

FLOATERS

A Jack Daniels/Alex Chapa Mystery

By

J.A. Konrath

and

Henry Perez

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Introduction to *FLOATERS*

By

J.A. Konrath

My name is Joe Konrath, and I write a mystery/thriller series about Chicago cop Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels. Jack, and her supporting cast of characters, have appeared in six novels since my first, *Whiskey Sour*, came out in 2004.

The goal of the Jack Daniels books is to mix serious suspense and thrills with genuine laughs. The books alternate between scary scenes and lighter, humorous moments, sort of cross between Thomas Harris and Janet Evanovich.

Besides the novels, Jack has appeared in many short stories, all available for download on my website, www.JAKonrath.com, and on the Amazon Kindle.

Which brings us to *Floaters*

I first met Henry Perez shortly before my first book came out. Henry says that I snubbed him, refusing to give him one of my advanced reading copies because I claimed I had no more. Truth told, I had plenty more, I just didn’t like Henry very much.

Naturally, we became good friends.

Years later, Henry wrote a serial killer novel of his own, called *Killing Red*, which I was fortunate enough to read while it was still in the editing stage. It is, without a doubt, the best thriller debut I’d ever encountered.

Henry later went on to land an agent and a big publishing deal. He also claims to have a large stack of advanced reading copies of *Killing Red*.

As of this writing, I haven’t been given one.

The hero of *Killing Red* is a Cuban-American reporter named Alex Chapa, who works for a Chicago newspaper.

Being a fan of his novel and his character, I begged Henry to collaborate on a story with me, believing it would be a lot of fun to have Chapa and Daniels in the same story.

It was, even though Henry writes so slowly, moss grew on his north side while he was crafting his sections.

I'm pleased *Floater's* is getting a second life in a digital format. It's a good introduction to our characters, while also being a fun way to revisit them if you've already read our novels.

Plus, it has pogs.

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CHAPA

I was merging from Harlem Avenue into mid-afternoon traffic on the Kennedy when word came in that another floater had turned up in the Chicago River.

“I phoned you first, Mr. Chapa.” Zach Bridges, an intern at the news desk, had taken the call. “Just like you always tell me to.”

I steered with my knee for a moment, one hand on my cell and the other fiddling with the air conditioning. There was a snowflake symbol on the dial, meant to indicate *frigid*. It was lying to me, blowing tepid breaths in my face that did little to combat the sticky summer air. I settled for lowering the window enough to get a breeze but not so much that it disrupted my conversation.

“That was good of you, Zach. Remind me to talk to Sully about getting you a regular news beat.”

The kid got all excited but there was no reason for him to. It was an empty hope, he just hadn’t figured that out yet. The newspaper industry was dying, slowly, painfully. The Suburban Herald, my employer for the past fifteen years, was just like all the other rags that had gone terminal before anyone realized what was happening.

Reporters have always fought over stories with front page potential, but at least there was usually enough space to go around. These days, we often spend our time wrestling over every precious column inch.

“Is Sully around?”

“No, Mr. Chapa, he’s in another meeting with the accountants, all the editors are.”

I thanked Zach for the tip, then called Matt Sullivan’s line and left him a voicemail. I took the next off-ramp, crossed over the expressway, and headed back toward the Loop. I’d be on the story before my editor had a chance to wonder whether someone else should be instead.

My office is located in the western suburbs, but I was in the city that day following a lead from Nina Candrolini, a pint-sized woman in her late sixties who offered

me a cup of green tea and a well-used chair to sit in while I drank it. I passed on the tea, and standing would've been the wise choice.

"You're my last hope, Mr. Chapa."

"Please call me Alex."

From the looks of it, Nina was wearing the same makeup she put on the day her husband went missing.

"Emil would never disappear like this. Not without telling me. It's been two days now, and I know something bad has happened."

Truth is I normally would've given her a gentle brush-off. People do sometimes get lost for a day or two. These stories pop up all the time.

"You've tried the police?"

"They came by, took my information. But they didn't seem to be in a hurry to do anything. Said he hadn't been gone long enough."

"I don't want to cause you any more worry, but have you tried the hospitals? Maybe he got in some sort of accident."

She raised her voice, probably as much as her frail frame would allow. "I've called every hospital and clinic in Chicago asking for Emil or anyone unknown fitting his description. I'm not a fool, Mr. Chapa."

"Alex," I said gently.

She nodded, sniffled, then I lost her face to a yellowed, embroidered handkerchief that I would have bet was older than I was.

"I'm sorry, Alex. Didn't mean to snap at you. I haven't been able to sleep, and I'm a wreck. But I've tried the hospitals, and everyone we know, and the police, and I don't know what I'm going to do next."

The handkerchief returned to her face, but she continued.

"This isn't the sort of big story you like to be involved with, I know that. But even after forty years of marriage Emil still makes my heart jump. He's all I have."

I leaned in to comfort her, but thought better of it when the chair crackled and squealed.

"There are private detectives."

“I called one, but he wanted to be paid much more than I can afford. Our finances lately, because of the business—well, I just don’t have it, Mr. Chapa.”

I felt for her, but didn’t see what I could do. Sadly, this wasn’t really news. Maybe if I spun it, took the human interest angle, something about how no one cares for the senior citizens in our society.

“I can write a story, print his picture. Maybe someone will recognize him.”

“That’s not enough. I need to go looking for him. Do you have a car?”

“Yes, but Mrs. Candrolini—”

“Please. I’d go myself, but Emil has our car. I don’t have anyone else to turn to.”

I let myself entertain the notion, cruising around Chicago with an elderly woman. For a moment I pictured something resembling *All the President’s Men* meets *Driving Miss Daisy*, and I wanted no part of it. But lately it had been kind of slow in the suburbs, and I’d grown tired of writing about the wife beaters, gang bangers, and sexual predators that crowd the police blotter. This would certainly be something different.

“Mrs. Candrolini, you need to stay here in case he calls or shows up.”

“Does that mean you will do it?”

I’d already decided to write the story. What could it hurt if I checked out some of Emil’s haunts and talked to a few people? It would be a way of getting background information.

“I can try.”

That brought a cautious smile to her face, the kind that reminds you why you became a reporter.

The Candrolinis had been antique dealers for more than a quarter century. They made a decent living through the eighties and nineties, until the collectibles bubble burst near the end of the last decade.

“At first we thought the internet would be a godsend for us dealers. But it didn’t work out that way.”

She explained that quality items had become hard to find as amateurs flooded the business, and that’s why Emil drove to the city.

“He goes once a month to check in with some people who buy stuff at garage sales and thrift stores. We used to do that too, but it’s hard to find the energy anymore.”

“Do you sell these things online?”

“No, too much competition. We stick to mostly flea markets, and collectibles shows.”

“Can you tell me who he was planning to visit on this last trip?”

“Sure. But I already tried to call them.”

“I should double check.”

She handed me a small piece of lavender paper with three names and addresses written on it in textbook perfect longhand, and a photo of her husband.

“The first one is a man he’s dealt with for a while, the other two are new, I think,” she said, then waited for me to respond with a word of hope.

I wasn’t going to lie to her.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know anything,” I said, then walked to my car and drove away without looking back.

As soon as I pulled onto the expressway I put a call in to the Chicago branch of the FBI and asked for Special Agent Joseph Andrews.

“I’m telling you right up front, Al, I do not have the time to be doing you any favors right now.”

“Busy, huh?”

“Very.”

“I understand, and you know I would never waste your time.”

“I appreciate that.”

“I just need access to some IPASS records from two days ago,” I said as casually as I could, referring to Illinois’ automatic toll system which can make it easy to track a car’s movement, as long as the driver is registered for the program, which Emil Candrolini was.

“Al, that’s a favor.”

“Not really. The driver of the car in question has been missing for two days. His wife believes he was driving into the city from Batavia, which means he would’ve passed through at least two toll booths.”

I heard him sigh, then silence. I'd been friends with Joe Andrews for more than twenty years, been best man at his wedding, a pallbearer at his father's funeral, so I knew what was coming next.

"Goddamnit, Al," another sigh, "what's the plate number?"

Half an hour later, I was driving through the tunnel beneath the old Chicago post office when Andrews called me back and confirmed that the Candrolini's ten-year-old Chevy Impala had indeed passed through two eastbound toll booths along I-88.

"But that's it, there's no record of a return trip," he added.

I thanked him, promised to check in later that day, then drove to the first address on the list. It turned out to be a small curio shop on Clark, situated in a corner of an eighty-year-old building, just north of the river.

It had once been a drugstore, complete with a lunch counter and regular customers. The business space next door looked like it had originally been part of a larger whole, and the two still shared a display window. Now one half was a coffee shop catering to twenty-somethings and poseurs, and the other was the store, crammed with a mish-mash of old junk, some of it valuable, most of it not.

I walked past collections of movie memorabilia, baseball pennants, and a dozen stacks of men's magazines, to the middle of the store. A tan, very muscular man in a St. Louis Cardinals cap and faded blue t-shirt was kneeling next to a box of old comics, flipping through them. The guy I needed to talk to was manning the counter.

"Yeah, sure, I'm Sam Preston, who are you?"

Preston was tall and narrow, and he might've been an athlete, but I got the sense he didn't come from that kind of family. Long, thin black hair draped his pale face.

"My name is Alex Chapa, I'm a reporter, and I'm looking for Emil Candrolini."

He reached out to shake my hand, revealing a roughly inked tattoo of a lightning bolt on the inside of his forearm. I filled him in on the details, and he confirmed that Emil had been there two days before.

"Emil's a hell of a guy, comes in every once in a while. He buys shit I'd never be able to sell. I give it to him below cost a lot of the time on account of I like the guy, and he's a good customer."

"What kind of things does he buy?"

“Junk. But then, it’s all junk, isn’t it? One person’s trash, another man’s treasure. Buy a box of cereal, keep it unopened for thirty years, someone will pay five hundred bucks for the toy inside. Crazy world, right?”

He leaned back against a door behind the counter on the common wall between the two businesses. It was covered with Garbage Pail Kids stickers, most of which were faded and peeling.

“Is that the kind of junk he normally buys from you?” I said, pointing to the awful stickers that I vaguely remembered from my youth.

“No, not this shit, exactly, but sort of. Emil never liked the antiequey stuff. He’s into collectibles. You know, baseball cards, records, movie posters. Most of those things hold their value, but Emil sometimes buys up stuff no one seems to want any more. You know, like Pokemon cards. Some of those used to go for a few hundred bucks a piece. Now you’d be lucky to get ten bucks for a trunk full. Just couldn’t hold their value.”

“Emil bought Pokemon cards?”

Preston shook his head. I waited, unwilling to ask again. He stayed quiet, folding his arms, his lips pressed firmly together. I got the hint and fished out my wallet. All I had was a twenty and a five, and I didn’t think he’d make change. I handed him the larger bill.

“Emil accumulated stuff like collections of National Geographic magazine, Michael Jackson memorabilia, and pogs,” he said, his face splitting into a wide grin. “He thought they would become valuable again someday.”

“Pogs?”

“He bought pogs. A whole shitload of them.”

The guy who was hunched over the comic books looked up for a moment. A big pog collector, no doubt.

“And what, exactly, is a pog?”

Preston spent the longest three minutes of my life explaining everything I ever wanted to know about pogs, including the details of their quick rise in popularity, and their even quicker fall. He told me about the many variations, and the important difference between a regular pog and a slammer, even pulled a few out from behind the counter and spread them across the glass top.

When he was finished, I took him down a different track, asking questions about Emil, fleshing out his personality. Old man, forgotten by society, trying to eke out a living by selling items from the past. It was heavy on the schmaltz, and wouldn't get me a Pulitzer, but some readers love that sort of thing.

I gave him my business card and as I turned to leave I saw a large doll in a glass case. Preston noted my interest and launched into his spiel.

"It's a limited edition American Girl piece. It's in mint condition in its original, unopened box."

He made it sound expensive and more valuable than it probably was, but the doll reminded me of my daughter Nikki, and I knew she'd love it.

"How much?"

"It books at seventy-five, but since you're a friend of Emil's it's yours for forty."

"Do you take credit cards?"

He pulled out one of those old credit card gadgets, the kind that makes an imprint of the card on a carbon copy, and I handed him my Visa.

After he'd bagged the doll, I thanked him and headed to the next place on the list, a warehouse and factory just west of Old Town. A name had once been painted on the building's brick façade, *Jorgensen's*, maybe, but that was decades ago. The street that ran along the front of the building was narrow and empty, except for one truly eye-catching set of wheels.

I parked next to a mint new Corvette, spent three seconds admiring the lines, then walked to a door that had one of those cheap tin entrance signs stuck in the middle. The old knob was scuffed, and badly dented, and it complained loudly when I gave it a quick twist. The room on the other side of the metal door was a cramped office that smelled of dried sweat and recycled grease. The paint on the walls may have been beige once, but years of cigarette smoke and stale air had left a mud brown patina.

A small man with spiked hair sat behind a metal desk that was built long before computer monitors were common. He looked up at me as though he'd been waiting for someone, and I wasn't that guy.

"What do you want?" he asked as though that was his default greeting.

I looked beyond him to a partially open door and noticed the shadow of someone on the other side.

“Is that how you greet all your customers?”

“We’re closed.”

He tucked something into his hip pocket as he stood. This wasn’t a guy you showed your back to. He was short but solid, even his eyebrows had muscles, and his legs could’ve passed for fire hydrants in blue jeans.

“Are you Marty Cleven?” I asked in my most authoritative voice.

“What do you know about Marty?”

“Nothing, except he was supposed to meet a man named Emil Candrolini here two days ago.”

“Don’t know either of them. Time for you to go.”

“Is Mr. Cleven here? I just need a minute.”

“Time for you to go,” he repeated, raising his voice several decibels.

I glanced beyond him again, and saw what looked like a man moving around in the next room.

“Is he in the room behind you?”

“I warned you, buddy.”

He came out from behind the desk, reaching around his back as he closed the twenty feet of cracked grey tile between us. When his thick right hand re-emerged it was holding a tazer.

I never had military training, never formally studied the martial arts. But you pick up stuff over the years. After more than a decade of interviewing all sorts of people, experts in a wide variety of areas, not all of them legal, I’ve learned enough to defend myself in most circumstances. As all four feet, eleven inches of him came toward me I was certain this was one of those circumstances.

Mighty mite was just five feet away when I lunged forward and slammed my left fist down on his right wrist, sending the tazer tumbling across the floor until it came to a stop somewhere under the desk. Before he could snap out of his *what-the-fuck-just-happened* trance, I swung my right forearm into his chin and across the side of his neck.

He dropped to the floor like someone had cut his strings, one hand rubbing his face, the other seeking the tazer.

The shadows in the other room weren't moving around anymore, they were huddled by the door. It was time to go.

I reached back for the entrance door and noticed there were dents and a lot of scuffed metal around the lock. Maybe the damage to the outside knob was recent, because maybe these guys didn't have a key to the place. I heard shorty growl something R-rated as I walked out.

Driving through busy Lincoln Park streets, I checked the rearview a dozen times on my way to the third stop, an apartment above a small business in Rogers Park. Calling the police crossed my mind more than once, but I didn't exactly have what you would call a friendly relationship with a majority of the Chicago PD. Besides, what would I say? I saw a guy who might have broken into an old warehouse with his friends, and I assaulted him because he might have tried to attack me because I wouldn't leave when he told me to? I'd been hassled by cops enough over the years, and I didn't want to add another unpleasant experience to the collection. So it was on to the third address on my short list.

The sign on the door of North Side Plastics read *Closed*. Between broken slats in the lowered blinds I could see someone moving around inside. I found the entrance to the apartments around the side of the building, and the name on the mail box confirmed that Angel Batara lived on the second floor. But the amount of mail filling the box also suggested what I soon confirmed, Angel wasn't home.

An hour later I was sitting at Johnny's Beef, eating a sandwich and looking over the notes I'd made, which added up to a whole lot of nothing. I finished lunch, got back in my car, and pointed it toward home.

And that's when I got the call from Zach.

Four floaters in eight weeks. An attention-getting number. One death is a human interest story. Two can sometimes be the result of some sort of a grudge, or gang activity. A third can be dismissed as fallout from the first two deaths. But when the body count reaches four, regular folks start worrying that they could be next. And that sells papers.

The scene along the North branch of the Chicago River was about what I had expected. I parked the car several blocks away so as to not draw attention to myself, and walked to the scene. The mid-summer sun that had recently baked the town to a crisp was still clinging to the late afternoon sky. Scanning the area for an anxious witness, a familiar face, or another reporter, I roamed the perimeter that the cops had staked out until I spotted Jimmy Gordon.

“Hey, Officer Gordon,” I said just above a whisper. He turned and eyed me right away.

“Chapa, I should’ve known you’d end up here along with the gawkers, bugs, and river rats.”

Jimmy had been my pal since back in the nineties when I wrote a series of stories that helped him and a few of his brothers in blue get off on bum corruption charges.

“What have we got here?”

“The guy hasn’t been in the water for long, and it doesn’t look like he drowned.”

“You got a name?”

“Don’t think so, but all of this will be released to the press in due time.”

“C’mon, Jim,” I said with a smile.

He smiled back, though not as much, and appeared to consider his options.

After a moment, he said, “Have I told you about my brother?”

“Didn’t know you had one.”

“I do, he’s an orthodontist, very successful, knows all the latest technology and shit. And he just opened his own office in Glen Ellyn.”

“You don’t say.”

“It’s a tough business, Alex, very competitive and publicity can be hard to come by.”

“Sounds like he’s providing a fine and necessary service to the good people of DuPage County.” I nodded. “I could probably milk a decent feature out of that.”

He returned my nod. We had an agreement.

I watched Jimmy walk down to the river and over near a woman I recognized as Homicide Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels. As Jimmy hovered around the scene I slipped behind an oak tree to avoid being spotted by the other cops. Daniels was a tough

customer and a decent enough cop, but she didn't take kindly to members of the news media. If she spotted me, Jimmy would immediately forget our deal, my name, or that he'd ever even heard of newspapers.

She was surrounded by the usual array of police officials who were poking around the scene and carefully examining the corpse. I was so locked in to the goings on that I didn't notice Jimmy had returned and was casually leaning against the tree I was standing behind.

"The stiff is a white male, about six-three, under two hundred pounds, probably in his early to mid thirties. A group of folks on a river cruise spotted him floating by."

"That'll ruin a nice day in the big city."

"No shit. He was found fully dressed, but without any ID on him."

"Cause of death?"

"No word yet. I didn't get that close."

"And he was floating, huh?"

"That's what I was told."

"Anything distinct about him?"

Jimmy thought for a moment.

"Oh yeah, he has a tattoo on his arm."

"What kind of tattoo?"

"It's a lightning bolt, could be prison ink."

"That's Sam Preston."

"You knew him, Alex?"

"Not for long."

DANIELS

Homicide Lieutenant Jack Daniels pushed her bangs behind her ear—seeing the streaks of gray annoyed her—and frowned at the body being lifted onto the stretcher. The man’s clothes and hair had begun to dry, and aside from the dull open eyes he appeared to be sleeping.

“Tour captain said he was floating,” she said.

Her partner, Sergeant Herb Benedict, had liberated his emergency beef jerky stash and was munching on some sort of pepperoni stick.

“I don’t get it either. Guy looks like he just went for a swim. Couldn’t have been in the drink for more than a few hours.”

“But he was floating,” she repeated. The words didn’t taste right leaving her tongue.

“Maybe he just had a buoyant meal,” Herb said. “Something light and airy. You want to grab a bite after this?”

Daniels walked over to Phil Blasky, the county Medical Examiner, who was using a probe to take the liver temperature. Unlike Herb, who was portly and sported a mustache, Blasky was thin to the point of gaunt and didn’t have enough hair on his entire head to keep a mouse warm in the summer.

“Eighty degrees,” he said, noticing Jack’s approach. “The water is fifty-five.”

“Rigor?”

“No. No lividity yet, no livor mortis. This man was alive a few hours ago.”

“Cause of death?”

“Can’t tell from a cursory examination. No visible marks on the body. Blue pallor, slightly cyanotic, but that could be from the water temperature. A drowning?”

“When they fished him out he was floating.”

“That’s odd.”

Jack’s frown deepened.

“Are his lungs full of water?” she asked.

Blasky pulled a syringe out of his med kit, unwrapped it, then looked around for a place to put the wrapper. Herb took it, adding the garbage to the dozen or so jerky wrappers in his breast pocket; you always knew when Herb was around because he sounded like cellophane.

“Let’s see.” Blasky pushed up the corpse’s shirt and angled the needle between the damp, pale ribs. He pulled back the plunger, getting a small quantity of blood and a larger quantity of air.

“Suffocation causes cyanosis too.” Jack folded her arms. “Give his diaphragm a squeeze.”

Blasky performed a partial Heimlich, there was a wet popping sound and something shot out of the deceased’s mouth and arced through the air. Jack tracked it down, squatting and peering at the asphalt between her black Ferragamo pumps.

“What is it?” Herb stood next to her. He wasn’t built to squat.

“I have no idea. Some sort of disk. A poker chip?”

She looked closer. It was white, maybe three centimeters in diameter. If it hadn’t been stuck in a floater’s throat, Jack would have guessed it was a Communion wafer.

Without prompting, Herb handed her a plastic evidence baggie and a wrapped pepperoni stick. She used the jerky to poke it. Metal. And thick, about a centimeter.

She flipped the circular object over.

Herb said, “Holy Guacamole, Batman.”

Her partner’s comment was appropriate. On the other side of the disk was a picture of Batman. A close-up of his face, the caped crusader in three-quarter profile, looking suitably heroic. Jack maneuvered Batman into the baggie.

Herb nudged her. “Should I call Gotham City, tell Commissioner Gordon that the Dark Knight has gone bad?”

Jack stood up, smoothed out her skirt with one hand while holding up the baggie with the other.

“You, my friend,” she said to Herb, “are too old to be such a big geek.”

“Batman is cool. Can I have my jerky back?”

Jack complied, then caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Two men were approaching. One, a uniform she recognized as a beat cop named Gordon. The other, a

man about forty, medium build, with strong Cuban features punctuating a slightly sad face. Jack knew him as well. She shoved the baggie into the coat pocket of her blazer and put her hands on her hips.

“This scene is off limits to members of the press.” She had some steel in her voice, and though her words were to Gordon her eyes were on the reporter.

“Lieutenant, Alex, uh, Mr. Chapa here, he says he knew the floater, uh, the deceased.”

“He can pay his respects after we release the body. In the meantime, if he’d like to go for a swim himself, the Chicago Police Department would be happy to assist him.”

Alex Chapa took a step forward, something Daniels viewed as brave but not wise.

“Officer Gordon, tell the Lieutenant I just saw this man alive a few hours ago.”

Jack narrowed her eyes. “Did anyone see you two together?”

“I’ll save you the trouble. He owns a collectible shop on Clark, has a closed circuit camera. You can view the tape, which will show you he was still alive when I left.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Herb said, stepping up to meet Chapa. “You could have killed him after he left.”

“I didn’t kill him, Sergeant. I want to help.”

“Do you like Batman?”

“Batman? Why?”

Jack stepped forward, standing shoulder to shoulder with her partner.

“Officer Gordon, take Mr. Chapa down to the station and get a statement. If you make him wait for more than six hours, I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Sorry, Alex,” Gordon said. “Let’s go.”

Gordon placed a hand on the reporter’s shoulder, pulling him backward. Chapa shrugged away.

“Lieutenant Daniels, I know in the past the Suburban Herald hasn’t treated you with the respect you deserve...”

“Here’s the direct quote. ‘If Daniels paid as much attention to her job as she does to her wardrobe, maybe Chicago wouldn’t have so many unsolved homicides.’”

“I didn’t write that. But it’s nice to know that someone still reads the papers.”

“Not me, Mr. Chapa. My boss. He wasn’t amused, and neither am I.”

Chapa attempted a smile. “I apologize. Still, that suit you’ve got on is very flattering.” He looked over at Jimmy, who was studying his shoes.

Jack turned to the uniform. “Make him wait ten hours, I’ll see to it you get a promotion.”

Officer Gordon again tried to lead Chapa away, and again the reporter twisted out of the hold.

“Don’t you find it odd, Lieutenant, that this is the fourth reported floater in eight weeks?”

“Potentially unrelated,” Daniels said. “If you knew anything about floaters—”

Chapa interrupted. “—I’d know that bodies in water tend to sink for the first several days. They only float after bacteria begin to decompose the tissue, releasing gas. Those other bodies had been dead for weeks before they bobbed to the surface. Preston’s clothes should have weighed him down, kept him on the bottom for a while. I know this because I attended a forensics lecture you gave at the U of C about five years ago. You were excellent.” Chapa added, “And your outfit was killer. Red. I think it was Armani.”

“It was Fendi,” Jack said.

Chapa glanced to his right, viewing the corpse as Blasky fussed with a black body bag.

“What is that?” Chapa asked, pointing to Preston’s right foot.

Something was wedged between the victim’s ten dollar loafer and his wet sock. Blasky carefully removed it with some forceps and held it up. A small key.

“Bag it,” Jack told him.

“He doesn’t appear to be beaten up like the other victims,” Chapa stated. “The other three floaters had facial lacerations, indications they’d been worked over.”

“No comment.”

“And the others were men with money who turned up wearing polo shirts with country club emblems, and Italian leather shoes. This guy shopped at thrift stores.”

“Still another reason why there may not be a connection. How many ways do I have to say, ‘no comment’? Officer Gordon, now, please.”

“Look, Lieutenant Daniels, I really am trying to help. Don’t you want to know what Preston and I discussed? It could be relevant to the investigation.”

“Officer Gordon will take your statement, possibly sometime within the next few days.”

This time Gordon managed to get Chapa several steps away before the reporter slipped his grasp and came storming back

“Why was he floating? Lungs full of air because something was caught in his throat?”

Now Herb got so close his nose almost touched Chapa’s.

“And how exactly do you know that?”

“I saw something fly out of his mouth, watched the Lieutenant pick it up. Could be a pog.”

“A what?”

“Let me see it, and I’ll tell you.”

Jack thought it over, couldn’t see the harm, and pulled the bag out of her pocket. Chapa held it by the edge, bringing it close.

“Well, is it a,” Herb hesitated, “*pog*?”

Chapa looked up at the four of them and shook his head.

“It’s not a pog.” He smiled smugly. “It’s a slammer, a member of the pog family.”

Jack looked down at the small round piece of metal, then back at Chapa with a gaze that was equal parts awe, bemusement, and pity.

“That’s it,” Jack’s voice was calm and steady. “Officer Gordon, get him out of here and keep him away from normal people until we take his statement, sometime around Labor Day.”

“Pogs were made of cardboard, this one’s metal, and heavier, that’s what makes it a slammer,” Chapa was talking fast, trying to get the words out before Gordon could grab his shoulders again and drag him away.

Jack snatched the bag back, returned it to her pocket. “Your turn. What, exactly, is a pog?”

Chapa folded his arms across his chest and looked like he was getting ready to hold court.

“They originally came from fruit juice in Hawaii. The treated cardboard milk cap beneath the screw-on bottle top of passion fruit-orange-guava juice. They had different designs, kids began to collect them and trade them by playing a game. You’d pile up a stack of your opponent’s pogs face down, then hit them with a heavier piece called a slammer. The ones that turned face up you got to keep.”

Herb grunted. “Never heard of it.”

“Really big, back in the early 90s. Companies made millions of them. They were a fad for a while, some of the rarer ones sold for big bucks, like baseball cards. The one that popped out of Preston features a Bob Kane drawing. Classic Batman, before they turned his cowl from blue to black.”

“And you know this because...?”

“I’m a reporter,” Chapa said through a smirk. “That means I’m as close to being omniscient as any human being can possibly get.”

“If you’re omnipotent you know that if you print any sort of speculation before we release an official statement I’ll come down on you so hard your ears will bleed.”

Chapa smiled. “You can’t repress the truth, Lieutenant. The people have a right to know.”

“They also have a right to be safe from murderers, which are a lot harder to catch if crime scene information leaks out. Now go take his statement, Gordon, and if he gets away from you again you’re going to wish you didn’t come to work today and instead stayed home and licked all the hair off of a monkey.”

Chapa laughed, then said, “Don’t knock what you haven’t tried, Lieutenant,” forcing Jack to suppress a smile of her own.

Gordon nodded, grabbed Chapa more firmly than possibly necessary, and pulled him off the scene.

“Want to get a smoothie?” Herb asked. “I’ve got a sudden urge for passion fruit-orange-guava juice.”

Jack didn’t answer. She watched Chapa leave. While shooing away reporters was second nature to her, this one wasn’t as annoying as most, and it seemed like he might have had more to offer. It didn’t matter really. Gordon would do a decent interview, and if there was a follow-up needed Jack could always do it herself. Besides, real murders

weren't like TV or books where the crime was solved an hour after it happened. It often took days, weeks, months, before an arrest was made.

Still, watching Chapa walk away left her with a nagging doubt that perhaps she should have pressed the man further.

CHAPA

“Hey, Alex, that deal we have, it’s still on, right?”

I hesitated just long enough to put some doubt in Jimmy Gordon’s mind. We were almost to the sidewalk, beyond that was the row of parked squad cars. I kept looking back over my shoulder at Lieutenant Daniels.

“Sure, Jimmy. I’ll write a really nice piece about your brother.”

Jimmy smiled and wrote his brother’s business number on the back of a bar and grill takeout menu, which he then handed to me.

“But let’s get this statement thing done quickly so I can get out of here ahead of the rest of rush hour traffic.”

“It’ll take as long as it’ll take, Alex.”

“C’mon Jimmy, if I don’t get back to the office soon my editor will be seriously pissed, and it could be weeks before I get a shot at doing that story you want.” I gave him a regular guy smack on the arm. “You know, behind the badge and the by-line you and me are just a couple of blue collar guys.”

“Damn straight.”

“We’re the ones in the trenches, doing the grunt work.” I tilted my head toward the river where Daniels was still talking to the examiner, “Not like some overpaid glory hounds.”

He nodded like I’d just preached the gospel. “I guess I can take your statement in my squad car.”

Fifteen minutes later I was back in my car, driving as fast as traffic would allow back to Sam Preston’s store in the hope that Daniels hadn’t already dispatched a unit to check it out.

I drove by and saw no sign that the cops had already been there, then parked a block away and around the corner. I dug through my car’s ashtray, filled with the usual pennies, discarded pen caps, and the occasional mint, until my fingers landed on a large, thick paperclip. Then I scrounged through the ocean of pens in my glove compartment

until I found one that had a metal ink cartridge. I unscrewed the pen, and slipped the cartridge and paperclip into my shirt pocket.

Looking at my watch as I walked through the dark purple door of Strange Brews, the coffee shop next to the collectibles store, I figured I had twenty, maybe thirty minutes max before Daniels and her rotund partner showed up. The place didn't have that good solid coffee shop smell, but instead offered a confused combination of scents that reminded me a bit of an old head shop.

A couple of goths were sitting at a table in the back corner. Both of them furiously thumbing the keys on their cellphones, probably texting each other. The only other customer was a thin, middle-aged guy who was quietly drinking his cup of coffee and staring out the front windows as though it was the only thing he needed to be doing at that moment.

I did my best to act as though the woman behind the counter looked pretty much like anyone else. A tattoo of a fist clutching a length of chain adorned her shaved head. The flimsy black tank top she was wearing clung to her shoulders like old skin that she might shed at any moment.

“Yeah?” she said through a heavily pierced lower lip.

“I just need a cup of coffee.”

She flashed a look of tired disgust, then turned and pointed to the board behind her listing every crime against coffee they were willing to perpetrate for a price. It reminded me of trying to decipher the arrivals and departures board at O'Hare.

“I just want a basic coffee. Something strong that'll put hair on your—,” I stopped for fear her fist tattoo might spring to life.

”You could try our Strange Brew house coffee.”

“That'll work,” I said, feigning optimism, then asked where the restrooms were. She pointed to a hall at the back of the shop.

I walked past the end of the counter, and the texters, and into a narrow hallway that was partially blocked by a stack of boxes. Four feet beyond the stack I saw what I was actually there for, the connecting door to Sam Preston's shop.

Taking a quick look back to make sure no one was watching, I walked over to the door and tried the knob. It didn't budge, no surprise. I squatted, and using the boxes to shield what I was doing, pulled out the paperclip and ink cartridge from my pocket.

You do enough interviews, meet enough people, ask enough questions, you learn stuff. It was a simple lock, the kind you find on bathroom doors in cheap suburban apartment buildings. As I worked on it I listened for any movement coming from the coffee counter, but all I heard was some tepid new age jazz.

A firm twist with one hand, then a quick snap with the other, and I felt the cheap mechanism give. I turned the knob slowly, then opened the door about an inch or so, just enough to confirm that there wasn't a second door. I stood and looked over the boxes to see if I was being watched, but the tattooed barista had her back turned as she conjured up my cup of black coffee.

I opened the door no wider than necessary and slipped through. The lights in the store were turned off, other than that it all looked exactly as it had when Sam Preston was still alive.

Moving through the cluttered rows of collectibles I spotted the security camera and stopped to examine it. The small device was mounted on a wall, about eight feet off the floor. There were no wires attached to it. A fake, the type you can buy online for under twenty bucks.

A heavy blue curtain that probably hadn't been washed since the last century separated a back room from the rest of the store. I pushed it aside and flipped on a light.

I was hoping to see a file cabinet or business desk, but all I found was a microwave oven, a futon with a bare mattress on it that was torn and stained, and a toilet that needed a good sandblasting. There was a roll of paper towels sitting on top of the microwave, I tore off a couple of sheets and headed back into the store and over to the counter.

Fifteen minutes more, tops—that's all I figured it would take for the cops to get here. I was searching for some sort of lock box, something that Preston's key would've opened. I found it behind the counter.

Beneath shelves cluttered with sports cards, loose action figures, and old postcards, and behind a stack of *Cracked* magazines sat a drawer with a keyhole that

seemed about right. I slid the magazines aside and tried the drawer. Locked—but that wouldn't be a problem.

It took me half as long to pop this one as it had the door. Inside I found miscellaneous receipts and printed documents, some emails with what appeared to be coded numbers, and a small spiral notebook. I used the ink cartridge to flip through the notebook. It was empty except for two pages, filled with names and corresponding sets of numbers. Sixteen digits, followed by three in parentheses, plus a date, a name, and a dollar amount.

I didn't see Emil's name but I did recognize three of the others. They'd all been in the news recently. I shut the drawer, used the paper towels to wipe off any fingerprints I might've left, and returned to the coffee shop. Miss Fisthead placed my cup of coffee on the counter as I walked up.

“That'll be four-fifty-five.”

I pulled out my credit card, watched her swipe it through the machine, and a light went on in my head. I suddenly knew the reason behind the floater murders.

After signing and writing a generous tip I briskly walked to my car. I had just sat down and locked the door when I saw a pair of squad cars speed down Clark. Right on time.

This wasn't about the story anymore. Maybe it never was. This was about that sweet old woman sitting in her tired chair and sipping tea while anxiously waiting for the love of her life to return home, the man who still made her heart jump after forty years of marriage.

I waited a moment to give the cops a chance to get in the store, then pulled out of the parking space. Turning left on LaSalle, I headed north, toward the warehouse. I was certain this was all linked together, and considered how Emil fit in.

The building looked the same as I'd left it, just a few hours older. I drove down the same narrow street as before, and noticed the Vette was gone, then turned and began searching for a back way in. I passed a set of doors big enough to drive a semi through, then spotted what I was looking for.

I parked in front of an adjacent building, locked up, and checked to make sure no one was around. No cars for two blocks. Then I slid along the brick wall of the

warehouse, peeking in each window as I passed. There were no signs of life inside, only the silhouettes of large machinery. A dozen or so yards shy of the giant doors I found the window I'd seen when I drove past, the one that had been left half open.

I pulled myself up, then wedged my left foot between two cracked bricks. Swinging my right leg through the opening, I found footing on the other side. Once I'd shimmed all the way in I realized I was standing on a workbench. The equipment that filled the enormous room was old and heavy, and I was careful to avoid slamming into any of it.

There was a light beyond a door at the other end, and through its grease-caked window I could see an empty office and a well-lit hallway. I leaned against the door and listened for a moment. Quiet. I walked through the office and into the hall. A dead end one way, a curve to the left the other. Rounding the corner I sensed it wasn't far to the front of the building. Not far from that room where the shadows had drawn my interest earlier.

A series of standard service lights were on throughout the place. Just enough to help me see where I was going, but also little enough to offer cover to anyone who might see me coming. I walked into what had once been a break room, but was now a makeshift work space with two computers, several elaborate printing machines, and a few other pieces of equipment I did not recognize but could easily guess their purpose.

As I turned to leave, something caught my attention. A white plastic rectangle, maybe two inches by three inches. I squatted and picked it up by its thin edges, flipping it over. Blank on both sides.

I was putting it back down, leaving it for Joseph Andrews and the Feds to find thanks to a tip from a friendly reporter, when I heard a sound coming from behind me. I spun, senses on high alert.

The sound repeated.

THUMP!

THUMP! THUMP!

It was coming from behind a closed door in the corner of the next room. Maybe it was Emil behind that door, trying to get my attention. Or maybe it was a gang of bikers, the sort that hated Cuban reporters.

Walking in I realized this was the room where I'd seen the shadows moving around earlier. A table along the near wall was cluttered with computer monitors, keyboards, and printers. All sorts of decade old computer equipment, none of it hooked up to anything. There was a gray office chair with minimal padding in the middle of the room, and a closed closet door at the far end.

THUMP!

I took a deep, steadying breath, then walked up to the door, reached for the handle, and slowly, ever so slowly, turned it.

THUMP!

That was the loudest so far, but I managed to keep my grip, then tugged the door open, revealing a small man dangling from a wooden clothes hanger.

Emil Candrolini, alone in the closet. He'd been completely bound, toes to shoulders, with duct tape. Several more pieces covered his mouth. A hanger had been tapped to his back, between his shoulder blades, then they'd hoisted Emil onto the rod. He regarded me with fear and exhaustion.

"Mr. Candrolini, I'm a reporter. Your wife sent me to find you."

I pried at the pieces on his face, got my fingernails under an edge and began to pull. He moaned. I yanked harder, watching the tears streak down his cheeks, but managed to remove enough tape to allow him to breathe through his mouth.

"Help me." His voice quiet, pained.

"I will, Mr. Candrolini. Let me get you down from there, first."

I wrapped my arms around Emil and lifted just enough to unhook the hanger. Then I leaned him against the back wall of the closet so I could work on removing the multiple layers of duct tape circling his upper body.

That's when I noticed someone out of the corner of my eye. I spun around, and sure enough, it was just the person I didn't want to see—the little shit with the tazer from earlier today. I turned to face him square, feet spread apart, hands forming fists. I'd dealt with him before, and saw no reason why I couldn't repeat the experience. I prepared to deliver an ass kicking.

"Okay, fucker," Tiny Tim said, rolling and flexing like some asshole in front of the workout gym mirror. "It's on."

“Buddy, who ever told you size doesn’t matter, lied.”

And then his pals walked into the room. Like Junior, they spent too much time in the gym, pumping iron and injecting each other with illegal performance enhancers. Unlike Junior, they each stood well over six feet.

On more than a few occasions I’d been the recipient of a fist to the face or a kick in the gut. Once, I’d been beaten bloody. But even in that case, I knew it was only a fight, and I would heal and live to see another day.

This wasn’t going to be a fight. This was going to be murder.

I backpedaled, grabbing a computer keyboard on a nearby desk, throwing it at one of the muscle mountains. It bounced off a chest wider than Nebraska, and he smirked at me.

Then I heaved a computer monitor at his head, and he lost the smirk. This was an older model, big and clunky and a good fifteen pounds. Mr. Olympia managed to dodge most of it, but the corner caught his chin and spun him to his knees.

Atom Ant scurried in, under the throw, and landed a decent punch to my ribs. I staggered back, vision blurring red with pain, and then blindly swung a roundhouse that connected and sent him sprawling over the desk top.

The other hulk stampeded toward me, I got a shot into his massive chin, but it had zero effect. And then I was being thrown through the air, thrown over Shorty, arcing a ridiculous distance before I landed, head-first, into the monitor I’d tossed seconds before.

For an instant I thought about putting my hands down to break the fall, only to realize a second later that I was already sprawled out on the cold floor, my head feeling light and heavy all at the same time.

Then I wasn’t anywhere anymore.

When I regained my senses, ten minutes, an hour, a day later, I realized I was being pinned to the floor by the two behemoths. One held my arms. The other leaned on my legs, like he was spotting me for sit-ups. I pushed against them, pushed until my aching head felt ready to burst.

No good. I wasn’t going to break free.

“You stepped in some serious shit, Mr. Chapa.” The tiny warrior had my wallet in one hand, my press card in the other.

“People know I’m here,” I lied.

Pipsqueak grunted, which might have been his way of laughing.

“Get him in the chair.”

I never felt myself being lifted off the floor, it was painless and far too easy. The rapid descent into the office chair was another matter.

“Get some duct tape and bind him.”

“Can’t do that,” the younger looking giant said. “We used it all on the guy in the closet.”

“Oh, you’re fucking kidding me! Then just hold him down.”

A pair of paws like industrial presses pushed down against my shoulders.

“Seriously, it’s procedure when I’m reporting a story, like a chain of command. My editor, my assistant, other reporters, they all know I’m here. You kill me, the police will trace it to you.”

“They won’t trace nothing to me. In fact, we got a witness, says he saw you kill Preston. Ain’t that right, Angel?”

The muscle-head who wasn’t busy fusing my shoulders to my hips nodded. “This is the guy I saw at Preston’s store.”

I squinted, picturing him in a Cardinals cap. He was the guy leafing through the comics.

“You’re Angel Batara,” I said.

“How does he know me, Marty?”

I stared at the short guy, finally putting his face to his name.

“So you’re Marty Cleven. You don’t own this place, do you?”

“No, been abandoned for years. I used to work here.”

“Why did you kill Preston? He was the mastermind behind your credit card scheme, wasn’t he?”

“My idea, all of it,” Cleven said, jabbing himself in the chest with his thumb. “I’m the one who taught him how to spot the marks with money, to get their card numbers without putting them through the system.”

I recalled the old fashioned carbon gadget Preston had used on my Visa when I bought the doll. If he never called it in the transaction would be totally off the grid, no electronic trail.

“He steals the numbers, and Batara supplies the blanks,” I said. “Let me guess, Angel, you own that plastics shop.”

Batara nodded. “Dad did. It got shut down.”

“And how are you involved?” I asked the other steroid junkie, mostly to keep them talking.

“I’m his brother,” the guy pressing me into the chair said.

I kicked into interview mode.

“What’s your name?”

“Mario, Mario Batara.”

“I’m sensing you two are close, closer than most brothers.”

They looked at each other, then nodded in agreement.

“So why did you guys start killing people?”

“Stealing cards isn’t enough,” Cleven was back in charge. “The card companies can track them. Any unusual activity gets reported.”

“And the accounts would eventually be suspended.”

“After a few grand, yes, Mr. Chapa, But then I got an idea. If we had the card, *and* the card holder, they could be persuaded to call the company, make sure the card wasn’t deactivated. They could even get the limit raised.”

“Enough to buy almost anything,” I said. “Like a shiny new Corvette.”

“After the money and the goods got moved around some, sure. The only problem was, once we reached the limit, the card holders were, let’s say, a liability.”

“And Preston didn’t want to be involved, so you killed him.”

Cleven laughed. “Preston was in it all the way. But he started running a little side game, so he had to go.”

“How did Emil figure into it?”

“That dumb ass Preston thought the guy would go for it, he was wrong. It’s all good, though. We figured we’d frame the old guy for Preston’s murder, that’s why we stuck the pop in his mouth. The old man was known for dealing in that shit.”

“Help me,” Emil moaned. The sound of his wounded voice made me want to rip these bastards’ hearts out.

“Shut that door,” Cleven said.

Angel complied.

Cleven continued as though the old man in the closet never existed. “But now we don’t need to do that. Now we can frame you for all the murders.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Sure it does. Angel saw you kill Preston. You broke in here, where we were playing some cards with our good buddy Emil, and you killed him too. Then, in a fit of despair, you killed yourself by swallowing a pog.”

That was Angel’s cue to pull a round piece of metal out of his pocket.

“But you guys also broke into this place.”

“Your point?”

“To play cards with Emil?”

“That’s it, I’ve had enough of your bullshit chatter,” Cleven turned to Angel.

“Let’s do this.”

How could these guys even think this could work? Then again, if I’ve learned one thing in my professional life it’s that criminals aren’t the sharpest fellows on the block. That’s why they’re criminals.

“Marty, I’ve got another idea.” Angel was still holding the slammer.

“Really?” Cleven didn’t seem like the sort of guy who appreciated other views.

“We were going to pin Preston’s murder on the old man anyway.”

“Right.”

“Let’s kill this reporter guy, do the pog thing, and suicide the old man.”

I could see that Cleven wanted to disagree with his cohort, but it wasn’t coming together in his tiny muscle-cramped mind.

“Fine. How would an old man kill this son-of-a-bitch?”

“He’d club him,” Mario said.

Now Angel, “Yeah, clubbing is definitely the way to go.”

Cleven dispatched Angel to the factory floor in search of a handy murder weapon.

“Marty, you’re obviously an intelligent man,” I lied. “As a reporter, I could tell your story, your way, and naturally I’d protect my sources.”

He leaned in close, and when I looked into his eyes all I saw was death.

“It’s over, Alex. If you have a god this might be a good time to reconnect.”

I weighed my options. What options? I considered playing the common ancestry card with the Batara brothers. But those thoughts ended when Angel returned holding a two-foot length of pipe, and said, “Let me have the first swing at this piece of shit.”

Cleven nodded, then stepped back.

Angel took a batting stance reminiscent of Mark McGwire in his prime. Then he let rip.

DANIELS

Homicide Lieutenant Jack Daniels had spotted Alex Chapa coming out of Strange Brew Coffee, adjacent to Sam Preston's collectible shop.

"He looks pleased with himself," Herb said.

Jack couldn't help but grudgingly give the reporter credit. He managed to talk his way out of a trip to the Precinct house, get to the victim's place of business, and find some sort of lead if the spring in his step was any indication. Not bad for less than an hour's work.

"Want to pick him up?" Herb asked.

"Let's see where he goes. Mankowski can handle the scene here."

Jack waited until Chapa pulled away before directing her Chevy Nova after him. She kept back, keeping the tail loose, sometimes letting him get a block ahead. Eventually she lost him at a red light.

"Smooth," Herb said. "You ought to be a cop."

"You got any of those pepperoni snacks left?"

"One."

"Want me to tell you where you can stick it?"

"Way ahead of you," Herb said, biting off the wrapper and shoving it into his mouth.

Jack frowned, squinted ahead. She could put the cherry on the roof, run the siren, skip through the light, but that might alert Chapa that they were following him. But if she did nothing, he could get so far ahead she wouldn't be able to catch up. She made an executive decision, sticking the light to the roof of the Nova, giving the siren a short blast and then switching it off.

When the intersection was cleared she roared through, swerving to miss a CTA bus, and caught sight of Chapa turning east onto Division.

"You got anything to eat?" Herb was fishing through the glove compartment.

"Grab those binoculars," Jack said, glancing at him.

"I don't think those would digest well."

“Give them here. I think I’ve got something in my purse. It’s in the back.”

Herb handed over the binoculars, then the car bounced on its shocks as he adjusted his weight to hunt for the purse. Jack made the left, took a moment to focus the binocs, and spotted Chapa two blocks ahead.

“All you’ve got is a mint covered in fuzz,” Herb said. Jack’s purse was open and he was squinting at something between his fingers.

“It’s yours if you want it.”

Herb frowned, then began brushing off the mint. Jack peeked through the lenses. Chapa was turning again. She noted the street.

“This is awful,” Herb said, the mint clacking against his teeth. “You got any more?”

Jack turned where Chapa had. Not a good part of town. Industrial mostly, a few overgrown, fenced in lots, some abandoned factories.

“He’s stopping,” she said, hitting the brakes on her own car two blocks behind him. She watched Chapa park, lock his car, then look around. He seemed to stare right into her binoculars, which amused Jack. Then he began checking the windows of a warehouse building.

“What’s he doing?” Herb asked.

Jack watched Chapa approach one of the windows then begin to climb the side of the brick wall.

“Son of a gun,” she said under her breath. “He’s breaking in.”

“Guys got balls,” Herb said.

“He went in through the window,” Jack said. “Now we have a choice. We can wait for him to come out, then bust him, or surprise him inside and bust him.”

“I vote for waiting,” Herb said. “Less work. And if he’s looking for something, maybe he’ll come out with it.”

They waited.

“Think he knows about the vics’ credit cards?” Jack asked. The previous three floaters all had suspicious credit card activity after their disappearances.

“We kept it out of the news, but he’s a reporter. It’s his job to find things out. Besides, you remember how he explained that he’s omnivorous.”

“He said omniscient. You’re the omnivorous one.”

“I’ve never eaten an omni in my life. Is that one of those Greek things, comes in a pita?”

A Corvette, out of place in this part of the neighborhood, cruised past. It was followed by some other sports car.

“Damn, check that out,” Herb said. “Dodge Viper, cherry too. I bet it could take out the Vette. Maybe they’ll race.”

They didn’t race. They passed the warehouse, and turned left behind it.

“I think we should go in,” Jack said.

“I thought waiting for him is easier. Then we could get whatever he found.”

“But if we get him now, then we can look for it ourselves. Just cause, no warrant needed.”

“Do we even know what *it* is?”

“No. But I bet Chapa does. And I bet he’ll be extremely helpful once we slap the cuffs on.”

Jack took another look through the binocs, then made the executive decision. “We’re going in.”

Jack started the car, threw it into gear. She drove slowly, carefully, eyeing her target and eventually parking behind it. She reflexively checked her gun, in the shoulder harness under her blazer, and then got out of the car.

Jack and Herb walked up to the window Chapa had climbed into.

“Boost me up,” Herb said.

Jack stared at him. Herb locked his fingers together, and she stepped into his hands, careful not to break the heel off her shoes. She got a knee up onto the sill, silently cursed the filth rubbing against her clothing, and slipped inside and onto some sort of bench.

“Give me your hand,” Herb called.

“Find another way in.”

“Just hold it out, I’ll haul myself up.”

Jack rolled her eyes and climbed off the table. She thought she heard human sounds, coming from deeper in the warehouse, but Herb was grouching on about how he

couldn't be blamed for having big bones and a slow metabolism so she had to walk away from the window before she could locate the noise.

Voices, for sure. Two, maybe three men. A tall, well-built man walked in through a door at the far end of the factory floor. Jack ducked behind a massive piece of machinery and watched as he appeared to be looking around for something. An adrenaline spike hit her, and without thinking she unholstered her Colt. Then the man was leaving, even more quickly than he had appeared. He was carrying what looked like a long metal pipe.

Jack waited a moment, then moving quick but cautious, she bypassed the rows of machinery and headed for that same doorway. She walked through it, saw no sign of the guy, then proceeded down a hallway and to the left. Jack heard what sounded like a piece of furniture crashing to the floor somewhere not too far ahead. The voices were becoming more distinct as she approached what appeared to be a lunchroom.

The voices were coming from another room just beyond. She wished she hadn't worn heels that day, as she continued to advance on the small room. The men inside, who appeared to be arguing over which of them would get to hold the large steel pipe, were too focused on each other to notice her. Jack gradually arced around to get the best angle, braced her shoulder against the door jamb, and pointed her Colt into the room.

"Freeze! Police!"

Three people turned and looked at her. Two were big muscle guys. One was a little muscle guy.

"Hands on your heads! Now!"

They were slow to respond, and Jack noticed a man sprawled on the floor, next to a chair.

Chapa, half there, half not.

"Chapa, you okay?"

In her peripheral she saw the reporter slowly sit up, then work himself into a squat.

"More or less. Angel over there only got one swing, then they started arguing about who would get to go next."

“Too bad,” she said, without taking her eyes off the men. “You three, on your knees, hands on your heads, face the fucking wall!” She fired above their heads both to scare them and to alert Herb. “Do it!”

She started to walk over and check on Chapa when a closet door burst open and a small man, wrapped in duct tape darted out like he had somewhere he needed to be.

“What the—?” Jack instinctively turned in his direction. The guy looked like a silver mummy with a coat hanger attached to the back of his head.

He was yelling something.

“HELP ME!”

He ran past Jack.

“HELP ME!”

Through the doorway.

“HELP ME!”

And straight into a wall.

“HELP—”

Then quietly tumbled to the floor in a sticky heap.

It was just enough of a distraction to give the three muscle men ideas.

“Hold it!” Jack cried as the little guy ran out the door. She got ready to go after him, when one of the giants rushed her.

Jack got off a shot, but he was already under it, pushing her arm up, batting her across the floor. It took her a microsecond to readjust her aim, and though her training dictated she shoot to kill, she settled for taking out the big man’s knee. It burst like a ripe tomato, and he went over, howling.

The other big man was on his feet, seemingly unsure of whether to run or attack. Chapa made the decision for him, cracking him across the face with the office chair. The big man fell.

Jack got to her feet, rushed out of the office. The short man was nowhere to be found, but then she heard, “Get down on your knees! Wait, are you already on your knees? I said get down!”

“Got him, Herb?” Jack called.

“I will in a second. You okay?”

Jack glanced at the two fallen men, and then Chapa, who was cautiously rubbing his forehead.

“We’re good,” she yelled.

“The wee dude’s name is Marty Cleven.”

“Thanks, Chapa, but we know all about him, and that’s just one of the aliases he goes by. His name is actually Connie Runkle.”

“The guy’s real name is Connie?” Chapa said, half laughing.

“Connie can be a man’s name, too, motherfucker!” they heard him yell, his voice trailing off as Herb hustled him out.

“That would explain a few things,” Chapa said.

“What’s up with the guy wrapped in tape?” Jack asked.

“He’s Emil Candrolini, a good guy, a victim.”

“We’ll take care of him.”

Jack spent a minute securing the fallen weightlifters. Chapa helped her drag the one he nailed with the chair over to his companion, and she locked their wrists together through a large piece of machinery.

“For a big man, Angel,” Chapa was talking to the guy he’d taken out, “you swing like a girl. No offense, Lieutenant.”

“None taken. You going to make it?” she asked him, noticing how the left side of his forehead was beginning to take on a bluish hue.

He nodded slowly.

“Good, because I have an offer to make you.”

Chapa grinned. “An exclusive interview, Lieutenant?”

“Sort of, but this offer is more like a right, actually. To remain silent.”

“Ah, believe it or not, Lieutenant,” Chapa appeared fully alert again. “I can explain all of this, the whole thing.”

Jack smiled. “Believe me, I’m anxious to hear it.”

CHAPA

As his cab pulled to a stop beside my car, the driver warned us about how dangerous this neighborhood could be at night.

Emil and I looked at each other.

“It’s not too safe in the middle of the day, either,” I responded.

I was just happy to find it hadn’t been towed or jacked in the four hours since I parked near the warehouse. Once we’d left that industrial area in the rearview, I asked Emil to reach inside my glove compartment.

“You sure got a lot of pens in here.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a thing with me.”

I told him to dig through and find my tape recorder, which he did. I checked to make sure the batteries had enough juice, and clicked record.

Emil probably should’ve taken the Chicago PD’s offer of an overnight stay at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for observation. But he would have none of it. It’s amazing what a meal could do for a guy who hadn’t eaten in two days. Mostly, Emil just wanted to get home to Nina.

I had just merged into late night traffic on the Kennedy when Emil began to talk—about everything. He told me about his immigrant parents and how he grew up in the southwest suburbs, his military service, the ups and downs of the antiques business, and how he and Nina had met. That’s when he seemed to get lost in his thoughts.

I turned off the tape recorder, and asked him to excuse me while I phoned the Herald. Matt Sullivan, my editor, sounded pleased to be hearing from me.

“Christ, Alex, you phoned me from the back of a squad car and told me to hold page one, then three hours came and went!”

“Sorry about that, but believe me, it couldn’t be helped.”

I dictated my lead, and asked him to extend the deadline. I heard him cover the mouthpiece and talk to someone in the newsroom who didn’t sound too happy.

“I can push it back until one-thirty, that gives you almost two and a half hours.”

Perhaps not as long as I wanted since I had volunteered to drive Emil home first. His car was gone, and had probably been chopped already. Still, I had no business complaining about my new deadline, considering that a few short hours ago I was scrambling to talk my way out of an arrest.

Lieutenant Daniels wanted to fit the cuffs on me in the worst way, and I couldn't blame her. But after a lot of negotiation on my part, she seemed to understand I had gone into the warehouse out of concern for Emil. I gave up all the info I'd gathered, leaving out the part about the break-in at Sam Preston's store. She knew I'd gone into the coffee shop, must've had someone watching the place. But I told her I just checked to see if the connecting door was unlocked, then left with my coffee when I couldn't get it open.

Between what Emil knew and what Cleven had told me, we were able to help Daniels fill in the remaining gaps. Putting a brutal series of crimes to bed seemed to take a bit of the fire out of her, and I got sent home with a stern warning and a guarantee I'd hear from her again concerning this case. I wasn't spending the night in lockup, and that's all that mattered.

Emil started talking again as we closed in on the Oak Brook toll, the city's skyline a distant memory. I turned my tape recorder back on, and this time he talked about the last two days. At first it played like the newest in a series of adventures that had punctuated his life. Then Emil stopped mid-sentence, as his bravado abandoned him.

"I was so scared, Alex."

I clicked the recorder off and said nothing.

"So scared." His eyes were fixed on the darkness beyond my headlights. "But not for me. I didn't know who would be there for Nina."

He let it out, and I couldn't blame him. As far as I was concerned, Emil Candrolini was all right. I reached in my pocket and handed him a piece of paper towel I'd taken from Preston's backroom.

"Here you go, it's kind of matted, but all that's on it are my prints."

He took it, quietly thanked me, and wiped his face.

"I'm sorry about that."

"Don't apologize."

We rode in near silence the rest of the way to his house. Nina was waiting at the door. They invited me in, then quickly forgot I was there and they each disappeared into an embrace. I could hear her softly weeping and him telling her it was all okay as I quietly let myself out. Backing out of their driveway I wondered what it would be like to have someone waiting at home to ask how your day went, and really care about the answer.

My house was half as far away as the office, and it would've been easy to write the story at home and email it in. But an empty house held no appeal at that moment, so I turned in the direction of the Herald building. The streets were mine, and that was good as I was able to piece the story together in my head during my drive. There were a few off the record details I couldn't use, but that always goes with the territory.

It would take me about an hour to knock out my story. A rush job, but our readers would never know it. And maybe, after the story had been put to bed, tucked in nice and tight on page one above the fold, someone from the night crew might ask me how my day went.

Postscript To *FLOATERS*

By

Henry Perez

Joe Konrath and I did extensive pre-planning and spent countless hours discussing and debating before we took on the task of writing *Floaters*. As a way of providing a glimpse into that process, here's a transcript of our initial conversation on the subject. Or at least as I remember it.

JAK: "We should write a story together, I think that would be fun."

HP: "Yeah, I'd like that, sounds cool."

JAK: "And we should order more beer."

HP: "And some nachos."

JAK: "The nachos here are good, especially when you get beef and chili on them."

HP: "True, so let's get some."

30 to 40 minutes later...

HP: "I like how the chips stay crisp even though they're buried under a mound of chili."

JAK: "Oh yeah, that's important. You don't want the chips to get soggy."

HP: "No, no you don't."

JAK: "So we should write a story together, I think it would be fun."

HP: "Yes, we should."

JAK: "You got any ideas?"

HP: "No, but I'll come up with something."

JAK: "You write the first part, then I'll write the next one, and we'll go back and forth until it's finished."

HP: "Did you just eat the last nacho?"

JAK: “I’m already published, and I’m a big shot, and I get the last nacho, and I want another beer, which I’m contractually entitled to, as a big shot.”

Two weeks later, I sent Joe the first 3000 or so words of *Floaters*. I came up with the set-up of the missing collectibles dealer, but Joe knew nothing about it until that first segment arrived in his inbox. He thought up the idea of using a pog as a murder weapon, which I loved, wrote the next 2500 words, and we were off and running.

It took us about a week to knock out the first draft, then spent a couple more revising it. The whole thing proved to be a great deal of fun, and a terrific experience for me. Joe is a very generous writer, and as it turned out, our protagonists, and our storytelling styles blended quite well.

Introduction to *Killing Red*

By

Henry Perez

As a reader, I like books that refuse to let me go to sleep at night, then haunt me the following day as I count the hours before I can return to its pages and the dire circumstances within. When I set out to write *Killing Red* my primary goal was to create that sort of book. I wanted my readers to spend the next morning yawning because I kept them up too late the night before.

Killing Red is the story of Chicago area reporter Alex Chapa, a man who is out of place everywhere except when he's in a newspaper office, or chasing a story. But this time it's not a story Chapa is after. Less than a week before mass murderer Kenny Lee Grubb's execution Chapa learns that a copycat may be retracing the killer's steps. and that his final victim will be Annie Sykes, the woman who, as a young girl, led police to Grubb's house.

Excerpt from *Killing Red*

By

Henry Perez

Alex Chapa, just a little more than a year out of college, was hiding in a corner of the cramped newsroom. The only other writer in the office that night was playing Tetris on one of the two computers in the room. Down the hall, Betty the Layout Lady—few at the *Tri-Cities Bulletin* seemed to know her last name—was putting the final touches on section one.

Back turned to Murphy and the annoying sounds of his game, Chapa was working on a feature story that wouldn't earn him an extra penny, but might at least help him feel better about his job. So far, the newspaper business hadn't been as fulfilling as he'd imagined—personally, professionally, or financially.

A phone rang two desks away.

"Wrong number," Murphy barked, refusing to break eye-contact with the monitor.

Chapa leaned back in his office chair and looked over at his colleague.

"Might be Carter checking in. He does that."

"Not during his fishing trips, he doesn't. Let it go, Alex."

Ross Carter was the *Bulletin's* lone columnist. A respected pro who had been in the business longer than the lakes he loved to fish had been wet. Chapa looked up to Carter a little bit when he first started at the paper. But over time Chapa had starting wondering if the guy was just drifting along on cruise control. Counting the days until his last byline.

Another ring.

"Oh, hell." Chapa rolled over to Carter's desk.

"You touch it, you own it," Murphy said as Chapa reached for the phone, lifting the handset just before the next ring cut out.

"*Tri-Cities Bulletin*, news desk."

"Carter?"

"No, Alex Chapa. Carter's not here."

“Shit.”

“Can I help you?”

“How soon will Carter be back?”

“Not till next week.”

“Shit. Do you have a number I can get him at?”

“Not really. He’s on a lake, up in Wisconsin.”

A thick sigh.

“I can take a message if you like.”

“No. It’ll all be over by the time Carter gets it.”

Chapa turned away from Murphy and lowered his voice. “Whatever it is, I’m certain that I can help you.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“Because the urgency in your voice suggests that whatever this is about, matters, and not in a selfish way, no, it’s not about you, it’s bigger than any one person, and you have the clarity to understand that, which means you also understand that it’s bigger than Carter, or any reporter.” Chapa turned away from the mouthpiece, drew a breath, heard Murphy ask him if he was all right, ignored the question.

“Yeah, okay, buddy. But Carter has to know that this came from Bulldog.”

“Bulldog?”

“He’ll know who you’re talking about.”

“So what are we talking about, Bulldog?” Chapa asked, straining to sound casual. Silence. And Chapa feared he’d lost the guy.

“It’s a police raid. Going down in about forty-five minutes. Maybe less.”

“Where?”

More silence.

“Look, I’ll be sure and let Carter know this came from Bulldog. I’ve already written it down. Now, while it still matters, where is this going to happen?”

He gave Chapa the address, but it was hard to believe that anything criminal could be happening in that corner of Chicago’s suburbs. It was a place populated by folks with membership cards to clubs, and close ties to their church affiliations, living in color coordinated houses on clean, freshly resurfaced streets.

“It’s about that missing girl, Annie Sykes.”

Chapa knew the case. A week ago, on the evening of October 7, the ten-year-old had gone missing after she walked into Rudi’s Foods in West Chicago and was never seen walking out.

“They found her?”

“Not exactly. She sort of found them, more or less. Escaped from some psycho late last night.”

“*Last* night?”

“Yeah, she walked into some convenience store, and the owner called the cops.” There was a slight wheeze in Bulldog’s voice, leading Chapa to decide he was a long-time smoker. “Then she spent last night and all day today in the hospital for observation. The cops kept that under wraps. But now, tonight, about an hour ago, she led them to where the guy lives.”

“You know what that guy’s name is?”

“Yes, Grubb, Kenneth L. They got the house under heavy surveillance while they put a team together.”

Across the room, Murphy yelled something about finishing a level, then, “You still on the phone, Alex?”

Chapa nodded casually, rolling his eyes, feigning exasperation.

“I’ll tell you what, Bulldog, I’ll talk you up to Carter, big time, if you forget all of this right now, and no other reporter gets a phone call tonight.”

“You mean that?”

“Absolutely.”

Chapa hung up the phone, grabbed his jacket and tape recorder, and headed for the door like it was nothing at all.

“You got something, Alex, or just making a food run?”

“Maybe something, we’ll see.”

“I warned you.”

“That you did, Murph.”

Chapa sprinted across the parking lot and into his car. He pounded the accelerator of his old Honda Civic, tearing down country roads, quickly narrowing the distance to the address Bulldog had given him, while keeping an eye out for any squads.

Can't afford to get a ticket. Can't afford to lose time, either. The house was only a few miles away, but the minutes seemed to be passing by faster than the darkened Midwestern landscape.

Once he crossed Route 59 and the Grandville city limits, Chapa let rip and did fifty down quiet residential streets, confident that every available cop in town would be part of the team gathering to storm a sleepy, well-manicured neighborhood.

Chapa pulled into the Pleasant Highlands subdivision less than twenties minutes after he'd left the newspaper office. Grubb's house was at the far end of a labyrinth of short, narrow streets near the middle of a longer center drive. Chapa tried to get as close as possible. But the cops had blocked off both ends of the wide, curving street and he had to park around the corner and a block and a half down from the house.

Choosing his palm-size notebook instead of a larger more conspicuous one, Chapa grabbed a couple of pens, took a calming breath, and stepped out of his car. He decided to try the most direct path first, and walked down a street that ran parallel to the one he needed to get to. Folks in nightgowns and sweats drifted like moths in the direction of the police activity, only to be turned away before they could get near enough to see what was going on. Chapa couldn't afford to be turned away, couldn't risk drawing that much attention to himself. He needed to find another way.

As he walked with a smattering of half-awake neighbors who were quietly speculating on what all the fuss was about, Chapa kept looking around for a way in. He was getting closer to the police barricade than he wanted to be, when he spotted a small park nestled between a cluster of houses.

Ducking away from the would-be gawkers, he cut down a driveway, and through a backyard, drawing a response from a set of motion sensors that roused security lights. Ignoring the sudden unwanted attention, Chapa slipped past a row of bushes and emerged on the other side, no more than twenty yards from a jungle gym.

The park was quiet, empty. A lone light post illuminated the area around the swings. Chapa thought about the children who played in this park. Wondered if their parents would ever again feel safe there. Or if the place would now have a taint.

Locating the paved path that led from the park to the sidewalk beyond, Chapa eyed the street where all of the heavy action was going down. He knew he wouldn't fit in with any group of officials at the scene. His faded jeans, the fabric starting to split at the cuff, and University of Iowa sweatshirt couldn't pass as anyone's official uniform. Except maybe that of recent college grad trying to make it as a reporter. But Chapa just played it cool, like he had a hall pass in his back pocket, and strolled down the sidewalk and past huddles of heavily armed officers.

"How the hell did you get here?"

Officer Steven Zirbel's voice startled Chapa, but the reporter was already working on his response before realizing who was talking.

"Steve, you're out late tonight."

"And you're where you don't belong, Alex."

The two men had gotten to know each other a couple of months back when Chapa spent the night with a police detail at a roadside checkpoint. Zirbel, who oversaw the operation, liked the way the story turned out, and though he was always cautious, the lieutenant had become somewhat of a source Chapa could rely on.

"I understand you guys are about to bring in a very bad guy."

"And how do you know that?"

Chapa smiled and shrugged as Zirbel moved in close.

"Look, Alex, you need to move on," he said, his voice measured. "I'll give you a call in the morning after the smoke clears."

"That's no good, Steve. I'm holding up page one right now. I've got to have something."

Zirbel looked away, in the direction of the house, then to where a group of men from various jurisdictions had assembled. When he focused his attention back on Chapa the reporter could almost hear the wheels turning inside the cop's head.

"You keep my name out of it, unless I call you and tell you otherwise," the officer jabbed an index finger at Chapa, who nodded. He knew Zirbel had been angling

for a promotion and the right story could put him over the top. The wrong one might knock him back to the overnight shift at the evidence desk.

Zirbel laid out how twenty-four hours ago Annie Sykes walked into Dominic Delacruz's store and everything that followed and how she had led them here.

"You're going in awfully hard on one girl's word, Steve."

"She's a very convincing little girl."

Chapa followed Zirbel's eyes to the three people standing by a cruiser's open door. He recognized Roger Sykes, a man in his mid thirties who dressed like the middle manager that he was.

"Is that her?" Chapa asked, pointing to the small redheaded child wedged between her parents.

"They insisted on being here when we take him. We told them to stay in the car, but they weren't too interested in anything we had to say."

A guy decked out in protective gear called for Zirbel.

"Go back to where you came from, Alex," Zirbel said, then walked over to a group that looked like it was primed to go into battle.

Cloaked in as much confidence as he could conjure, Chapa walked down the sidewalk in the direction of the Sykes family. He nodded to a uniformed who was staring at him, but didn't break stride. Making sure Roger Sykes saw him as he approached, Chapa pulled out the small notebook and a pen, then introduced himself.

"My wife and I have appreciated how the newspapers publicized Annie's disappearance, but not the way you guys came after me and her mother."

"I know my paper may have been off base, but—"

Michele Sykes cut Chapa off. "It was those incompetent jerks in the police department." She was pleasant looking in a fresh, rural Illinois way. "They couldn't find our daughter, and I still don't know how anyone could have thought Roger was involved. That was just a terrible thing for us. People should be ashamed of themselves."

Annie Sykes had been looking up at Chapa the entire time. When he returned the attention she took it as a cue that it was her turn.

"I'm looking forward to going home," her tone strong, voice driven with determination. "But first I want to see the police get that terrible man."

“You got away from him, didn’t you?” Chapa asked, kneeling to meet her at eye-level.

She nodded, “I wasn’t afraid, not too much,” and almost smiled.

“How did you recognize the house from the outside?”

“I remembered some of the streets that he turned on when he brought me here in his van.” Then she pointed to an area of fencing that Chapa could barely make out in the darkness. “And I remember seeing that through a window in the basement. I have a really good memory.”

“It’s been a horrible time, and we’ll be talking to our attorney after all this is over,” Roger said, then put a protective arm around his daughter, as though it could shield her from everything. “But we’re just thankful that Annie’s back and we can put all this behind us. I love Annie very much. She’s a strong person, and she’s my little girl. I don’t care what anyone said about me, I’m just so glad she’s back.”

A shot exploded inside the house. Now the police were rushing around like scattered ants, ordering each other to get down, get back, get ready. Chapa got shoved aside as Annie and her parents were hustled into the squad car. He made his way around to the back of the vehicle so he could get a decent view of the house. Leaning on the trunk of the car, Chapa quickly took notes as the police rushed the house.

A chaotic minute passed. Then a guy wearing a flak jacket over a gray suit appeared on the front porch. “It’s all over,” he said, then signaled for paramedics to move in.

Chapa was also on the move. Getting as close as he could without drawing attention, he stopped just beyond the reach of a streetlight. He waited there until Zirbel walked out of the house and was crossing the front yard.

“Steve, who got shot?”

“Didn’t I tell you to get out of here?”

“And I was doing just that when I heard the shot. You can’t hold this back now.”

Zirbel appeared to take stock of the situation.

“I assume one of your officers shot the suspect, let’s start with that, Steve.”

“One shot, in the chest.”

“So the suspect was armed?”

“When we entered the house we found Kenneth Lee Grubb in the dining room. The moment the suspect saw us, he put down a piece of bread he was eating and appeared to reach for a weapon even though he’d been told to remain still, that’s when the officer fired.”

Chapa’s hand was racing across the yellow tablet, as he made certain he didn’t miss a word.

“What kind of weapon?”

Zirbel hesitated for a moment as he surveyed the immediate area.

“Damnedest thing I’ve ever seen. A large animal collar with long metal spikes sticking out of it.” Zirbel leaned in close to Chapa and used his height advantage to cast a shadow over the reporter. “But I’d appreciate it if you kept that detail to yourself for the time being.”

“I will, Steve,” Chapa said, drawing a large oval around the last part of Zirbel’s statement, then writing the word *No* in large letters next to it.

“Do right by the department, Alex,” Zirbel added, then turned to a uniformed and told him to escort Chapa back to his car.

Once he was back in his car, it took Chapa a moment to regain his bearings and find the fastest way out of the subdivision. Then he quickly drove away, stopped at a pay phone six blocks later, and called the office. It took some coaxing to talk Betty the Layout Lady into delaying the printing of page one, even more to convince her to do a redesign.

“You got eight hundred words, young man, give or take a dozen, no more, and one hour to get them to me.”

He thanked her, then dialed information and got a home number for Dominic Delacruz. The store owner didn’t sound like he’d been sleeping, but he wasn’t anxious to get media attention, either. Still, Chapa managed to squeeze a solid, if reluctant, quote out of him.

Winded and running on high octane, Chapa had just sat down at his desk to write the story when he got a call from Zirbel, who gave him the okay to use his name, and filled in a few more of the details.

“After we secured the rest of the house, we cautiously headed for the basement, and found evidence that someone had been kept down there,” Zirbel said. “We believe that at least one other child had been held there.”

“Why, what did you find?”

After another hesitation, Zirbel said, “Children’s snacks, a boy’s T-shirt, and a dozen or so comic books in a small room in the basement.”

“There was more than one room?”

“Several. Each appears to have been used for a different purpose. It’s going to take a while to sort everything out, but we believe that some of the victims may have started out in a makeshift guest room before being transferred to other parts of the large basement.”

He told Chapa that the officers removed several bottles of a liquid that had yet to be identified.

“We’re waiting for the lab results, but we’re reasonably certain the bottles contain whatever drug the suspect used on his victims,” Zirbel said.

“So if there were other kids down there, where are they now?”

“We don’t know yet. Grubb is considered a suspect in at least four other disappearances over the past three months,” Zirbel said. “But that’s the first question I’m going to ask him when the son-of-a-bitch comes out of intensive care.”

The story came in at 844 words, and Betty the Layout Lady forgave him for that. It would be one of the last Chapa would ever write for the *Tri-Cities Bulletin*.

The reporter didn’t sleep that night as he waited for the morning’s *Bulletin* to arrive. Sleep would become precious and uneasy in the days and months that followed. For a while he took comfort in the certainty that it would all pass in time. But he was wrong.

Sixteen years and millions of printed words later, spanning hundreds of topics, the story that launched Alex Chapa’s career still dogged him.

Henry Perez has worked as a newspaper reporter for more than a decade. Born in Cuba, he immigrated to the U.S. at a young age, and lives in the Chicago area with his wife and children. *Killing Red* is his first novel.

Readers can visit him at [**www.henryperezbooks.com**](http://www.henryperezbooks.com)

Introduction to *Cherry Bomb*

By

J.A. Konrath

Cherry Bomb, the sixth Jack Daniels book, features a villain Jack has faced before. Since the Jack Daniels series alternates between Jack's point of view and that of her adversaries, the included excerpt spotlights the baddie. And boy, is this one a baddie.

Excerpt from *Cherry Bomb*

By

J.A. Konrath

The Honda's speedometer is up over 90 mph, and has been for close to half an hour, but Alex hasn't seen a single squad car on this stretch of highway. None hidden. None passing. Not even one coming in the other direction on the opposite side of the street.

It's discouraging. Don't cops have monthly quotas? Who's protecting our nation's roads from reckless drivers?

Finally, after blowing past an obvious speed trap semi-hidden by a cluster of bushes, Alex grows a red and blue tail. She waits for him to hit the siren before taking her foot off of the accelerator and rolling to a stop. Traffic on the interstate is sparse at this time of night. They're past the city limits, in the country. No stores, houses, exits, or oases, for two miles in either direction. Just plains and trees, stretching out and fading into unpopulated darkness.

The cop parks behind her, but further out on the shoulder, protecting himself from being accidentally run over. He aims his side door spotlight directly in Alex's rearview. She angles it downward, deflecting the glare, and turns around in her seat to see him coming, hoping he's not too short or fat.

Alex likes speed, and because of that she has been stopped many times in the past. Flirting, flattering, showing some leg, has gotten her out of many a ticket. But with her face the way it is, no cop will be anxious to get her phone number.

This time, however, she's not looking for a free pass.

He climbs out of his car, and Alex is surprised. He is actually a she.

Girl cop. Cool.

Alex digs into her purse, palms the stun gun. Waits.

"License and registration."

The cop is standing a foot behind the driver's side door. One hand is on her belt, near her holster. Alex squints behind her, doesn't see a partner in the squad car. She opens the door.

“Stay in the car, ma'am.”

It's an order, delivered with authority. The cop's hand has now unsnapped her holster and is on the butt of her pistol. It's hard to tell with the light silhouetting her, but Alex guesses her at about thirty years of age, tall, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds. A pro, by the way she's conducted the traffic stop so far.

But Alex is a pro too.

Alex fumbles with her purse, pretending to search for her wallet.

“Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry, I know I was speeding, I can't find my license, my boyfriend, he hit me—”

“Get back into the car, ma'am.”

Alex takes a step toward her, hand still in her purse. The cop's name tag reads Stark.

“The hospital, I need the hospital, look what the bastard did to my face—”

Now Officer Stark draws her weapon, aims at Alex's chest.

“Drop the purse and hands above your head!”

“Why? I didn't do anything. My boyfriend—”

“Drop your purse and hands above your head! Now!”

Alex halts. She's excited, even a little scared. Alex drops the purse, slowly raises her hands.

“Turn in a complete circle!”

Alex complies, her shirt riding up, showing the cop there is nothing in her pockets or her belt.

“Get on your knees! Hands behind your head!”

Different cops arrest suspects in different ways. Some order them to palm the car or the wall. Some order them to lay face-down on the ground and spread out their arms and legs. Some prefer the knees and the hands behind the head routine.

Which Alex had been hoping for.

“Hands behind your head! On your knees!”

Alex nods quickly, getting down, the asphalt cold beneath her jeans. She puts her hands on her neck, under her long red hair. If Stark had ordered her to palm the hood of the car, Alex first would have fallen to her knees and faked sobbing, face in her hands. If Stark had wanted her to eat the tarmac, she would have complied, but put her hands behind her head. But any way it went down, Alex still would have been within easy reach of the stun gun she'd stuck in the hanging hood of her sweatshirt.

“Look the other way!”

Alex turns her head, knows that the cop will approach her from a different angle to keep her off balance. As expected, Officer Stark comes at Alex on her left side, snicks the cuff on Alex's right wrist with her left hand, grabbing Alex's thumb to hold her steady. But it's impossible to fully handcuff a suspect while holding a pistol. Stark has to holster her weapon before slapping on the other cuff. As she does this, Alex's free hand snakes into the hoodie and grabs the Cheetah. Alex tilts left, twisting around under her armpit, and jams the stun gun into the officer's hip, letting her feel a million volts.

Officer Stark folds in half and drops to the street. Alex reaches for the gun, but it's secured by a strap. She takes a second to find the release, then the pistol—a Sig Sauer .45—comes free. Alex sticks it in the back of her jeans.

A car whizzes by, doesn't slow down. The cop moans. Alex juices her again, then drags her between their cars, onto the dirt beyond the shoulder. She unclips a MagLite from Stark's belt and takes her pepper spray and radio. The handcuff keys are in her breast pocket, and Alex removes her bracelet and binds Stark's wrists. Then she waits.

The cop stirs, opens her eyes. Alex focuses the beam on her.

“Full name and car number.”

“Ma'am... you're in a lot of trouble.”

Cops like MagLites. Illumination is only one of the reasons why. Alex raises it, heavy with six D batteries, and brings it down on the Officer Stark's leg. Not hard enough to break it—that would cause a delay—but hard enough to hurt like hell.

This produces a sound somewhere between a whimper and a howl. Alex repeats the question.

“Val... Val Stark. Car Five Victor Seven.”

“Good. Now on your hands and knees. Back to your ride.”

Alex follows while hunched over, keeping out of sight of the occasional passing car. She helps Officer Stark into the back seat.

“Be right back, cutie.”

Alex winks and slams the door. Then she gathers up the items from the back of the Honda and transfers them into the passenger seat of the cop car, save for a fist-sized chunk of PENO, a pyrotechnic blasting cap, and four feet of pink thermalite fuse. She pushes in the Honda’s cigarette lighter, then spends a few dirty minutes crawling under the chassis. Alex hums as she works, sticking the PENO to the gas tank, and the combined fuse and cap into the plastic. The road, and the undercarriage, are still damp from the earlier rain, but the explosive sticks like peanut butter.

Boom time.

Alex pops out the lighter, admiring the orange glow. She hesitates, savoring the moment, letting some anticipation build.

The fuse ignites, hissing and sparking and making Alex feel like she’s ten years old again, behind Father’s barn with Charles, lighting cherry bombs and blowing up tin cans.

Four feet of pink thermalite equals eighty seconds. Alex pockets the lighter and strolls to the police car, no hurry, and climbs in the driver’s seat. Officer Stark has left her keys in the ignition, the car still running. The car computer—a laptop—is attached to the armrest, its white screen blinking. Alex shifts into reverse and backs up along the shoulder until she’s a good hundred feet away from the Honda. Then she chews her lower lip and watches, eyes wide. Waits for it... waits for it...

Eighty seconds pass.

Nothing happens.

The radio squawks, making her jump.

“Five Victor Seven, status on the 10-73. Over.”

Alex locates the handset, picks it up.

“This is Five Victor Seven.” Alex’s pitches her voice higher, to match Officer Stark’s. “Standby, Central.”

“Ten-four, Five Victor Seven.”

Still no explosion. Alex wonders if the wet road snuffed out the fuse. Or if she grabbed an electric blasting cap by mistake. There could be a dozen reasons why it didn't go off, but going out and checking doesn't seem like the brightest of ideas.

"Check under the car, Alex. See if it's lit."

"You check, Charles. I don't have to know that bad."

But in this case, Alex has to know. Her prints are all over that car, and a quick peek at Officer Stark's computer shows it has been reported stolen. If the Honda doesn't explode, it will give Jack an unfair jump on Alex's location, and let the lieutenant know she has plastic explosives. Not to mention alert the local cops that an escaped serial killer is prowling the area.

Alex speaks into the radio, reading the call number off the screen.

"Central, this is Five Victor Seven. Negative on that 10-73. It was the owner, spent a long weekend out of town, forgot to call home, over. I'm giving her a warning. Over."

"Roger that, Five Victor Seven."

Alex turns around, faces the cop in the back seat.

"Officer Stark, I need you to check to see why my car hasn't blown up."

Officer Stark doesn't move, and her face reveals she isn't pleased with the idea.

"Chances are pretty good that it went out," Alex says, soothing. "I don't think it's going to blow up in your face."

"Then you go check."

"I have the gun, so I don't have to. Now are you going to help a civilian out, or do I have to put two in your knees?"

"You're making it worse for yourself. You need to stop before this goes too far."

Alex considers this woman. She's tall enough, but the eyes are wrong.

"Are you married, Stark?"

"Yes. I have a husband and three kids. You don't want to do anything stupid."

"Exactly. Which is why you're the one who's going to check the fuse."

Alex exits the vehicle and walks around to Stark's door. One hand opens it. The other points the Sig.

"Check if the fuse died, or any other problem you can find."

“I don’t know anything about explosives.”

“It’s easy. If you see a spark, run. And make sure you run this way, or I’ll shoot you.”

Stark pulls herself out of the back seat—not the easiest of tasks with cuffs on—and stands before Alex.

Alex extends her empty hand. Stark flinches, but Alex brings the gun up under her jaw to keep her still. She pushes a stray auburn bang out of Stark’s face, tucks it behind her ear.

“Don’t be afraid,” Alex says. “Things happen beyond our control. We can’t do anything to stop them. But we do have control over how we react. How we respond. Being afraid is a choice.”

The speech seems to have the opposite effect on Stark, who begins to tremble. Alex rolls her eyes.

“Just get over there, fraidy cat.”

Stark moves like a robot, joints stiff, head down, scanning the road. Alex waits behind the open door of the cruiser, one hand aiming the Sig, the other aiming the Maglite.

The closer Stark gets to the Honda, the slower she becomes. At this rate, the sun will be up before the car explodes.

“Let’s pick up the pace, Officer Stark. I’m hoping to get laid tonight. You find the fuse?”

Stark mumbles something, the words lost in the night.

“Crouch lower,” Alex says. “It’s a skinny pink fuse.”

Another mumble. Alex aims, fires a round over Stark’s head, close enough for her to feel the wind. The cop drops to the ground.

“That’s what I mean. Keep looking.”

Another minute passes, along with three rubberneckers. One slows down enough to maybe see that things aren’t right. The radio squawks again.

“Five Victor Seven, what’s your twenty? Over.”

Alex doesn’t know radio call signals. And she can’t trust Officer Stark to give her the correct response. She chooses to ignore it, hoping to get out of there shortly.

“See the fuse?” Alex calls to Stark, who is now on all fours next to the Honda, shaking so bad she looks like a wet dog.

“No.”

“Check underneath, by the gas tank.”

Stark doesn’t budge. Alex shoots out the tire Stark is crouching next to, the *POP* almost as loud as the gunfire.

“I hate repeating myself, Val.”

“Five Victor Seven, status.”

Goddamn radio. Alex opens the front door, grabs the hand mike.

“Just finishing up here, central. Computer problems.”

She tosses the mike back inside, and notices Officer Stark is under the car. But there’s a faint blue light under there with her.

The bitch has a cell phone. Probably one of those ultra-thin models for Alex to have missed it in the pat down.

“Five Victor Seven, do you have a 10-86? Over.”

Dammit. Alex figures she said something wrong, which means another patrol car will cruise by any minute. She needs to get out of here, pronto.

“Throw away the phone, Val!”

Alex fires two rounds into the trunk of the car. The cop can’t drop the phone fast enough, and it skitters across the pavement.

“Now grab the plastic explosive I put on the gas tank!”

Val cowers, hands covering her head, as if that will protect her from a forty-five caliber bullet.

Alex takes a deep, calming breath, then exits the vehicle.

“I’m going to count to three. If I don’t see the plastic in your hand, your children will grow up without a mother. One... two...”

Officer Stark holds up the PENO.

“Good. Now run back here. Move it, double time.”

Stark half-jogs/half-stumbles to the squad car. Her face is wet.

“Gimme the plastic, and get in the back seat. Close the door behind you.”

The cop follows orders. Alex studies the PENO. The fuse has fallen out. Alex frowns with half of her face. She places the PENO on the passenger seat.

“Now take your clothes off, Officer Stark.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. Faster would be better. If you follow directions, you’ll live through this.”

Officer Stark strips. Alex enjoys the show. From experience, she knows how difficult it is to undress a body. It’s much easier, and quicker, when they undress themselves.

“Underwear too. This is just so you won’t be able to follow me.”

Alex gives Officer Stark credit for not losing it. There are tears, but no begging or sobbing. Tough broad. Not a bad body, either.

“Very good, Officer Stark. Now I want you to get into the Honda. I’m going to leave you there.”

Alex opens the door, checks for cars, then marches the cop to the Honda. Moving bodies is an even bigger pain in the ass than undressing them. Much easier to let them move themselves.

“Sit in the driver’s seat, put your hands out.”

Alex tucks the gun into her waistband. Naked, the cop has lost the will to fight back. It takes a few seconds to uncuff one of her wrists, then attach it to the steering wheel.

“Are you afraid, Val?”

Officer Stark stares hard at Alex.

“Yes. But I’m controlling it.”

“Good. Good for you. Are your children proud of you? That their mother is a cop?”

Stark nods.

“They should be.”

Alex hurries back to the squad car, picks up the PENO and two feet of thermalite fuse. Dispatch comes on the radio. Alex switches it off, concentrating on inserting the

fuse into the blasting cap. Once she's satisfied it won't fall out, she returns to the Honda, stopping once to pick up Officer Stark's cell phone.

"Normally I savor things like this, Val, but I'm short on time."

Alex takes the cigarette lighter from her pocket, and leans across Stark to press it into the outlet.

"I'm using a forty second fuse. I won't light it until your call goes through. Forty seconds probably isn't long enough to say goodbye to your kids, but it's an unfair world."

Alex hands Stark the phone. She looks deep into the cop's eyes, sees it all. Disbelief. Realization. Anger. Despair. Acceptance. Out of everyone Alex has killed today, this is the most memorable. Too bad she can't stick around to see the final moments.

The lighter pops out.

"Call home, Val."

Val's hands are shaking so badly she has to dial three times. Finally, she gets a connection.

"Honey? It's Mommy."

Alex caresses Val's hair. Then she lights the fuse and tosses the PENO under the Honda.

As she walks back to the patrol car, Alex wonders what she would do with only a few seconds left to live. What would she say?

Nothing. She'd say nothing, because she doesn't have anyone to call.

The explosion is loud, and rattles the police car, but there is no huge pyrotechnic fireball like on television. The car burns, but it's a small fire, won't last long.

Alex hits the siren and peels out. Mission accomplished. On to the next goal.

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