

Crispy Critters

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Published by Shaylee Press Jan 18, 2014

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BOOKS BY THEO CAGE

SPLICER (2012)

BUZZWORM (2014)

SATAN'S ROAD (2014)

THRIFT SHOP (2014)

ON THE BLACK (Fall 2014)

DAREDEVIL'S CLUB (2015)

EMERGENT (2015)

When I was a teenager, I discovered a cache of well-thumbed paperbacks that a friend's uncle kept stored in his basement. That summer was my first introduction to Robert Heinlein, Frederic Pohl, Isaac Asimov and HP Lovecraft.

Up to this point, my only exposure to short stories were the anthologies – Amazing Stories, Weird Tales, etc. So I eagerly gobbled up that whole, musty library. But when I cracked the spine on my first Lovecraft horror story - it was like being infected by an addictive parasite. No one could create atmosphere like Lovecraft - or dwell on the gruesome details so lovingly. I still can't get some of those images out of my head.

Now I am no Lovecraft, but I've always wanted to write a short story that scored high on the creepy-crawly meter. But modernized. And what could be more revolting than a child molester? And two retired guys with too much time on their hands - and revenge etched across their sclerotic hearts.

Theo Cage

Crispy Critters

Leo wound the monofilament line around the man's neck with practiced hands, the shiny tether sparkling in the light of their high-powered flashlight. Gordon stood over their captive, holding both of his wrists as the pedophile struggled, jerking his arms back to quiet him for at least the tenth time in the last fifteen minutes. Leo was in his seventies, retired over twenty years, but his hands were as steady as a seamstress's - his large meaty fingers working the fine line like a surgeon.

The mono was Gordon's idea. He had no idea where it came from. He had spent his working life as a firefighter, then a fire inspector - not the most creative career choice. But now, the project he and Leo were working on had lit a fire under them, no pun intended. Gordon loved the open-ended quality of their work together. No bosses. No routine. Every job, a fresh new adventure.

The pedophile squeaked this time, his voice slowly but certainly being cut off by the thin line wrapped around his throat. And his eyes were wide now, big yellow saucers in the dim light of his filthy bungalow. Leo and Gordon had worked on this effect for some time and made a lot of mistakes. But they had it now, and they relished the recipe as if it was the colonel's special own. You don't want a man thrashing around and doing damage, but you also don't want him sedated so much that he misses the point. It's a fine line. And the point of this exercise is all about that fine line.

The man they held, his chest bare and his arms covered in needle tracks, was Nelson Parrish. He was about forty, thin, no more than 120 pounds, which made this whole process a lot easier than it normally was. Plus the roofies they gave him made wrangling him easier too.

Parrish lived in a rented house on a broken down street in northern Phoenix called Cable Road. His neighbors hated him, avoided him assiduously. After all, he was a known child rapist just released from Clayton maximum in Minneapolis. The FBI now published the names and addresses of all known released sex offenders. You could look it up on the Internet with very little difficulty.

A neighborhood group called *Mothers for Sanity* had pasted a poster on the light pole just down the block with a grainy picture that didn't really do Nelson justice. He had shaved the eighties mustache the day he was released. Gordon found that odd. Why would you want to spend one day more in prison than you had to looking like a cop from *Hill Street Blues*?

Leo and Gordon were going to give Nelson what he deserved. Well, not exactly what he deserved. They didn't really have the stomach for that. Nelson's record showed that he had abused at least five young boys all under the age of twelve over the past ten years. How do you pay someone back for that kind of atrocity? They had given it a lot of consideration and couldn't come up with a balanced response. Mostly they wanted him just gone. They weren't in this for kicks. They were doing a job no one else wanted to do or had the balls to talk about. They didn't really give a shit about what the bleeding hearts thought. They

had worked hard their whole lives, raised families, paid their taxes. This piece of shit was only a turd in the yard no one else wanted to bury.

Leo finished the fine detail on the monofilament. The line was now digging into the grey unshaven flesh of Nelson's neck, fifty-pound test, the thickest they could find at a local sporting goods store. They used mono because it was plastic, would quickly melt away in the high heat of the fire and not leave a carbon trace. The idea was to make this look as much as possible like an accident. Nelson was just another lackadaisical smoker, drifting away on a cheap rayon couch that would soon be his funeral pyre.

Nelson was having a hard time controlling his arms and his legs, but you could see in his eyes that he was wide-awake.

Leo moved back to inspect his work. The pervert looked like an insect trapped in a spider's lair. He smiled. Then he knelt down and picked up a plastic cup from the floor. He had filled the small container with gasoline from a spigot he had installed himself under the right rear wheel well of his 1993 Ford F150.

He held the yellow cup above Nelson's face. Nelson tried to turn, but when he twisted, the nylon line cut deeply into the flesh of his face. Leo carefully let one-drop fall into Nelson's open right eye.

Nelson jerked like a bug that had fallen into an open flame. Then Leo put the cup down carefully on the floor again. He took his time, mindful of spilling anything on the carpet that could leave even the smallest trace. He knew time wasn't a problem. Nelson had no friends - no lady callers. The only visitor might be his parole officer, but not likely at one in the morning.

Gordon then took his cigarette lighter out of the pocket of his windbreaker and held it in front of Nelson's face.

"Five boys you destroyed. Even a sick puppy like you knows that's not right. And you're probably thinking to yourself right now, I just couldn't control myself, couldn't fight the urge. Yeah. I hear the urge is strong. But you should have tried harder. We should take a steel poker, heat her up real hot, and drive that thing right into you. That would be justice of some kind. But that might get the medical examiner interested. So we are going to try something else."

With that, Gordon flicked the starter on the lighter. The gas in Nelson's eye burst into a small flare of light. It sizzled for a few seconds, burning off the salty moisture in his tear duct. Then the eye went opaque like a boiled egg white.

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Gordon Cleary saw the two detectives walking up his front walk from his upstairs bedroom window. Cheap suits and a Crown Vic sedan - that was all the information he really needed. Plus they walked like cops - like they deserved to be there.

He closed the curtain, hoping they hadn't seen him, and took a deep breath. He had played this scenario out in his head many times. After all, he was a pro.

He was just surprised they were on to him so quickly. He would have guessed it would have taken at least a half-dozen deaths before an investigator could put enough clues together to triangulate on him. What kind of mistake could he have

made that put him on their radar? Then he realized his mistake. There had been six deaths. He had almost lost count.

As Cleary made his way down the stairs, there were thoughts buzzing around in his head that surprised him. For a brief moment he actually considered taking out the two cops. Had it really come to that? He was going to transition from murdering perverts to police officers because they might get in the way of his master plan? He shook his head as if to toss the thoughts aside. As a fire inspector, he often thought of criminals as hopelessly unimaginative. *You're surprised we showed up?* And here he was doing exactly the same thing. Six simple acts of revenge and someone was on to him already. Like spontaneous combustion - sometimes it just happens.

The doorbell rang, echoing in the tiny hallway. Cleary cleared his throat. A doorbell chime can mean so many things. In this case, potentially, the end of everything he knew and loved.

He opened the front door, wearing old blue jeans and a worn T-shirt; he fit the part of the retired fire fighter perfectly.

The first cop on the stoop was about six feet tall, black, with a serious expression on her face. The second, standing behind her a few steps down, was younger, blond, probably at the bottom of regulation height for a cop. Or maybe it just looked like that since he was standing in the shadow of his partner.

The blond looked bored, which caused Cleary to relax a bit. Or maybe that was the cop's strategy - play it cool and get you to drop your guard. But right then, something in their faces told him they hadn't come to make an arrest. Not today anyway. Cleary guessed some old firefighter's intuition had kicked in. Now he was feeling more curious.

"Gordon Cleary?" said the woman. Cleary put on his most disarming smile; pushing all of his nervousness down where it couldn't be seen.

"That's me," he said.

"We're working on an investigation and wondered if we could ask you some questions."

"Sure," said Cleary, stepping aside in the small hallway. "You want some coffee?"

The tall cop looked at blondie who shrugged. The coffee question was always a good one. If they were coming to slam your head against the living room wall and cuff you, caffeine wasn't necessary. The female cop told Cleary she probably had enough coffee to last her a week, but thanks anyway.

Cleary led them into his kitchen - green linoleum floors, cupboards painted years ago in a pale green color his late wife used to call mint. They sat down at the kitchen table. Also mint.

"How can I help?" offered Cleary, hands open, leaning forward slightly - the international symbol for *I have nothing to hide*. Meanwhile, his heart was winding up to warp factor five.

"I'm detective Cyn Bathgate," then she pointed at her partner. "This is detective Scott. We're working on a fire investigation we thought you might be able to help us with."

"Always happy to help a fellow investigator."

"The fact you worked with the Fire Department for so many years is the reason we're here actually. We have an arson case - at least we believe it's arson - and wondered if you'd look at the file."

"This a cold case?" asked Cleary.

"No. It's recent. Three days ago. On Cable Road. A small bungalow burnt to the ground."

"Why do you think it's arson?"

She looked at her hands for a few seconds, folded together on the tabletop. Then she smiled, looking a bit embarrassed. "Nothing based on the scene actually. Just a suspicion. There have been three very similar fires in the past twelve months, all the homes of pedophiles. They all occurred while the owners were being reintroduced into society."

Cleary almost laughed. Re-introduced? Is that what you call it when you invite a rabid dog into your backyard?

"Somebody's burning pedophiles?" Cleary asked.

"That's my guess. But I don't have any hard evidence. You worked on a lot of arson cases. Ever seen anything like this?"

"You know, there are enough psychology books on fire starters to fill a small library."

"I didn't know that," Bathgate answered.

"Arsonists are fascinating. Some of them just love to burn things down. They have personality issues. Low self-esteem usually. Watching a fire makes them feel important; gives them power over others. Then there are the pros. Fire is just a means to an end for them. Which do you think it is?"

The blond cop perked up. "We think it's revenge."

Cleary thought about that for a moment. "Someone whose kid was abused you mean? Or a family member?" he asked.

"Could be. But amateurs usually leave a lot of clues. Traces of extenders. Kindling. Unlocked doors. There's none of that," said Bathgate.

"You know your stuff, detective," said Cleary.

"Not as much as you."

"What do you need from me then?" asked Cleary.

"We'd appreciate it if you would visit the site tomorrow. We'll be there at noon. We just want your opinion."

Cleary looked up at a calendar hanging on the end wall of one of the kitchen cabinets - the only thing in the room less than ten years old.

"You've got my curiosity up now. Sure I'll be there." Bathgate gave Cleary her card with the address of the destroyed home - what Cleary would call the *fireground*. "But don't forget. It's been six years since I've worked on a case. I'll be a bit rusty."

The tall cop smiled and shook his hand. "I think you underestimate yourself, Mr. Cleary. From what I hear, you were ... uniquely suited to your work."

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Bathgate and Scott got back in their unmarked sedan. Bathgate looked back at the house wondering if Cleary was watching them. She was sure of it.

"He doesn't rattle easy," said Scott.

"Are you surprised? He's probably interviewed hundreds of sociopaths in his career. I'm betting after a while you start thinking like them. But I was watching his wrist. His pulse was way up."

"Still pretty cool for a guy out of action that long."

"I wouldn't say he was totally out of action. I'm guessing he's doing a bit of freelancing," she said.

"So what happens tomorrow?"

"We bring him to the site of the fire. We watch him go through the wreckage. Ask him a lot of questions. See what we can learn."

"Then make an arrest?" asked Scott.

"I didn't say that. We don't have an open and shut case. We need a lot more."

"What about his truck?" Bathgate nodded. It was all they had. On the night of the fire, a neighbor two blocks over had called in a suspicious vehicle. An older Ford truck was parked in front of her house and since two families on her street were out of town, she was worried about a break and enter.

When the Phoenix Police patrol car arrived, the truck was gone, but the woman had recorded the license number. When they checked the plates, they learned the F-150 belonged to Gordon Cleary who lived in Cold Canyon, about ten miles north of downtown Phoenix. *An expert on arson parked two blocks away from a suspicious fire at two in the morning.* Not enough for a grand jury, but a thought-provoking question for Cleary tomorrow, while he had his nose down in the charred timber, hoping he hadn't left any clues behind.

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Cleary pulled up in front of the sidewalk that led to a blackened pile of lumber and a crooked chimney poking up into the Chinese elms, the remains of Parrish's little bungalow. The firefighters had done a good job of containment. A faded picket fence belonging to the neighbor on the right showed some signs of bubbling paint and chars, but both adjoining houses went largely undamaged. That was all about proper water management and the right wind direction. But the fire department could never save Parrish's little pre-war home once it ignited - too much old paint, dry paneling and wood chips in the attic. Cleary knew, after all. He had checked before they started the fire.

The two cops were standing at the edge of the debris, careful not to get burnt charcoal on their clothes or hands.

"Detectives," said Cleary.

"Mr. Cleary," said Bathgate. "You know this area at all?" Cleary thought that was a strange question to start things off.

"I fought fires all over this city for thirty years, detective. Why do you ask?"

"The Fire Department told us these houses were a problem, but didn't explain why."

Cleary nodded. "Age mostly. These bungalows and two stories were built in the 40's and 50's. They used a wood construction method called balloon framing that isn't used anymore. Basically, the walls are like chimneys and the fire and heat shoot right up the insides. Creates a very fast burn. And in those days, they

didn't use fiberglass or treated fibers for insulation - they used wood shavings. Lights up faster than kindling.

"So this was just a fire waiting to happen?"

"Unless people remediate these older homes, they are living in a fire trap."

Cleary walked up to the edge of the foundation, which was now just a concrete pad piled high with charred timbers and the remains of appliances and a blackened furnace. He looked up at the tall detective. "I really don't know what I can help you with here. You must have a fire report from the inspector."

"Yeah. They say the owner fell asleep on his couch while smoking. Cigarette burned a hole through the couch, which started the fire. Guy never woke up."

"Did they say what kind of couch?"

"Poly something."

"Probably old. Before fire resistant chemicals were used. Highly flammable. And once they get started, they produce very high heat, which spreads the fire quickly. Also pumps out poisonous gas. Which is likely how your victim died. But an autopsy can confirm that. Burnt lungs - or not - will tell the story."

Bathgate just stared at Cleary for a moment, saying nothing. "The ME said death from asphyxiation. Chemicals released from the couch."

"Pretty typical," Cleary added. "The hot gas burns out their lungs. It only takes seconds. Did you test for accelerant?"

"You just said the couch ..."

"You brought me here because you think this is arson. That almost always means gasoline or kerosene traces."

"They had a dog here, clamoring around in that pile of burnt wood for about an hour."

Cleary looked over at the debris. "Dogs are sometimes more accurate than the laboratory. They're trained to sniff out the by-products of accelerants. Saves a lot of time."

"They didn't find anything. So that means what?"

"Ninety percent of arsons involve the use of gasoline or solvents. If the dog didn't find that, you don't have much to make a case."

"What about the other ten percent?" asked the detective.

Cleary frowned. "Kindling usually. Piled up furniture or wood scraps. Sometimes if there are a lot of drapes, an arson can start there. You can look for certain V-shaped burn patterns to determine the point of origination."

"This place had no drapes. The owner preferred tinfoil taped to the windows."

Cleary shrugged. "Poor man's window coverings. You can buy them at Piggly Wiggly," he said. The two cops seemed out of questions.

"Okay, detective," said Cleary. "Old house, dry as a popcorn fart - just waiting to light up like the fourth of July. The fire inspection office does a thorough review and comes up with nothing more than a guy with a nicotine addiction, smokin' home-rolled or maybe a joint, while he dozes off in front of the Shopping channel. Do you know how many people died from smoking accidents last year? Hundreds. So what makes you think this isn't just an accident?"

"Three cases just like this one over a space of twelve months, all in the greater Phoenix area." Cleary turned to the blond cop who seemed fascinated by a distorted light bulb lying in the grass. Glass melts at over six hundred degrees,

thought Cleary. They called that a *pulled bulb*. The direction of the pull was a clue to origination. This was quite a fire. He wished he'd seen it. And the cop had the number wrong. There were six house fires - but the zone was bigger than she had thought to examine. *Hey, give credit where credit is due.*

"Three convicts?" asked Cleary.

"Three child molesters."

Cleary made a face. "You expect me to feel sorry for those perverts? Maybe someone is doing us all a favor." Both cops looked at him. "Do you have kids?" asked Cleary.

Bathgate squinted at Cleary, evidently not liking the question. "I don't see what that has to do...?"

"You don't see what? You don't worry about your kid being grabbed by some monster?"

"Cleary! Let's stay on point here. You're the expert on arson. Could you plan a job like this? Start a fire without making it look like arson?" she asked.

"There are two kinds of arsons: people who burn their houses because the insurance money is worth more than the pile of sticks they live in, or kids who have behavioral problems. 99% of intentional fires match that pattern. You are really going out on a limb here.

If you hate the pervert next door, why not run him down with your car or fake a home invasion. Why go to all this trouble?"

"Good question," said the female cop, too quickly for Cleary's liking.

"So am I done here?" Cleary pointed at the tangled pile of burnt timber looking like a giant game of pick-up-sticks. "Cause I'm not crawling through that crap unless someone is paying my cleaning bill."

The blond walked over and for the first time got involved in the discussion. Up close he looked a lot older. "Where were you, Mr. Cleary, on the evening of June 12th?"

"Where was I?"

"It's a simple question."

"A week ago? Tuesday? Playing cards with a buddy. We play Poker ever Tuesday night."

"And your truck?"

Cleary looked from one cop to the other. He was beginning to see where this might be going.

"What time?" Cleary said.

"Early morning. About 2:00 AM."

"You see my truck, Detective? A rust-bucket 1993 F-150. It has over 200,000 miles on it. Held together with plastic bondo and faint hope. Not what you could call reliable. But what can you do on a firefighter's pension?"

I was driving my buddy home late, when the truck stalled. We pushed it to the curb and ..." Cleary was thinking ahead as fast as he could. Leo would back him on any story he shared with him. But if he said they took a cab, it would be too easy to check the time and dates with the taxi operator.

"And?" said the blond cop.

"So we hitchhiked home."

"Hitchhiked? At 2:00 in the morning?"

"Just got lucky, really. A young kid saw two grandfathers stuck at the side of the road and took pity on us. We got home, grabbed my friend's car and battery cables and drove back. Gave it a boost. I was in bed by four."

Cleary knew the two cops wanted to exchange glances, but they were far too professional to give anything away. *His truck* thought Cleary. Someone had ID'd his truck sitting a few blocks away from the house they had torched. Could be a police officer or a nosy neighbor that called it in. That was a huge mistake. The police could have shown up quicker, the neighbors might have gotten involved - and two old guys could have walked right into the end of their careers as *The Revengers*.

"I'm a suspect?" asked Cleary, trying to damp his anger down. They were just doing their jobs. No sense getting bent out of shape. "Because my truck was seen near here?"

"You have to admit, it raises some interesting questions," said the blond.

Cleary looked from one cop to the other. He could see the accusation in their eyes. He guessed they were both past making assumptions. Now it was just a hunt for evidence. Was there any point in trying to distract them?

"I spent fifteen years fighting fires and another fifteen inspecting them. Proving arson isn't that hard. Nailing the perpetrator - almost impossible. All that procedural stuff you guys use on a typical crime scene like DNA, fingerprinting and fibers - don't mount up to a pile of donuts on a typical arson case. You need a confession, detectives. Otherwise, you ... well, you're basically fucked."

Bathgate didn't even blink. Cleary guessed she had already thought about the challenges in this case. "I'll need the name and the phone number of your poker playing friend." Cleary gave it to her. Then he said his goodbyes and got into his truck.

Just for effect, he held the gas pedal down before turning over the starter, intentionally flooding the carburetor. He knew this truck intimately, had bought it new twenty years before. As soon as he could smell gas rising up from the engine, he turned the ignition. The starter groaned several times then he turned the ignition off.

Cleary looked at the blonde cop who was now almost to his passenger door, heading for his cruiser. He raised both hands in exasperation, looking angry, and got out and flipped up the hood release. Just as he got the engine cover open, the two cops rolled past him and disappeared up the road.

Assholes, thought Cleary. *Won't even help a senior citizen.*

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Tuesday night poker had been a tradition with Gordon Cleary and his four close friends for almost twenty years. They were religious about the weekly game; despite marriages, children growing up, divorces, sickness and funerals - they had all adhered to one tradition that remained unchanged; twenty-five cent ante, dealer's choice, everyone helps pay for the snacks and beer.

Larry was the first to go. He was a short, wiry firefighter, never married. Had his first and last heart attack chasing some kid down the back lane who broke a branch off his favorite crabapple tree. And he wasn't going to hurt the kid -

probably just wanted to talk to him and give him a bag of green apples to take home.

Now the poker team was down to four. There was talk of replacement, but Cleary would have none of it. Larry wasn't just a guy they happened to play cards with. He was funny and warm and would always pay for more than his share of the food pot.

He also saved Cleary's life once. They were part of what is called an interior attack; four firefighters holding hoses, deep into an industrial warehouse, finally beating back the flames after hours on the site.

Cleary was pushing forward when he felt a tug on his arm. He turned and saw Larry through his flash hood and breathing mask, tugging him back. Cleary didn't understand. They were clear, and the flameover was rolling back, a sign that the origin of the conflagration was under control.

Cleary wanted to kill the fire; put its lights out. But Larry wouldn't let go. If it was anyone else, Cleary would have pulled away thinking the other guy had lost his nerve ... but this was Larry. He was a firefighter without an ego - he just did what he thought was right. So Cleary slumped his shoulders, expressing his sense of defeat and turned - just as the roof, sixteen feet about them, collapsed.

Larry had sensed something. Later he said it was a sound, but you can't really hear anything in full gear. Cleary knew it was all instinct.

So Cleary was not the least bit interested in replacing Larry. They would have to do with four.

Then Tim got divorced, met another woman and moved with her to Texas when her company transferred her. Now they were down to three. Three players make for lousy poker. But Cleary refused to take on replacements.

Now here it was Tuesday night, years later, and it was just Gordon and Leo. They both had a beer in front of them, sitting in Cleary's kitchen, a worn deck of cards sitting on the table that they hadn't touched for an hour - although Leo said he wouldn't mind a game of solitaire to clear his head. Poker night lately had become strategy and planning sessions, only the stakes were much higher than a \$30 pot full of quarters. They were looking for justice.

"What do you think, Gord? Are those cops onto us?" asked Leo. Cleary looked across the table at his friend of fifty years. How rare is that? Someone you can put up with - even enjoy their company - for five decades. He felt blessed.

Cleary had called Leo the minute the two cops drove away and told him the story. Leo got a call a few hours later and repeated the tale of the hitchhiker. The cop had delved into the story in some detail. In the end, Leo said his memory wasn't what it used to be and couldn't remember all the details - finally, a decent use for garden-variety senility.

"They have some circumstantial evidence, enough to fuel their interest, but not enough to get a warrant. That'll keep them up at night though. And I'm a big puzzle for them. Having no record and no priors - and no obvious motive. I remember as an inspector, that kind of thing would make me doubt myself. Ninety percent of the time cops know the suspects they're dealing with. It's like a club. I don't belong to the club."

Leo took a careful sip of his beer. He wasn't a big drinker. He could nurse a long neck for two hours. He also didn't seem worried. And he had already said he wanted to keep going.

"Look. This is your call," said Leo. "They have your name and you're the fire guy. I'm in 100% if you need me."

Cleary looked tired. Without the game they called *Crispy Critters*, they had nothing anymore. Might as well turn off the lights. And a pathetic game of two-person poker wasn't going to cut it either. Nothing had the clean concise edge that tracking down pedophiles and sex maniacs delivered. Nothing. It was like a five-alarm every time.

Cleary sat forward. "This just ups the ante, Leo. We have to be smarter. And they're only looking at four cases. They don't know about the other two yet. So, like I said yesterday, let's look a little further afield. Do some traveling."

What Cleary meant was stop focusing on just Phoenix proper and consider cities within one or two hours' drive. Or longer, if it came to that. Cleary knew that the only way they would ever get caught was red-handed. And how likely was that? So extending their territory just improved their odds.

Leo had been spending some time over the last twenty-four hours going over the Arizona Sex Offenders online database, specifically looking for targets that weren't in Phoenix.

All the info they needed was on the web. There were thousands of offenders in the database, and the online info included names, birthdates, gender, age and current location. Leo eliminated anyone in an apartment or multi-use housing. They didn't want to start a fire that could accidentally kill innocent bystanders. Also, too many opportunities to be seen by people in the area. Leo wanted a stand-alone house, typically a small renter or something owned by the offender.

The next step was to determine classification levels. Sex offenders were rated on their risk to reoffend and their danger to the community at large. Level 3 was the worst - and that was their focus.

Finally, Leo would look at their actual offenses - people who caused harm, who were true predators. Those were the ones that made it onto their hit list. Why were these people tracked on a National database available to everyone with their picture and complete address information? Because the law was hopeless. They knew who was going to reoffend and who was a danger to the community. So did they keep them locked up longer? Of course not - they couldn't. The courts wouldn't allow it. So all they had left was to list these psychopaths on a public website with their last known address. Don't have time to check to see if there is a sexual deviant living right on your street? *Well, that's just too freakin' bad isn't it.*

Leo had a short list, which he brought on a piece of paper, hand-written. That was one of their rules - nothing on a computer. Clean out your browser history after every search. Create one manual list. Never cut and paste. And after Poker Tuesday, they burned the list and started over. That's the way it was. If the cops came back, the first thing they would do is confiscate technology. Ninety percent of cases were made nowadays by a computer tech on the police payroll doing forensics work on some poor idiots laptop. Nothing was safe on a personal computer - all those files you think you deleted - a clever tech can resurrect in minutes. And juries eat that Sherlock Holmes' shit up.

Leo unfolded the list and flattened the edges with his hand.

"I know this is going to surprise you, Gord, but I found a perfect *Crispy Critter* in Palm Springs."

Cleary raised his eyebrows. Though Palm Springs was only an hour away from Phoenix, he somehow never imagined a slimy reprobate holed up in a fancy house there.

"Palm springs has a low rent division like everywhere else." He showed Cleary his notes. "This is David Torrance. He's a Level 3. Lives in a small bungalow on 52nd Street near the Industrial Park. Checked it out on the Palm Springs Tax Roll site. He owns it. Has for years.

And he's a bad guy, done a lot of nasty stuff. Spent eight years in Yuma's Dakota Level 4 unit. Released about a year ago. He's 42. Restrained from going within five hundred yards of any school or kindergarten - and for good reason. He likes to kidnap kids and keep them as his personal pet for days. What do ya' think?"

"I think you should consider very carefully whether you want to join me on this case," said Cleary.

"Think I'm too old for this, do ya'?"

Cleary couldn't help but smile. "Leo, you're tougher than a horny javelina pig on Red Bull. And you know it. You're also the only guy I know over seventy, who has two girlfriends and a prescription for Viagra that keeps being renewed. But if you walk away now, they could never implicate you. Remember we've been lucky. No screw-ups or bad breaks yet. They're bound to happen eventually."

"I think we're on the side of the angels," said Leo, taking another drink.

"That's not a defense in court," said Cleary, swallowing the last of the lukewarm backwash sloshing around in the bottom of his beer bottle. *The first swig was always the best, full of bright promise; the last swig, almost a solemn duty.* Maybe he could get that engraved on his tombstone.

"Well, Gord, I signed up for the whole tour. And you're the general. If this is on the to do list - dump one more sleazy pervert into hell's dumpster - then, I'm your man."

Cleary raised his empty beer bottle, and Leo tapped his against the side.

"Done. A deal signed with the devil. Palm Springs, here we come," announced Cleary. "My old clunker may not make it there and back. Maybe we should take your station wagon instead this time."

That was, as it turned out, mistake number one.

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Cleary and Leo had used the same tactic to get inside the sex offenders houses six times before.

Just outside the neighborhood, Cleary would pull over into a back alley or a shopping mall and put on his bunker gear. This was the complete outfit a firefighter would wear before going into a major fire - yellow Nomex pants, a fire resistant yellow coat, boots, black rubber gloves, flash hood, firedome helmet and face shield.

In many U.S. cities, firefighters made appearances at schools and kindergartens to prepare children in case they are ever confronted by one of these yellow monsters during an actual emergency.

Cleary was six foot two. He bought the turnout gear at an auction for a fraction of the ten thousand dollars a full kit was worth. Leo thought he looked like a rubberized version of Godzilla.

Cleary then squeezed himself back into the passenger seat and let Leo finish the driving duties. They parked this time in a back lane behind a dumpster - less noticeable by nosy neighbors. And Cleary rubbed peanut butter he had brought across the license plate, so it was less readable in the dark.

Their rule was simple - if anyone at all saw them - they would turn back; a fully kitted firefighter was the epitome of official and trusted in most communities - but hardly forgettable.

Torrance's little bungalow had a handy side entrance hidden in the shadow of the house next door, three steps up to a concrete porch. Leo stayed back in the shadows; his bag of goodies stuffed into his backpack.

Cleary knocked on the door, already sweating in the heavy suit. The side light went on and the side door opened. Cleary recognized Torrance from his picture on the sex offender's site. Torrance looked surprised - just like they all did. Who expected a firefighter at their door at one in the morning?

Cleary had to yell to be heard around the fire hood and head harness.

"There's been a gas leak in the area, sir. I need to come in and inspect your furnace." Torrance didn't even reply - he just opened the door wider and let the spaceman into his home. Cleary tromped into a small living room and turned. Torrance still looked speechless, wondering perhaps if the firefighter could even hear him through all that rubber armor.

"Where's the furnace?" yelled Cleary, making gestures with his big black rubber gloves. Torrance led him into the kitchen to a large closet near the back door that led out into a tiny backyard.

Leo had snuck in the opened front door and followed the two men into the kitchen. He was wearing a black nylon jacket and had a fake set of ID around his neck that said *Ned Healy, Arizona Gas*. He opened the side zipper on his backpack and pulled out a Colt 45 he owned. Nothing fancy, just a gun the size of a baseball bat. He waited for Torrance to turn around, which he eventually did when Cleary nudged him.

"Shit," he said. "What the fuck is this all about?"

"Sit down, asshole," said Leo, his face hard. He hated the guy the instant he saw him. He wanted nothing more than to pistol-whip the little creep. Torrance sat reluctantly on a wobbly kitchen chair tack-welded together in the sixties and reupholstered at least three times.

Cleary pulled off his helmet and face hood and rubbed his head. His glove came away slick with sweat.

"What about the gas?" asked Torrance.

"You're safe for now, David," said Cleary. "But if you so much as twitch, my friend here from the gas company will shove that Colt up your ass and shoot your balls into Mexican airspace." Torrance turned to Leo.

"Hey, Ned. You're the one who's going to get his balls removed." Torrance didn't look cowed anymore. He was fully awake - had smoothed down his short brown hair that was sticking up, and was getting feisty. Leo looked worried. Was this guy on drugs or just stupid?

Cleary had taken the two blue pills from Leo and mixed them in a glass of water from the sink, which was full of dishes. That was Cleary's second mistake. He should have known that was a lot of dishes for just one guy.

"Here! Drink this. It will save you from the effects of the gas."

From behind Leo came a female voice, full of sleep and high-tar cigarettes.

"You take my husband for some kind of bird brain? You drink that shit yourself if you think it's so great."

Standing in the hall was a woman about five feet tall and nearly as broad as she was high. She was wearing a stained nightshirt that couldn't hide pillowy breasts, stomach and hips. Her hair was tinted bright red with yellowish-white roots exposed and flared out down past her shoulders like a wild alien sagebrush.

When she smiled, which she was doing now, she revealed tiny yellow teeth with gums so receded you could see the angry stumps of the roots. She was holding a shotgun - a big two-barrel job that looked rusty and unused - that she was swinging back and forth between Leo and Cleary.

"I said drink that shit," she growled. "If it's good enough for Davy, it's good enough for you." David got up, smiling a partially toothless grin and joined his girlfriend.

"Yeah. Let's see how you boys do. Medicine is good for ya'," said Davy.

Cleary just stared. At this point, he would rather be shot than helpless on roofies with this pair.

"Feeling shy?" the woman said? Okay. Let's try this. Davy, you take gasman's gun there. Good. Now you shove it into the fireman's nut sack. Well now, aren't you bein' enthusiastic." Cleary jumped, but held his ground. The woman gestured with the barrel of the gun to Leo. "Now, you lift your hands up, grandpa, and walk over to that table and drink that *pick me up* just like it's the nectar of the Gods. Or your fireman friend there is gonna lose something precious in exactly ten seconds. You ever been on one of those fireman nudie calendars, Mr. Fireman? Well, you won't be after what we do to ya."

Cleary glared, his mind racing, his eyes on Leo, who was reaching for the water. Leo took the glass, raised it in a toast to his attackers and drank half of it. When he stopped, Red wiggled her gun at him again.

"Now, now. Finish everything up before you leave the table. You know those are the rules." Red stumped across the kitchen and pushed the shotgun into Leo's temple. Leo finished the glass and looked over at his friend.

Cleary estimated they now had about twenty minutes or so before Leo became paralyzed - totally conscious, but unable to move a single muscle.

"I think you boys have been up to no good," said Red. "I heard about a couple of fellers, guys like Davy here with an occasional itch for younger meat, who were burned up in their houses. Imagine that! Could they have spontaneously combusted? Yeah. Don't look at me like that Mr. Yellow Submarine guy. I can read. And you look like a friggin rubber dingy standing in my kitchen." She pulled

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