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“Look at that little girl,” ten year old Ralph Bicknel grumbled. His nine year old friend, Del Fraso merely mumbled a response as he continued to browse through the various action figures in aisle ten. It wasn't until Ralph slugged him hard in the upper arm causing a shooting pain to momentarily paralyze him, did Dell finally pay attention.

He had little choice.

When Ralph got into these moods, people had little choice but to pay attention to him. When he was much younger, it started off as a full-fledged attention grabbing obnoxious whine. It didn't matter where he was – he preferred to embarrass his mother out in public the most - he would sit his little ass down right in the middle of a crowd and commence to his hideous whelping.

Of course, as he grew older, he graduated to more outlandish acts.

Like the time he shit on his first grade teacher's desk, in front of the entire class. Sure, he'd gotten himself expelled...which was precisely what he'd wanted all along. But his days out of school was short lived.

But his anti-social behavior wasn't.

After yet another relocation by his mother, Sarah, this time to the tiny town of Scotswood, Ralph grew even more restless. Trouble continued to plague her son forcing yet another move. This time, Sarah hoped moving to the depressed area of Merseyville in Northwestern England, just outside of Liverpool, would give her son a new lease on life.

Instead, it only intensified Ralph's wild behavior after hooking up with a local boy, who soon became his best friend. Together, he and Del shared a rare anti-social view of the world.

While both were bound by the embarrassment of being habitual bed wetters, they outwardly hid that shame behind gregarious personalities, while focusing their anger on smaller, less fortunate victims. They began a spree of terror upon the neighborhood pets, going as far as to skinning a poor kitten alive before being interrupted by a neighbor alerted by the animal's wild, shrieking screams.

The boys had only been moderately reprimanded for their act.

They were only eight years old, after all.

Though it all, Sarah Bicknel hoped her only son would outgrow his repulsive actions. But life in Merseyville was tough, and Sarah found

herself out of work often. It was becoming more and more difficult to support the two of them. Struggling to maintain some sense of a normal life for her and Ralph, she found herself succumbing to the seedier side of her neighborhood. Submerging herself into drinking, drugs and then finally into prostitution, Sarah soon was of little help to her stability-seeking son.

Now unsupervised, Ralph ran unchecked.

“What?” Del scowled as he rubbed his numb shoulder. “Why didcha have to do that?”

He hated the way he sounded – almost like a whining baby – and decided that if Ralph moved to slug him again, he’d gouge his damn eyes out before he knew what hit him.

But, Ralph was much too preoccupied to notice his friend’s anger.

His eyes remained fixed on the lone, small figure not more than ten feet away from them in the crowded toy store.

“Look,” Ralph repeated, “look at that little bitch!”

Now Dell glanced over to view what Ralph was referring to. Together, they looked at the small, oriental girl, sobbing out of horror over losing her mother in the holiday rush of shoppers.

By the looks of her small, thin frame, she couldn’t be much older than two or three years old. Her crocodile tears streamed down her face, caking portions of her vibrant, black hair to her deep red cheeks. There was no doubt she was in deep distress, and the more she sobbed, the more aroused Ralph became.

Still, no one in the crowd intervened to put the little girl at ease. Instead, they continued to pursue their holiday targets.

“Yeah? So, what about her?” Del wanted to return to the action figures.

“Look at the terror in her eyes...,” Ralph seemed mesmerized, “...look at how scared she is.”

“Yeah...,” Del could sense the change in his friend’s demeanor. “So...whatcha want to do? Scare her even more?”

With an abrupt turn of his head, Ralph gave Del a large, devilish smile. His deep, dark eyes gleamed. In spite of himself, Del took a half step backward.

“That’s a great idea!” Ralph’s grin widened. “Let’s see if we can actually scare her to death!”

Now his partner matched his grin. Del had to hand it to Ralph; he was always able to come up with stimulating notions. The memory of that little kitten squirming to free itself from his restraining hands as Ralph skinned it alive, stirred deep, hideous excitement inside him.

*Could they really scare her to death?*

“Let’s go!”

The two boys swaggered up to the bawling child. Within minutes, they’d managed to sooth the little girl’s tears.

“What’s your name?,” Ralph asked sincerely.

“Min,” she replied between gulping air. Her crying had bordered on hysteria, and even as she now calmed down, had trouble breathing.

“Well, Min, you have nothing to worry about anymore.”

She smiled.

“You...you will help me...find my mommy?”

“Of course! Won’t we Del?” Ralph clapped his buddy on the back.

“No problem,” he replied and smiled deeply.

The smiles stayed on their lying faces as each took one of her hands in theirs. Ralph didn’t know where they were heading. All he knew, was they had to get out of this shopping mall. Before the mother discovered her daughter was gone. Then the real fun could begin.

“Where’s my Mommy?” Little Min looked like she was about to cry again.

“This way,” Ralph reassured her, pointing to the outside, “she’s waiting in the parking lot to take you home.”

His smile should have sent shivers down her spine. But she was too young, too naive to understand. Instead, she merely nodded and allowed the two older boys to lead her toward the doors.

They seemed nice.

She felt secured and soothed being with them. They actually reminded her of her old brother Timmy.

The trio picked up the pace as they reached the huge glass doors. The rays of the late fall afternoon sun warmed their faces as they exited to the outside. Glancing behind them to ensure no one was following; Ralph turned and pointed up the sidewalk.

“She told us she’d meet us up there,” he lied, and began tugging the little girl alongside him. He didn’t want her thinking or questioning them right now. If she happened to start sobbing here, they’d gander too much attention. But once they managed to turn the corner, they’d be behind the mall where people were much scarcer.

Once there, the woods weren’t too far beyond.

Then, they’d be home free.

It wasn’t until they reached the corner that little Min begun to squirm and protest. But by then, it was too late.

The boys had reached a point of no return and they weren't about to turn back now. No sir. Their hearts hardened as their focus intensified with each rising decibel of the girl's wailing.

"It won't do you any good," Ralph sneered and yanked hard on her limb. He didn't know whether she cried because she was being forced away or because her arms hurt.

It didn't matter.

It all aided in the experience.

He wanted her to be terrorized. By the time they got to their designation, he wanted her totally despondent.

Reaching the edge of the woods, the boys threw the child down harshly onto the pavement and quickly dragged her through a small opening in the cyclone fencing that surrounded the perimeter of the back lot. They began to pull her body deeper into the dense abyss. Deeper and deeper they moved until her frantic screams were barely audible from the noisy parking lot.

*They had pulled off the perfect crime.*

No one would ever suspect two ten year olds with the kidnapping of a little Asian girl. Even if someone did...who'd believe it?

Who indeed?

Fortunately for law officials and unfortunately for the boys, the entire act had been caught by mall security cameras.

It seemed their perfect crime wasn't so perfect, after all.

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It would take law enforcement officials seven long days to track the boys down and only a couple hours after that to learn the chilling details of the whereabouts and final hours of three year old Min Wong Lee. The boys had forced her to walk over three miles, often beating and dragging her through the thick underbrush.

Superintendent Jeremy Lewis of the Merseyville Police Force was the first to question the boys. Wisely, he decided to do them separately. This was when the first discrepancies began to surface. Still, no one on the Merseyville Police Department really thought the two youngsters had anything to do with Min Wong Lee's disappearance. Surely, some dastardly monster had abducted the girl from them.

"Now Ralph," he began, "tell me everything that happened at the mall that day." He tried to sound reassuring and non-threatening.

"Nottin happened, Captain."

Lewis frowned at the boy's sarcastic grin.

"Now, come on there fella. We gotcha and your friend on video camera surveillance. We know you fellas left the mall with the little girl."

Ralph looked up surprised.

"Have ya found her yet?"

The question surprised the seasoned veteran.

"Ah...no...no, not yet."

There was that shit-eating grin again.

Ralph stayed silent, waiting for the next question. It was quickly apparent to Jeremy Lewis that this kid was no typical ten year old boy. He was wiser and more street wise than many hardened criminals he'd seen. It all seemed like some perverted game to the boy. And Lewis didn't feel like playing.

"So, let's try this again, Ralph. What happened after you and your friend took Min out of the mall?"

"Nothin happened," Ralph stayed defiant. "I told ya before. We took her outside and her mother took her away in a car."

"How do you know it was her mother?"

"The little girl told us. Said, *there's my mommy.*"

Although Ralph was so confident in his manner, Lewis still didn't believe him. Maybe it was because he could recall so much in such vivid detail, and yet couldn't describe what the woman looked like – not even whether she was oriental or not – or the make or color of the vehicle she was driving. Yet, he could remember the color of the little girl's clothing, the type of shoes she wore, right down to the small ribbon in her hair.

Or maybe it was the callous way he spit out the details. Almost as if in contempt. But it was also the boy's nasty fondness to intersperse insignificant questions – as if taunting the police officer with his hidden knowledge – about the little girl's whereabouts that irritated Lewis the most.

Either way, he bet Ralph knew more about the girl's disappearance than he let on. But even the hardened Police Superintendent still didn't suspect the boys having a hand in it. That is, until he got a crack at Del.

Del was a different interrogation all together.

He wasn't as detailed as his older friend. He couldn't remember things so vividly, going as far as describing Min as a blond haired girl. He was more playful in his manner, oftentimes blurting out in laughter over something Lewis said.

Still, though Ralph and Del admitted spending much of the afternoon together, their statements did not totally tally.

“Let’s go over this again,” Lewis insisted, much to the young boy’s chagrin. “Now, what kind of car was the girl’s mother driving?”

“I told ya. I don’t know.”

“What color was it?”

Del shook his head.

“I think it was white.”

“Your friend said it was blue,” Lewis lied.

“Then it was blue. Anything Ralph says is right. He’s smarter than me.”

“Smart enough to blame you for the little girl’s disappearance and pin it all on you?”

The question radiated a discomfort in Del’s eyes for the first time today. The mere thought that Ralph would betray him had never struck his mind.

“Why would he blame me, when we had nottin to do with it?”

This was the first time Lewis had managed to shake one of them. But even as he desperately tried to poke and prod, he couldn’t get the boy to admit more. Frustrated, he finally took a break and stepped outside the room to converse with a colleague and his superior.

“Well, where are we, Lewis?,” Chief Inspector Thompson, his superior asked. “We don’t have much more time. Their parents are already making noise about getting an attorney.”

Lewis shook his head.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he said. “It’s got to be them...or one of them. I’d put my bet on the other kid...Bicknel. He’s got a nasty temperament to him, that kid.”

“Then get this kid to flip on him,” Thompson said. “Quit dicking around with him and go after him hard.”

Then looking at the other Detective, asked,

“Okay Waller, what do we have? Anything besides the damn tape?”

“Nothing concrete. A couple of teenagers entering the mall said they thought they remember three kids matching these descriptions walking up the sidewalk to the back of the buildings.”

“Do you have these teenagers coming into the mall on that security tape?”

“Yes sir, approximately five minutes after the youngsters departed, according to the tape.”

“Well,” the Chief Inspector’s voice started to rise, “did you guys check out everything behind there? Dumpsters? Garbage bags? Was there signs of a struggle?”

“Nothing so far, Chief.” Detective Waller seemed embarrassed for having nothing to show so far.

“What else is back there?,” Lewis asked. “Anywhere the kids could have gone to? Is it fenced in?”

Waller thought for a moment.

“Yes,” he replied, then remembering a detail that he and his colleagues hadn’t fully fleshed out yet, cautiously continued, “but we did find a...small...hole in it.”

Now both Lewis and Thompson looked at Waller in disbelief.

“And...?,” the Chief Inspector asked, already knowing the answer.

Waller raised his hands.

“We’ve been looking for a blue vehicle with a woman driver. We never suspected that these kids might have - ”

“This is the break we needed,” Lewis announced, as he turned to reenter the interrogation room that housed Del Fraso. Just as abruptly, he stopped and turned toward his Superior. “Get the kid’s father down here,” he said. “Maybe it’ll help him remember some key elements as we move forward.”

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It took only fifteen minutes for Lewis to break Del Fraso’s story. Having his father come in, teary eyed and pleading for his son to tell the truth certainly aided in the confession.

But it wasn’t until Lewis told him that Ralph was telling another officer about how Del had dragged little Min through the hole in the fence did a sign of despair fall upon the boy’s face. His complexion turned pale and he became very tense and apprehensive. Gone was the jovial clown.

Del realized the time of reckoning was here.

“He said that?,” he cried after hearing Lewis’ embellishing. “He’s a liar! He did it! Not me!”

“Did what, Del? I can’t help you unless you tell me the truth. What did Ralph do to Min?”

“It was Ralph who killed her,” he blurted out, catching Lewis by surprise. He tried not to show his shock. “It all started out as a joke. We were going to scare her, that’s all. We were going to drag her into the woods and tell her about all the monsters and rapists that were going to get her. We were going to scare her...that’s all! Scare her, and leave her alone in the woods crying.”

“But, you didn’t leave her alone in the woods, did you Del?,” Lewis lowered his voice, trying to sound reassuring, all the while holding back the desire to jump across the desk and strangle this little prick. He knew what the boy was about to say. He dreaded listening, but knew he had to keep his composure to keep him talking.

“N-No. No, we didn’t. It was Ralph. He...he said he wanted to see her turn purple. So he put his hands around her neck and started to squeeze. The girl tried to make a sound, but the squeezing just seemed to...shut out the screams...” Del got a faraway look in his eyes as he recited what happened.

He seemed to be reliving the event.

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When confronted with his friend’s confession naming him the killer, Ralph quickly decided to give a statement of his own. It was Del, he said, who masterminded the entire event. It was true that he had put his hands around the little girl’s neck, but he swore she was still alive, still breathing, when the next, vile thing occurred.

“Del wanted to see blood,” he said. “That’s when he got a big rock and began hitting her in the face with it. I tried to get him to stop. I was pulling on his shoulders, but he just went mad! Blood was all over her face and the rock. Her face went all white and blue, with her eyes wide open. I said, Del you’ve killed her!

“I know I should’ve told on him...but I was afraid. I knew everyone would believe him and not me! But it was him! He killed her! Then he dragged her into a pit and set her on fire.”

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It took police a day to find the charred remains of Min Wong Lee. The trial of the two boys took place outside in Liverpool under tight security and closed doors. The press flooded from all over – from as close as London and as far away as Japan – to report on the heinous case. The judge attempted to avert an atmosphere of disgust by putting a gag order on all press reports, but it did little to douse the many leaks from the court proceedings.

The trial itself lasted only two weeks, with the verdict by the jury taking less than two hours to be rendered. Commenting on their decision after the deliberations, many jurors were struck by the impressions both boys

made on them. Although both struck to their stories that the other was actually the killer, Del came off more sympathetic. Often breaking down in tears on the stand, he truly seemed sorry for what had occurred.

Ralph, on the other hand, came off harsh and domineering. It was easy for everyone in attendance to see him as the assertive member of this friendship. And as much as Del seemed remorseful for his role, Ralph looked as if he relished in it. Sometimes being combatant and indifferent on the stand, he came off as very unfeeling and callous.

Still, the jury found both boys guilty of murder. The fact that they had sentenced the two to a life of incarceration did little to wipe the stench of the trial off their clothes and bodies. The judge summed up everyone's opinion during the boys' sentencing by claiming that their act was "unparalleled in its evil and savagery."

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Defense attorneys argued years later that Ralph Bicknel and Del Fraso should never have been tried as adults and that only due to the immense publicity surrounding the case, local politicians succumbed to public pressure and pushed for adult, criminal sentences for the boys. The European Court eventually agreed. Their conclusion was that the original ruling imposed on the two boys was not legal and deferred a new sentence to the Lord Chief Justice to decide.

His ruling would send shock waves through the conservative political government for years to come. Citing the circus-like atmosphere that surrounded the trial led to an unfair verdict, the Lord Chief Justice overturned the original sentencing and remanded the sentence to eight year terms for both boys.

Baring any further legal appeals, Bicknel and Fraso would be eligible for payroll on their eighteenth birthday. Politicians figured it would be easier to defer this political time bomb out a decade than to deal with it in the present. Believing that people, in time would forget, they put the case on the backburner for later judgment.

What they underestimated was the victim family's perseverance in pursuing that justice was served for their daughter. Even after eight long years, they continued to lobby to keep two of England's most notorious monsters imprisoned.

## **PART TWO**

**October**

**Eight Years Later**

*In the mind and nature of a man, a secret is an ugly thing, like  
a hidden physical defect.*

- *Isak Dinesen*

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Chief Justice Michael Cavanaugh pounded his gavel and brought the session to order. From high atop his lofty perch behind the giant, mahogany bench, he deliberately scanned the crowd in the courtroom. Consciously absent were Bicknel and Fraso. For the past eight years, not only had there been a news blackout while they served out their sentences, but there hadn't been a single picture or even sketch released of the two boys due to strict court orders. Even now, as the fate of their future hung in balance, the two young killers were nowhere to be seen.

Though he came off defiant in his manner, Cavanaugh wanted to show his authority prior to rendering his ruling on the case. There was little doubt about it – this was going to be both heart-wrenching and controversial – but he had to make it.

It was the right thing to do.

Then his gaze fell upon the Lee family

Their eyes seemed to reach out and plead to him. Deep in their hearts, they knew what his ruling was about to be. They knew the hurt would strike deep within their chest like a plunging dagger. Yet, they were there in attendance to act as a conscience to the Chief Justice.

They weren't going to make it any easier for Cavanaugh.

With a deep sigh, he began reading.

“This has been a highly controversial case,” Cavanaugh started, “with a lot of emotion spent on both sides of the aisle. And through it all, with all the legal wrangling, the one thing we cannot...and will not forget...is the brutal taking of Min Wong Lee's life.”

Mrs. Lee buried her face in her hands and wept. People around her reached over and put their hands on her to show support as her husband held her against his chest.

God, how Cavanaugh hated this.

Even with all of his recent rulings, all of the new, liberal laws he'd helped enact to advance his country, this case was going to be what he'd be remembered by.

*His legacy.*

Having the victim's parents here only prolonged the agony.

“Nonetheless,” he continued, creating a hush in the room, “there was another tragedy to this case that being the injustice bestowed upon Ralph Bicknel and Del Fraso.”

Now the quiet courtroom erupted into a loud buzz as individuals openly questioned what tragedy the Chief Justice could possibly be alluding to.

“Quiet!” Cavanaugh pounded the gavel hard, “Quiet, or I will clear the room!” He slapped the gavel a few more times just to make sure everyone knew who was in charge and then proceeded once silence was restored.

“As hard as this case has been on the families involved, and for all of us who felt the families’ pain and shared in the horror of the act, we cannot lose sight that an injustice has also occurred.” He hit the gavel once, anticipating the murmur.

“The European court ruled that the initial sentence imposed for the two defendants in this case was not legal. They cited numerous case studies and precedent for that ruling and maintained that the two defendants did not receive a fair trial. This was predicated on the fact that they were tried as adults and that the trial and the manner in which they were treated, were both intimidating and inappropriate.”

Now the courtroom erupted once again in a much louder roar, fully foreseeing where this speech was leading to. Mr. Lee released his wife and sat eagerly on the edge of his seat, ready to spring to his feet in protest at the conclusion of the Chief Justice’s discourse. But when the words were formally uttered, it was all he could do to muster the strength to remain upright as his body slumped helplessly in his seat.

“It is then my ruling,” Cavanaugh sped it up, knowing his gavel no longer maintained its magic, “that Ralph Bicknel and Del Fraso be paroled, and that the process of that parole should begin immediately, with due process.”

The last few words were barely audible above the sudden yelp of surprise and protest that emulated from the large crowd. Fraso’s family, who was in attendance in the back of the room, hugged each other and cried openly. Never in their wildest dreams did they ever believe their son would ever go free.

The Lee family was in disbelief as well.

Mrs. Lee fell to the floor in anguish while Mr. Lee sat in his chair staring motionlessly out into space. If this was justice in a civilized world, he didn’t want any part of it. His little girl was dead, his entire life had been shattered, and now the one last thing in life he’d clung to – that his

daughter's killers were locked up, suffering and being punished – was stripped of him as well.

He felt the life drain from his body.

The bitterness he felt was undermined by the crushing pain in his chest and arm. Crying out loudly once, he doubled over and joined his grieving wife on the floor.

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Because of the huge scrutiny of this case, the court gave a permanent injunction restricting the freedom of the media from identifying, or harassing, the two young men upon their release. These sanctions stretched to all forms of media, including the tabloids.

To say that the British media was up in arms was truly an understatement. Certainly, they could understand the need for press blackouts during trials, but this was unprecedented. Citing that such restrictions destroyed the very nature of freedom, many of the largest press institutions threatened to disregard the ruling, even taking their fight to court.

The high court defended the rulings though, citing any press coverage would certainly put the two youths at risk of physical harm or worse. They claimed the media had whipped the public up into a frenzy and that the two would never know a life without harassment.

Still, the media persisted and remained staunch in their convictions.

For that reason, the high court decided to take a different route. Instead of just releasing the boys out into the general public, they opted to put them into a witness protection program. They felt hiding Bicknel and Fraso behind the government's cloak would solve all their problems.

Or, at least, pass their problem onto some other, more deserving soul.

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“Okay, so what gives...why all the secrecy?”

FBI Special Agent Jared Barnes had risen earlier than usual this morning in order to get to Detroit Metro Airport by seven o'clock to meet his Section Chief, Jack Saunders. He knew he wasn't flying anywhere – at least he thought he wasn't, since Saunders hadn't instructed him to pack any overnight bags – but with Jack, you never knew. He was as unconventional as they came, sometimes working out details of a case with his gut,

sometimes making decisions on a whim, but always calculated and through in his approach.

This time was no different. Jared had received a phone call late last night at the condo he shared with his girlfriend, Pulitzer Prize winning reporter, Julia Sorenson. Usually Julia would be inquisitive over receiving such a late call, especially one with little details other than where to meet. But she was off traveling, meeting her New York agent about a proposal for a fiction detective novel she was writing, and didn't know about his early morning rendezvous.

Jared fell in line behind Saunders as they both flashed their badges and walked through security. To the National Guard patrolling the area, the two made a curious pair. Tall, thin with striking facial features, Jared's shy, Boy Scout manner was in stark contrast to Saunders' shorter, stocky physique and intense approach. The fact that one was white and the other African American held little effect in this diverse, metropolitan area.

Only after one of the guards stopped Saunders and did a swift body scan did Jared notice his boss' attire. Saunders certainly looked the imposing part of a Federal Agent today, sporting a crisp, freshly laundered white shirt and dark tie under a worsted woolen, black, two piece suit. Even under the hot, summer climate of Detroit, he still looked cool.

Saunders pulled a notepad from his breast pocket and scanned a couple pages before returning it. He studied the multitude of monitors on the wall, all spelling out the various arriving and departing flights, until he found the one he wanted.

"International terminal," he muttered, almost to himself, then turned and began walking down the terminal aisle.

"Whoa, sir!," Jared raced after him and caught him. "And good morning to you, too, Jack."

Saunders looked at him and one corner of his mouth turned up. It was a weak attempt at a smile. Whatever had brought these two here was certainly serious. This morning, the Section Chief was all business.

"Sorry Jared. Didn't mean to - "

"That's okay, Jack. You seem preoccupied. Care to let me in on what we're doing here?"

Saunders looked around at the milling crowd passing them in the hall way and pulled his partner toward the wall away from prying ears. Even still, he kept his voice low and deliberate.

"We're here to meet representatives from Scotland Yard. I got the word from Washington late yesterday after you'd left, so I couldn't fully

brief you. Then, last night I didn't want to go into details since I called from my cell phone."

Jared nodded, urging him to continue.

"What we've got today is basically a prisoner exchange. Scotland Yard is escorting an individual over from London."

"Who is it, some terrorist for us to interrogate?" Jared seemed confused. If that was the case, why here? Why not Washington?

"No...no, it's not a terrorist. In fact, once he lands on our soil, he won't be a prisoner anymore."

"I-I don't understand."

Glancing at his watch and knowing he wanted to be there when the passengers deplaned, Saunders hurriedly said, "Witness protection, Jared. The guy they're delivering to us is going into our witness protection program."

Then before Jared could ask any additional questions about the identity of the British person or why they were being deployed into the US program, Saunders turned and began walking briskly toward the gate.

There'd be time for explanations later, but not now – if ever.

Hell, Saunders didn't know if he even understood it, never mind trying to get his younger colleague to. The one thing he *did* understand was he was under the strictest orders not to share the identity of the person being handed over. It was under a stringent need to know basis only. And after hearing who the former prisoner was, Saunders could certainly appreciate what all the concern was about.

In just under fifteen minutes, he was going to have a British citizen transferred under his responsibility, which would change his entire world and shake many of the beliefs he held so near and dear.

He wondered whether he should share the mystery person's identity with Jared. Would his reaction be similar to his own? He would have to ponder that and give it more thought.

Glancing at his watch, knowing the plane had landed and was now taxiing to the gate, he realized he was only about ten minutes away from his new responsibility. Although a job and dwelling had already been secured, Saunders had the dubious task of working the paperwork through INS and, once everything was settled, keeping an eye on the former prisoner.

That was the part which was the most troubling to him.

It wasn't like the person was seeking political asylum or something like that. The fact of the matter was this guy had killed a kid, a very young child no less. But what was chilling to the hardened agent was that this guy had killed the child while a child himself.

Now due to the quirks of the British courts, he found himself free. Free to live his life uncaged. Only, he couldn't be free in his own country. Like OJ, he'd be hounded...maybe even hunted by those who felt he didn't deserve to live. So the diplomats called in a favor and dispatched the kid to places unknown to the local media.

The laugh was on them.

They could hunt all they wanted, but the world was a large place. Now, Ralph Bicknel would call the United States of America his new home. And with his new home, he'd get a new name as well.

*Lance Gauvin.*

Saunders wondered who chose that name. And what of the kid's boyhood partner? What new name and country was that youngster dispatched to? Saunders figured he'd never know.

The loading door opened and the people from first class began milling through. Saunders immediately recognized what he felt were two undercover agents escorting a young, frail-looking teenager through the gate.

*At least they could have removed their sunglasses.*

"They look like our contacts," Saunders said to Jared, "let's go meet our newest responsibility."

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At that very moment, out in Bozeman, Montana, Special Agent Doug Smith was rolling over in his bed and hitting the snooze alarm button. He groaned as he stretched his tall, lean body out under the bed covers. He couldn't believe how early it was and felt if he stared at the clock long enough, perhaps it'd magically change.

He got out of bed and looked at himself in the mirror. He placed his hands on his love handles and squeezed.

*Getting pudgy.*

Since being relocated the Big Sky Country by the Bureau, Smith hadn't many opportunities to work out as much. There weren't any gyms or many racquetball partners out here in now-man's land. There were little options for recreation unless you were into ranching or skiing.

He was darkening up a bit, his pale, white skin now a golden brown thanks to the hot, western, summer sun.

At least he had that going for him.

Though, that was the only thing. Certainly the reassignment out here held few perks and even fewer opportunities for advancement. This was a

job that was going nowhere. It was nothing more than a shit assignment for a shit head.

Ever since he'd run into Jack Saunders in Detroit, it'd been downhill – career wise – ever since. Now banished to this hell hole existence in Montana, with primary responsibilities for keeping a watchful eye on the red-neck Freeman organization, Smith realized he was one step away from either quitting or being forced out of the FBI.

And what of his supposed mentor and friend, Assistant Director Dennis Levins? To Smith, he was nowhere to be found. Instead of reaching out and saving him from this crappy assignment, Levins stayed silent.

*So much for loyalty.*

Truth was - Smith had allowed his ambition to get the better of him. Instead of working within the task force Saunders had established six months ago to snare a husband and wife serial killer team, Smith had bartered his way to greater promotional opportunities with Levins. All he had to do was supply information to the Assistant Director. Keep him informed. Keep him one step ahead of Saunders and his investigation.

That was all.

To Levins, an easy assignment.

To Smith, it meant cloak and dagger. It meant deception. It was fun.

And it almost worked. He had the information to break the case. But it was Saunders' dyke Forensic Specialist, Lisa Arnet, who discovered the lies and ultimately had him imprisoned in a Mexican jail.

*The bitch!*

If he lived long enough, he was sure he'd get even with her and her snide, dyke smile. She was one person he would bide his time and pick his spot for revenge.

But not now.

After the solving of the most recent case - the Nafta Murders, as the national media called it – Arnet was a celebrity and very much in demand within the Bureau.

*Him?*

He was considered a bullshitter...a has-been...banished to one of the lowest posts possible within the FBI.

They thought he'd quit.

What the suits in Washington didn't realize was Smith was no quitter. And with his drive and ambition to advance within the organization was now no less than it had been when he first started, although somewhat tempered by the most recent events. That ambition had altered after his experience in Mexico, giving his life a new purpose, a new meaning.

*Arnet.*

Getting the better of her, somehow, somewhere, drove him on. He would never forget the humiliation he felt in that little, sneaking, cell she'd stuck him in. Nor the fucking cockroaches that ran over his body every time he moved.

No, Arnet didn't know it at the time, but she gave Smith a new purpose in life. And deep within his heart, he knew he'd get another shot at that uppity bitch. He'd be patient. Here in Montana, it was easy to be patient.

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"Can you believe this shit assignment?" Smith's newest partner, Art Collins asked as they drove the lonely, two-lane blacktop to the airport. "I mean, putting a child killer into a witness protection program. What next? Saddam Hussein?"

Smith smiled to himself.

"I doubt even our leaders would be that stupid," he replied, content in letting his partner ramble on. Collins was another of those Federal lifers. He'd been with the Bureau for thirty years, but once he'd outlived his usefulness, he was given this soft assignment in Montana.

And Collins didn't mind it one bit.

He liked the slower pace, the quiet evenings. Divorced, balding, overweight with a pot-belly, Collins was a typical middle aged white male living out the final twilight years of his life. Eager to avoid work as much as possible, he enjoyed the good life out in the plains.

For Smith, he quickly realized there'd be little action for him out here. In fact, if he was ever to make a name for himself again, he'd have to find a way to attach himself to some outside case, because the chance of a big one landing here was scarce and nil.

Now he and his non-ambitious sidekick were given the distinct privilege of a glorified babysitting role. Not only would they need to establish this kid into a new existence, they had to assignment of watching over him and ensuring he lived a very, nondescript life.

Wouldn't want him killing anymore little kids, now would we.

Talk about your political nightmares.

That was when Smith realized it was a lose - lose situation. If nothing happened and this kid lived out his life in a normal, no problem - who cared? Certainly not his superiors. Their only concern was if something went wrong, and then it'd be "cover your ass" time.

It now occurred to him why he'd gotten this task.

If something went wrong, if the kid killed again, there'd be hell to pay and Smith figured who'd be fingered for it.

"Bastards," he muttered and scowled.

"W-What?," Collins looked confused; a look Smith had grown accustomed to seeing on his partner's face.

"Oh...nothing. I was just thinking to myself."

"Man, you got up on the wrong side of the bed today," Collins whistled. "You're not an early riser, are ya?"

Smith glared over toward his partner with contempt. He couldn't believe how low he'd sunk.

"What's the kid's name?"

"His old name or his new name?," Collins rummaged through his notebook.

"Both."

The older man nodded.

"Well, the British media knew our boy by the name Del Fraso. But once he lands on our beautiful soil, he'll be forever known as Dirk McMahon."

"Huh? Who chose that name?"

"I guess he did. I don't know. I did access the data base on this kid. A real sicko, he was. Didcha read the file?"

"A little," Smith was disinterested. This, like everything else in the last six months was a nonevent for him.

"Have you found him a job yet?" They'd already secured living quarters for McMahon.

"Yeah...at least a stop-gap job until we see what he wants. May opt for college, though," Collins replied.

"What a world we live in," Smith muttered, his demeanor getting grumpier as the morning grew long, "where else can you kill a kid in cold blood, then get our government to pay for your college degree, change your identity, and support you for the rest of your rotten life? Unbelievable! What a bunch of idiots!"

Collins didn't reply. He knew his partner well enough that when he got into these moods it was best to remain quiet and just let him ramble on. He'd pick up speed before flaming out, and the two of them usually ended up at one of the local watering holes, drowning their sorrows.

He didn't know what Smith did to get this assignment, but it must have been something pretty bad to have put such a young, up and comer into this hell hole. Although his partner never volunteered an explanation, and

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Collins never ventured into that territory, he was sure the truth would come out eventually.

It usually did.

The two remained silent as they exited the highway into the airport.

Soon their babysitting job would begin.