sat back and glared at Warren Bascomb's estate situated straight ahead and up the hill beyond the clearing, bigger than shit behind the stone entrance at the end of the grassy knoll. *Like some egotistical monument to his conniving greatness. Or maybe he's just overcompensating for some personal shortcoming.* Bill grinned briefly as he continued to eye the huge estate looming not far away, imagining the same chain of events he and Schiller had witnessed the last three nights. At eight o'clock, the street lamps at the corner would automatically flicker on. At eight-fifteen, the floods fronting the estate would splash the lawn, shrubbery, and wrought-iron gate with a hazy golden glow. At eight-thirty, the spotlight behind the church would douse the expansive lot with a thin blanket of bright yellow, its frayed edges stopping just a few yards from the wooded area that concealed the truck in which he and Schiller now sat.

A quick glance in the side mirror told him no one was wandering about in the church parking lot. Even if someone was out there, they wouldn't spot the pickup. It was getting dark. He checked the dash clock again. Just a few minutes past seven. A typical evening in Central Florida in late May. The scent of honeysuckle hung heavily in the air. Gulls squawked not too far away. Toward the west, the hazy orange sun lightly brushed the tips of the palms.

A quiet night, to be sure, but it didn't help Bill breathe any easier. He wished he was anywhere else but right here, right now, waiting to do what he was supposed to do. But he couldn't be anywhere else, no matter how bad he wanted to be – couldn't just click his heels together and appear somewhere else. That only happened in fairy tales and old movies. If his and Schiller's lives hadn't been going down the shitter, they could be somewhere else ... the fishing camp, maybe, or sitting on the beach, watching the babes parade around in their skimpy bikinis. That would mean their lives were still somewhat stable. It might even mean their futures still held a glimmer of hope. But they had a job to do, and it *had* to be done. Destiny dictated it – *Bascomb* dictated it – and there was no way he and Schiller could get out of it. They were screwed, and they both knew it.

He scanned the estate driveway once again, looking for the flash of headlights that would get this freak-show started. He wasn't ashamed to admit he was nervous. More nervous, even, than he'd been that day Bascomb escorted him and Schiller into the empty conference room and threatened them with federal time and other scary shit. That was the day he came dangerously close to pissing his pants.

Schiller, on the other hand, was ready for the rubber room. And who could blame him? Bill glanced over at the skinny runt. He wasn't exactly the world's calmest human, and tonight was no walk in the park. This kind of

waiting would make anyone but a seasoned professional crawl out of their skin. But it would come to an end soon. Another hour, maybe, and then it would be over – if they were lucky.

“Feels like we’ve been here all night,” he said. *Time sure trudges along like a dying snail when you’re waiting for shit to happen, but it makes healthy tracks when you’re having the time of your life.*

Schiller coughed wetly and tossed the smoldering black sliver of his spent roach through the open window. Watching Schiller dig through his pockets, Bill pushed more foulness out through the window opening, into the warm evening air, determined to let the air-conditioning take care of it once they got on the move. “You’re not gonna smoke another one of those shit sticks, are you?”

Schiller found his regular cigarettes and lit one. “It’s too soon to see Salvador Dali again. Otherwise you’d end up doing this by yourself.”

Bill lit another of his own cigarettes and sat back. Whenever Schiller was jamming with Salvador Dali, the skinny runt turned into a post. You could nail a sign to his forehead that said *OUT TO LUNCH*, and the dope-head wouldn’t even notice. “What was Dali doing the last time you zapped yourself into his little playroom?”

“Squatting over a canvas, using the ends of his stash to paint something.”

“Weird.”

Schiller shrugged. “Sucker was *born* weird. But he sure made cool pictures.”

Bill shook his head. *Weirdoes stick together.*

Schiller sucked down some smoke and stared straight ahead. “Sure is taking his sweet time.”

“CEOs don’t exactly have regular hours. That’s why no one ever knows where he is – and why we’ve been out here three straight days now.” *Three days and still no show. Almost like the bastard was deliberately making this thing drag on.*

“Didn’t expect it to be easy, Billy. Didn’t expect to be doing this at all. Gotta be some way we can—”

“We’re in too deep now. Way too deep. Our own damned fault.”

“Yeah, for getting caught.”

Bill shook his head. “I still can’t figure how that happened.”

“Bad karma. You know what I’m talking about, Billy. What goes around comes ar—”

“Don’t go all whacky on me, now...” He hated when Schiller brought up that kind of shit.

Schiller shrugged. “No other reason for it. Not when everyone else was

pulling something too, and we were the ones to get caught.”

“Everything just seemed to turn around and go all funny.” He sighed, mulling over Schiller’s mention of karma, and the childhood images shot past. *You sow what you reap*. They’d taught him that in catechism class. *Do unto others. An eye for an eye. Vengeance is mine*. The Bible was chock-full of good shit like that. Funny, though. He’d never thought much about any of that back then. All he’d cared about was skipping catechism class with the rest of the guys, without the folks finding out.

“We’ve always been on Bascomb’s bad side,” Schiller said. “Take that backup program I created for him two years ago. It was just as efficient and workable as anything anyone else coulda done. But not for him – no siree. He wanted a whole new configuration. Didn’t want the competition to get it. That’s all I heard that weekend. The fucking competition. Jeez ... every ten minutes he was pulling up every bit of Spyware and Malware he could find. Dude’s fucking paranoid.”

“He treated me the same when I created that website for him.” Bill pushed out some foul memories along with the cigarette smoke. “Bastard trashed it and told me to design a new one. Gave me *four damned hours* to do it.” He wiped the back of his neck. The anger was getting him really hot. “Coulda made a grand, maybe more, from anyone else. Damn.”

“And you killed yourself designing the new one.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“Like tonight?”

Bill tried to read his friend’s expression in the darkness of the cab. He hadn’t liked the way Schiller had said that. “What’re you getting at?”

“Not a fucking thing.” Schiller’s hand trembled as he pushed out another cloud of cigarette smoke between his pursed lips. The plume scattered against the dark windshield in gray slivers, like a wavy starburst. “Just that I’d give anything to get out of this.”

“Can’t. Bastard spelled everything out, made it all real clear. *We don’t have a choice*.”

Penetrating the woods straight ahead, headlights splashed the road, slowing as the vehicle moved steadily toward the estate.

Schiller gulped audibly. “That him, Billy?”

Bill Landry stiffened, and his pulse raced. “Yeah. It is.”

