



All Tore Up

The Death of Orpheus
by Pat Nolan writing as
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A group of amateur mycologists in the pristine timberlands of R. K. Turas State Park found a freshly severed big toe at the base of a pine where amanita muscaria were growing. At first the blood red end was indistinguishable from the bright red of the mushroom's cap. Then blood dripping from nearby ferns only added to their initial horror.

Donavan was a little late but he'd already heard the initial report. Now he was watching Derrick Voss, the new Captain of Detectives, go through the power point on the screen in semi darkened Conference Room Two. The entire squad was in attendance for the briefing, excepting Rick Nelson who had taken time off while his wife had their first child. The grizzly aspect of the murder had caught everyone's attention.

Voss was pointing to the photos of numbered placards each designating a body part strewn across the forest floor. "They found the head" he said referencing another slide, "floating down the Acre River near Sharon's Crossing on some kind of rude raft made of branches." He paused to give Donovan a nod and then said, "Glad you could make it, Detective."

Donovan hadn't liked Voss when he first met him, an outside promotion hire from a department down south. And now he liked him even less. He spotted the subtle twist of Lieutenant Mike

Jackson's lips in a grimace, the dive of the lines of his forehead into a frown. The Loot was ten times the cop that Voss was and should have been the automatic choice for promotion after Krazy Ed Kryzinski retired. Because Jackson was a black man that wasn't going to happen. Voss was the new breed of cop, white and ambitious, giving truth to that old saying, meet the new breed, same as the old breed. Or something like that.

"HR took longer than expected, Cap, lots of paper work to read through and sign."

"Try not to make a habit of it," Voss admonished and turned back to the PowerPoint. "These three women are our primary persons of interest."

Donovan glanced at the head shots, a trio of pretty hard to look at gals, and then at his squad mates seated around the table looking at him with expressions of questioning disbelief and surprise. Had he finally done it? Burdon gave him a subtle power fist and Townsend flashed a thumbs up. He had filed his retirement papers.

Back at his desk, Donovan cleared the file he'd been looking through, an old case that had caught his interest dating from back before he'd made detective. He'd been a Deputy then, patrolling the rural country around Hades Acre Lake in the northern part of Weston County, when he caught the report of the ten fifty four over the unit's radio. And he was one of the first officers on scene. He wasn't going to forget the flayed condition of the body in this lifetime. Something about the current case was giving him pause.

And his phone rang. It was Veronica, the Sheriff's secretary.

"I hear that congratulations are in order."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to Nelson. It's his wife's having the baby."

"I'm going to miss your smart mouth."

"That's more like it."

"The Sheriff would like to see you in his office."

"Now?"

"Now."

Donovan avoided elevators. You never knew who you were going to meet on an elevator and he always felt so exposed when the doors parted at the destination. He took the stairs four flights up to

the top floor passing through the administration wing of Justice Hall where he was familiar with many of the employees, mostly women, and who greeted him with more congratulatory best wishes. He muttered his thanks and appreciations and waved back in greeting. Veronica was on the phone when he got to the Sheriff's outer office but she smiled and mimed him to go right in.

He hadn't been expecting champagne or even cake so he wasn't disappointed, but he was surprised to see Voss seated in one of the two chairs in front of Phil's large ornate frieze-like desk.

Phil greeted him without getting up from behind the desk but Donovan noticed the crutches leaning against the cabinet behind and figured that the gout must be acting up again.

"Have a seat, have a seat," Phil insisted. "You know Captain Voss, of course. I was just telling Derrick that it was a tough break to be less than a week on the job and get hit with this horrendous crime, murder, repulsive dismemberment. It's a tough job and it isn't made any easier with the pressure from the DA's office. And the media. To get a handle on this outrage in a hurry. And I assured him that he had a crack squad of experienced detectives already on the case, especially you, Jim, you're one of the old timers, you know the lay of the land, and you've established impeccable sources." Phil paused a breath. "Are you familiar with the three women who are being held as witnesses? Are we getting anywhere with them?"

Donovan shook his head. "I saw the mugs, runaways maybe. My guess, by the location, living rough on the Bare Ranch." He referenced the notebook he'd slipped from his jacket pocket. "Melanie, Dora, and Laurel, no last names because last names are patriarchal, so I hear." He recalled his reading of the booking photos, the insolent stare of the leader, the vacant stare of the next smartest, and the clueless stare of the last. Dumb, dumber, and, dumbest, the three ingredients for mayhem. "You won't guess who they've been talking to."

The sheriff winced like his gout was acting up. "May Naddy?"

Voss leaned toward the desk's edge after glancing a scowl at Donovan. "I've got Jackson on the interview panel with a couple of the other senior men, Sheriff. Detectives Donovan and Nelson are chasing down identification on the victim. I'm sure they'll piece it all together."

Phil roared, “Piece it together! That’s a good one, Voss!” He thumped his desk and wheezed out another laugh. Donovan figured that maybe the gout medication was making the boss loopy, not his usual high and mighty aloofness, or maybe he’d self-prescribed a three martini lunch. And he watched Voss’s face go blank and then register a flicker of recognition as he realized what exactly the “good one” was.

“Nelson’s on family leave. His wife just had a baby.”

Voss glared at Donovan, obviously displeased at being corrected. “I thought I had ordered all critical staff back on duty. Why does Nelson think he’s excluded from that order?”

The Sheriff nodded sagely. “His job was done nine months ago, why didn’t he take the time off then?”

Donovan ignored the remark, more annoying than inappropriate and confirming his hunch that the boss had had one too many olives with his martinis. “It doesn’t take two of us to get the ID on the vic. I can have the techs work up a composite sketch from the remains of the head and get the picture distributed through the usual channels by the end of the day.”

“I would expect no less, Detective, but you have missed the point. When I make an assignment of personnel to staff a vital function in an investigation, I expect them to report for duty no matter the circumstances.” Voss had turned to him, grim faced, and rose, “But you’re retiring soon, is that correct? I hope we can have this cleared up before then and you can retire on a high note.” Nodding to the Sheriff, he said “I have to get back for a meeting with the Medical Examiner. I hope you’ll consider my suggestions for streamlining the unit.”

After Voss had left, Phil Collins cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows. “So you went and did it. Finally going to pull the plug. I’m kinda of jealous. What are your plans for, you know, after?”

“I’m not going to be dead, Phil. Contrary to what people believe, there is life after retirement. I’ll finally have the time to work on fixing things around the house, remodel, dig up that slab covering most of my backyard. Travel, maybe, go east, Baltimore, look in on Marion.”

Phil wagged his chin leaning back in his chair, eyes narrowing. “Marion, that the colored gal you were dating, from the hospital?”

Any regrets about retiring from a job that had been his life for over 30 years evaporated in the heat of his slow boil. “Yeah, the ER nurse.”

Phil leaned forward. “We go back a ways, Jim. We were rookie deputies together. You were a module or two ahead of me in the Academy, I remember. We may have had our run-ins over time, but I knew I could always count on you doing the job. I think sometime that temper of yours can get in the way, cloud your judgement. I also think you picked a good time to go out. Voss is more of a manager than a cop, and I don’t doubt that you and he would bump heads over proper or improper procedure. If you get my drift.

“Anyway, just to say I’m going to hate to lose your years of experience and knowhow on a case.” The Sheriff paused to look down as if he were holding a hand of cards. “So I’m going to put this on the table for you to consider.” He looked up. “Retired annuitant.”

“Doing what? Paperwork?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Cold cases, sorting, filing, creating a data base.”

Donovan shook his head. “I don’t know anything about data bases. Besides I thought Crazy Ed was going to do that. Wasn’t that why he retired? It would give him time to solve the case of the century or last century, his obsession with the Lopes clan.”

Tim shook his head. “The problem with Crazy Ed is that he’s crazy. Or to put it more politely, demented.”

“That’s not more politely. You mean dementia?”

“Keep that under your hat, but it was a medical retirement.”

“I don’t know. It sound boring, a lot like my current job which if it weren’t for the occasional axe murder would be unbearable.”

Collins chuckled his acknowledgement of the dig from the dark side. “You don’t have to commit to anything just yet. I can get a grant from the State through the Justice Department for Data Enhancement, meaning put together a coherent archive of cold cases with links to a nationwide network. I need an experienced officer who knows how to read a file and I can hire an assistant to do the data entry. We’re a small county. We don’t have a big cold case backlog. You can do it in your spare time. What have you got to lose?”

“Spare time.”

Mary Fisher, the crime scene tech, wore her own version of scrubs, a cross between a nurse and a lab tech, utilitarian blue pants and jersey under a long white lab coat. She was pointing at the image on the screen. “I took photographs of the head from various angles and then fed them into this reconstruction program that puts it together in a 3D image. He was missing an ear, lower lip, part of the nose, the whole left side of his cheek, and the hair from that side of his head.”

“Pretty gruesome.”

“Vehicle accidents are worse. So I’ve heard.” Mary was plumpish, dark hair almost always in a braid pinned in a bun at the back of her head, quiet brown eyes, diffident in the way of her people, and with a quiet way of speaking. “So far, it’s just bits and pieces. Chunks, like someone or something torn up a loaf of bread and dipped in tomato sauce. We haven’t recovered the torso. Nor the hands. We can’t identifying him by fingerprints until we find his fingers.”

“You’re sure it’s a him.”

Mary colored a little, her lips clamped together. She was used to Donovan’s banter. “Unless he’s a bearded lady.” She indicated the composite on the screen and the obvious beard swathing the jaw of the otherwise wild haired gaunt visage depicting what could only generously be described as a vacant eyed mad man. “And one of the bits we found would confirm his gender.”

Donovan nodded and smiled. He’d had his fun. He’d known Mary since she was hired a dozen years ago when he was just finishing up his stint in narcotics and moving on to Violent Crimes, or Robbery Homicide, as it was known back then. And she’d been Mary King in those days, newly engaged to Jay Fisher. After he’d got to know her a little better, he’d inquired idly as to why she hadn’t hyphenated her name so she could be Mary King-Fisher. He thought he was being cute. Her answer had shut him up. “That is not his clan. He is an otter.”

“Were you part of the recovery team?”

She nodded, “Yeah, I photographed most of the physical evidence and then came back here to prep the lab. Why?”

“You familiar with the area?”

“It is a good place for mushrooms. Of all kinds. My uncle would load us up in his truck and we would range through the forest hillside. This was before the State made it a park. But then, better than condos. He taught us little songs that we would sing when we picked the mushrooms. They included a description and a thank you to be sung when we lifted one out of the ground. We were only allowed to pick the edible ones. The older boys picked the stronger ones and sold them at the High School.”

“Shrooms?”

One raised eyebrow answered the question. She handed him the printed sketch of the 3D model and said, “I hear you put in your papers. Sorry to see you go.”

He tugged at the sheet and she released the sketch. “I thought that was privileged information.”

“My cousin works in HR.”

Donovan stepped into Mike Jackson’s office with a handful of sketches to be distributed by the shift commander to the patrol units. He’d started a facial recognition search at his desk and was waiting for results. The Lieutenant had the same mug shots of the three women he’d seen earlier at the briefing up on his monitor. He shook his head and looked up at Donovan. “What would make them do such a thing? *How* could they do such a thing? They’re just women. Tear him to pieces like that.”

“They admit it? Maybe they had help.”

“Bloodied clothes would be the indication. And they’re not making much sense. Like they’re from another dimension or reality.”

“Think it could be ritual?”

“I don’t want to rule it out, but Voss isn’t interested in that angle. He wants straight out drug induced murder and mayhem. Reads better in the press, and besides ritual always leaves too much unanswered.” Jackson indicated the papers in Donovan’s hand. “Something you want to see me about, Jim?”

“I’ve got a facial recognition match in progress, thought you might want to take a look at the sketch that’s going out to the field.”

“Now there’s a face you don’t want to be staring back at you in the mirror.”

“Yeah, sociopath poster boy of the year.”

“How old you think he could be?”

“Anywhere from late forties to early sixties.”

“Right about our ages. I hope I look better than that when I go.”

“Yeah, he looks like he’s been rode hard and put away wet.”

Jackson laughed his appreciation. “Claymore?”

“Yeah, he was my sergeant years ago. I don’t know where he gets them.”

“I’d like to say, ‘last of the cowboys,’ but that isn’t so. There are newer and younger ones coming up every day.” He leaned forward, amused as Mike Jackson would ever get. “You had the rep of being something of a cowboy yourself, at least when you were in drug interdiction.”

“You have to be a cowboy if you’re going to play in that game, and you don’t have a choice. When it goes down, it goes down hard. Armed interdiction is high risk, you got to be like them but more so.”

“If that’s your logic, do you have to think like a murderer to work in homicide?”

“Most homicides are no brainers, husband, wife, ex, ex-lover, son, daughter, relative, neighbor, gang. You walk up on it, look around and you know right away which one of those Einsteins did it or knows who did it. You learn to read the scene, the people. If there are no witnesses, someone will know why, and maybe who. Unless they’re stone psychopaths, they have tells, twitches. Or come right out and confess before you ask the first question. Other times you have to negotiate. The paper work is the same, and it’s up to the DA to make the case with what I give him.”

“Well, things won’t be the same around here without you, Jim. Hell of a note to retire on, though. I hope we can wrap it up before you head out the door.”

“Unless it turns into a Krysinski case then it will never end.”

“Oh jeez, the Lopes. I’m glad I don’t have to listen to that horseshit anymore. He wasted a lot of manhours, his own, and some of the squad’s, on the Lopes Loop.”

“Collins offered me the annuitant job on cold cases. More paperwork, but I’d have an assistant to do the computer stuff.”

“That was Krysinski’s deal, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll take it. I don’t want to get tied down. There’s a waiting period before I can go back to drawing a county

check. Hopefully I can find something that doesn't have anything to do with asking questions of corpses.”

“I got another five before I even consider it. Be nice to go out with a promotion, but. . . .

“Yeah, I know. . . the new guy? I'm not sticking around to find out. And another thing that's bugged me. When Krysiniski retired, why didn't Collins promote you to acting COD until the hiring freeze was lifted instead of taking it on himself? And then to promote from outside the department? What kind of message does that send?”

“You don't have to ask. You know. And it's the same old question. When I passed the detectives exam and placed in the first rank on the list I knew that I would never promote within the Santa Lena PD. The Chief told me right to my black face. I took the first offer that came along and that was with the Weston County Sheriff's Office. I heard the word was out that I got the job because of the color of my skin. The Sheriff's Office had been slammed by the grand jury for being noncompliant with County diversity guidelines. And they grabbed the first chocolate chip they could get their hands on. So maybe they were right. I did get the job because of the color of my skin. Not that it's changed anything. And Santa Lena PD has yet to hire and retain a person of color in their sworn ranks.”

“Like you say.”

“I did my job, and I got good at it, and people that mattered said I had good leadership qualities. I think that my annual Fourth of July barbeques, where they got hammered and did stupid shit and knew that I knew they had, might have had something to do with it, too. Still when I got promoted to Lieutenant, the word going around was that I got the job because of the color of my skin. Now if I'd been made Captain of Detectives, the same thing would have been said.

“And since you weren't.”

“Now therein lies the salt to rub in the wound, to paraphrase Willy. The irony is that you could say that I didn't get the job, and I did interview for the position, you could say that it was because of the color of my skin.”

“Amen.”

“Your pocket is buzzing.”

Donovan retrieved his black clad device and glanced at the screen. “Ok, got an ID on the vic. He’s got paper, and. . .that’s interesting.”

“Whuzat?”

“He’s a poet.”

“Dead poet now, and as my old English Lit prof used say, the only good poet is a dead poet.”

The victim’s name was Oscar Reynaldo Phineas the Third and he had a paper trail for breach of promise and intent to defraud as an unregistered nonprofit from as far away as Alexandria, Virginia, Memphis, Tennessee, Athens, Georgia, Sparta, Indiana back east to out west Antioch, and Eureka, California. They were all lower tier felonies if that, but they were shadowed by the fact that he’d been a suspect in the death of his wife, Yuri Dicey, the famed performance artist, which was later ruled accidental during a rehearsal for a routine gone horribly wrong titled “Don’t Look Back.”

Donovan drove out to Sharon’s Crossing, the sun sparking at the horizon and glancing amber rays off the rolling pasture land and encroaching suburban sprawl before the Santa Lena Hwy headed further west and entered the deep shadows of dark green coniferous stands crowding the roadway fringed by barbed skylines and winding parallel to the Acre River.

Sharon’s Crossing during the heyday of the timber industry had served as the ferry point for the lumber mills on the north side of the Acre, where all the logging had taken place, shipping board feet to all points east. At the south end of the WPA era bridge and near the entrance to R.K. Turas State Park, was Sharon’s Corner, a collection of century old buildings converted to a coffee souvenir antique art shop museum and assortment of outdoor picnic tables. Once the victim’s name was released on the local news program, the tip came in. Someone remembered seeing him at the coffee shop near the State Park where his bits and pieces had been found. It was Donovan’s to follow up.

He identified himself to the young girl behind the coffee bar which made her wince, and then to the older man that she’d called over, the proprietor. They both wore glasses, hers more stylish. Donovan guessed that she was his daughter. His name was Dane Carson and he explained that he’d been watching the news on the

widescreen on the back patio and saw the sketch that he identified as Phineas.

“The Third! And this is the crazy part! The reason I knew it was the same guy is that he gave a reading here no more than a week ago!”

Donovan looked at the handbill Carson handed him. “You mean like a séance?”

“No, it was a poetry reading. He’s that poet” pointing at the photo on the flyer. “But now that you mention it, he was strange, like he really didn’t belong to this time. Old fashioned and kinda snooty like he thought he was royalty. I heard he was pretty famous. He had an argument with somebody. Just a raised voice that made me look up. But he was loud anyway. And then the way he performed the poems was really creepy. Made your hair stand on end.” Carson self-consciously patted his near bald pate. “Anne, here, usually helps me with the kitchen when there’s an event or meeting or art show reception, but I told her she could go home. Some of the stuff he was saying sounded pretty sick. She didn’t need to hear that.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Well, don’t go by me. I don’t know anything about poetry. But the audience seemed to like it.” He motioned to the wide semi enclosed area with a scattering of tables and chairs and big screen in the corner. “I just provide the space and the service. It makes a little extra money, and I do it as a favor to Fay Angeli. She’s the one who puts on these events.” He smiled like his generosity made him a nice guy.

Donovan looked out over the tables. More witnesses, more leads, less time sitting around the office with Voss breathing down his neck. “How big was the audience.” There was potential for extra hours. Mike would approve them.

Carson considered the count intently. “Not more than twenty I’d guess. But Fay would know for sure.” Then as if something had occurred to him. “It’s usually always the same crowd, and I know a lot by sight or their names. Friends of Fay’s mostly. But a few seemed a little bit edgier.” He paused to look over his shoulder as if someone might be eavesdropping, “They came with May Naddy.”

Donovan nodded, May Naddy again. She had been big star eye-candy on the continent years ago. Then she married someone richer than God. When he died she inherited a pile as laid out in the

prenup. It couldn't be said that the old sheik wasn't generous but his estate was parceled out like a class action suit. Donovan knew more about May Naddy than he really wanted to. His ex had gleefully kept him abreast of the scandals surrounding the buxom star. And all because he'd once remarked that she had a body that could stop a freight train. It was a quip he'd heard an older friend make when they were in high school after viewing a sword and toga epic. It was likely one of the poorly dubbed Hercules muscle and loincloth action extravaganzas where she played a scantily clad Queen of the Amazons. Her celebrity was fueled by her scandalous behavior diligently reported in the tabloids as well as by the many clothing optional heroic dramas she was featured in, including a chilling cameo as Medusa in the popular *Heroes of Olympus* in which she appeared without a stitch and with a coil of writhing snakes. After she married the oil rich oligarch, May Naddy dropped out of public view. Coincidentally that was right around the time Donovan's wife had decided to bid adios as well.

May Naddy reappeared in public a dozen or so years later, soon after the death of her husband, and in Weston County, as a severe, no frills beauty, still looking like she'd just stepped off the screen of her classic films, *Seven Rivers To Hades* or *Mistress of Beasts*, but now espousing a radical male averse feminism. She'd purchased an old ranch in the hills overlooking the Acre and adjacent to the State Park. At one time the property had been a resort with cabins and a pool. It was, to hear the old timers tell it, a nude dude ranch with young studs prancing around in nothing but leather chaps, riding bareback, and, in general, titillating the guests, mostly old goats. It had been called the Bear Ranch back then but everyone referred to it as the "Bare" Ranch. The local papers took an interest in Naddy when she applied for an exotic animal permit and stated, through her lawyers, that she planned to open a refuge for abused mammals of all species. That left the door open for the two legged mammals as well as the four legged variety.

Donovan surveyed the patio and indicated the table in the corner away from the few customers. "Do you have time to answer some questions? I could use a cup of coffee."

Carson nodded like a puppy eager to please. "Yeah, sure, coffee's on the house. Want a dough. . . ." Carson caught himself, "Uh, Danish or something?"

Donovan chuckled . “No, I’ve had to give up the power rings. And I’ll pay for the coffee. I can’t accept a gratuity.”

Fay Angeli’s pixie cut accented a perfectly shaped head, large gold hoops dangling from her shell-like ears. She was as nervous as a lap dog when she met him at the door, a nymph in the classic sense, teasing and unattainable,.

Following Carson’s directions, Donovan had driven out to her place after calling ahead at the phone number the café owner had provided and establishing her availability for an interview. Her home was up a long gravel driveway about a quarter mile off the main road set on a grassy hillock of oaks and tangles of coyote brush. A large rusting satellite dish antenna with the feedhorn pointing down at the concrete base next to the doublewide mobile home was silhouetted against the darkening sky like a relic from a post-apocalyptic B movie. He parked next to a dusty blue older model Outback, the headlights of his sedan picking out the succulent garden bordering the path to the front porch and a pergola festooned with hanging baskets of bright flowers and arrays of wind chimes clattering randomly in the faint evening breeze.

A quick look around the living room said Fay Angeli had a taste for decorating that did not skimp on exaggeration with an emphasis on the lush and layered, photos and paintings set in ornate frames or draped with sheer fabric and arranged for maximum arty effect. It was a busy feast for the eyes but Donovan wasn’t distracted. “Can you tell me how you know Mister Phineas?”

In her mid-forties, he guessed, Fay seated herself on a long orange chaise in a cheerful patterned top and form fitting sherbet green yoga pants and, cocking her platinum blonde head to one side, considered the question. “What can I tell you about Oscar Reynaldo Phineas the Third? For one thing, he never told me exactly what he was the third of. “

Donovan blinked and took a breath. She was going to be cute and the intense red of her painted lips looked voracious as if when smiling she might reveal a pair of fangs. “Can you tell me how long you’ve known Mister Phineas?” He gave her his practiced no nonsense cop stare.

She raised a bleached eyebrow and crossed her eyes thoughtfully. “I’ve known of his work for years. He’s quite a well-known poet, internationally. A genius, and a hypnotic personality.

And he was cleared in the horrible accident that caused his wife's death even if there were rumors that he was somehow involved or negligent. But one must forgive the great their failings," she proclaimed with an assured finality.

"I started a correspondence with him some years ago after attending one of his readings in Chicago when I was back there visiting relatives. He seemed very kind and interested in my own writing and some of my art." She motioned with her hand to indicate the paintings on the walls. "I invited him to visit if he were ever passing through Weston County merely as a courtesy, never imagining that he would take me up on the offer. He is a celebrity after all."

She got to her feet and ambled over to a small bookshelf near a writing desk. "I have most of all his books of poetry, and he was kind enough to sign them while he was here." She held them up as if they were precious icons. "*The Cult of Eight*, one of his early books, a very powerful epic that takes place in ancient Egypt. The depictions are so real it is almost as if he had lived during the time of the Pharaohs." She held up another. "*Higher Glyphs*, the sequel to *The Cult of Eight*, and much more detailed about the secret rituals of the ancient goddess religions. He was much younger then." She showed Donovan the jacket photo and there wasn't much resemblance between the pictured poet and the head that had been found floating down the Acre.

"This one is called *When Sunny Gets Glue*," she continued, proffering another volume, "and the least of my favorites. He was trying for the modern touch and I'm afraid it just doesn't work for him. Too flippant and self-referential." She gave Donovan a conspiratorial smile as if he would catch the critical dig. "But he got back on track with these last three. Although they are a little, what would you say, anti-woman? In *One With The Sun*, he pledges allegiance to the Greek god of poetry, Apollo, as he does in this next book, *Apollo Guised*, an epic about a poet travelling around the world proselytizing the glory of the sun god. And his most recent, *Death Sidestepped*, is a paean to immortality."

All of that had gone over Donovan's head as totally irrelevant. "When was the last time you spoke with Mister Phineas?"

"Well, I have to say I was flabbergasted when out of the blue he accepted my invitation to come and read in our tiny cultural outpost. And thrilled. He was staying in Santa Lena, I think in a

motel north of town. He came to dinner and we had a wonderful conversation about his poetry. Then we went to Sharon's Corner for the reading." Staring up at him, sincere, wide eyed, she asked, "Tell me, was it really as horrible as the news said?"

"I really can't comment on that. When did you last see him?" She sighed and grasped a knee with both hands and leaned back searching her memory with her eyes. "That night, after the reading at The Corner café and gallery. I curate the art there and host cultural events. I was quite disappointed at the turnout. O. R. Phineas is a literary celebrity even if he is a little controversial. Still, his reading was superb, quite magical."

A breeze passed through the porch and tickled the wind chimes as if on cue.

"You were expecting a larger audience. How many people were in attendance at the," Donovan checked his notes, "...reading? I'd like a list of the all people in the audience. Those that you can identify."

There was panic in her eyes as she sat bolt upright. "What? No!" Then "I don't know," she moaned sorrowfully, pleading.

"Did anything strike you as unusual that evening? Arguments, disagreements? Do these poetry meets get heated?"

She had a laugh like one of her wind chimes. "No, no, not at all, it's a very docile crowd. I know most of them. Local artists, writers, people who don't want to sit around and watch TV. Besides, he had everyone spell bound. He can charm the cosmos." She got dreamy eyed remembering and then snapped out of it. "Well, except for Axel," she explained with a grimace, "Axel Cronen, but he likes to argue just to hear himself talk."

"And May Naddy, I understand that she was there as well." Fay Angeli gasped and turned away to give her left shoulder a very hard stare. "I couldn't say."

"You couldn't say if she was there?" What Donovan saw in her hesitance was fear, terror.

"Don't you know? She's a witch. I don't want to even speak her name."

The operations briefing was scheduled for 8 AM in Conference Room Two adjacent to the squad bay. Donovan had been in the office since 5. Now he was seated at the long table watching

Lieutenant Jackson tack the mug shots of the three suspects and the reconstructed sketch of O.R. Phineas onto the white board.

Rick Nelson was there too, staring into the steam of a hot cup of coffee. He had that new-baby-no-sleep look to his bleary eyes. In answering “How’s the baby” he’d offered “I think she’s a vampire. She only sleeps during the day and stays awake all night. I could be catching a few precious winks if the Loot hadn’t called me in.”

Mike Jackson looked away from what he was writing on the white board. “Boss said he wanted everyone front and center. He even had me call Bobbie back.”

Lanky Townsend stopped at the doorway about to step in. “What? Bobbie Delyn? That’s cruel and usual punishment. I thought she was still going through rehab.”

“Boss’s orders,” Mike said to the white board and drawing a line connecting what he had written to the picture of O. R. Phineas that Donovan had printed out from an array of available images online. The victim had not been camera shy.

Stubby Burdon found a place at the table and set a paper hot cup down next to his file folder. “You’ll never guess who I saw in the breakroom.”

Nelson and Townsend turned to him and said “Bobbie” in unison.

“Taking my name in vain, are you?” The older woman in the doorway glared at them with mock displeasure.

“Not me, Sarge,” Burdon held up his hands in protest, “Just surprised to see you back is all.”

Sergeant Roberta Delyn had that tough cop look that only a woman can have. She was all business. No tolerance for boy games and pranks. If you messed up, she was the one who read you the riot act. At five foot five her square shoulders balanced a not exceptionally pretty face due to the white scar that ran from beneath her left ear across her cheek to the tip of her chin. A boyish dyed blond bob tucked under a ballcap, she was dressed in her usual puffy green down vest over a checked man’s shirt, a pair of Levi’s, one leg of which was wrapped in a brace, and a three toed aluminum cane. She passed behind Donovan’s chair to get to the end of the long table and casually asked, “Why are you still here?”

Donovan and Bobbie didn’t exactly have a history. Not that kind of history anyway. She’d been in Violent Crimes longer than

he had. She was the Loots right hand and sometime his left foot. “Sergeant Delyn, always a pleasure.” Donovan raised his coffee cup in salute.

Jackson faced the detectives from the white board, sleeves rolled up, folder in hand. “Ok, let’s get started. Captain Voss will be delayed so we’ll start without him. Let’s hear what forensics came up with. Pete?”

“I have a question.” Bobbie had raised her hand. “Why am I here?”

“Come on, Sarge, as I explained, it was not my call.”

“I’m on sick leave, for cry’s sake!”

“You could have said no.”

“Well,” she said glaring at the other detectives at the table, “don’t expect me to ride your asses in my usual capable and efficient manner. If anybody needs me, I’ll be in the cafeteria.” At that she pushed her chair back and lifted herself, obviously in pain, to stand, and slowly shuffled her way out of the conference room and in the direction of the elevators.

Jackson shook his head. “Pete? You were saying?”

“Uh, not much new from the lab except that some of the bits and pieces are testing positive with non-human traces. Blood from the clothing of the gals matches the deceased, but other than that nothing. Samples from under their nails show no indication that they used their hands to rip the vic apart.”

“Maybe they washed their hands after,” Burdon offered.

“Jackson shook his head. “I don’t think so, Eric. Their clothing was bloody but I’m guessing it was transient. They may have handled some of the body parts. And not one has a broken nail, chewed maybe, so I’m leaning toward the idea that maybe they were bystanders, witnesses, if you will, not actually physically participating in the rendering.” He addressed Townsend again. “What kind of non-human traces? Are we talking about foxes or big cats? Bear?”

“They ruled out most of the local critters. They’re thinking something more exotic. They’re still waiting for confirmation on the sample but something along the lines of,” Townsend checked his notes, “pan troglodytes.”

“What?”

“Chimpanzee.” Donovan offered.

“I know that!” Jackson retorted.

“Our closest animal relative.”

“Yours maybe.” Which drew guffaws around the table. “Ok, Pete, anything else?”

“Dispatch got a call from a fisherman downstream from Sharon’s Crossing. Seems like we might have found the victim’s hands. Deputy’s on the way. We should know within the hour.”

“Alright, might as well have the coroner’s guys head that way, too. If they’re his hands we can get a positive id. His prints are in the system.” He turned address the white board. “Now our terrible trio here, dumb, dumber, and dumbest.” He tapped each of their photos with his pen. “Melanie, Dora, and Laurel are not being very forthcoming about what they saw and how they were involved.”

Burdon who’d been on the interrogation team volunteered, “Here’s what we’re dealing with. The Captain is sitting in. Out of nowhere, he says ‘Will you admit that you tore the limbs off this man because you were high on mushrooms and you floated his head down the river on a raft made of sticks.’ This is when we were grilling dumber, there in the middle. I had no idea where the heck that came from. So Dora, dumb Dora, it fits, goes ‘I dunno about the first part, I was pretty high, but yeah, his head, it seemed like the right thing to do.’ And I about. . . .”

“Uh, good, good, looks like Captain Voss is on his way,” Jackson held up his hand glancing toward the doorway. Conference Room Two became very quiet as Voss stepped in.

The Chief of Detectives nodded at his lieutenant and briefly glanced at the others at the table. “Continue Jackson, you can fill me in on what has already transpired. How is the questioning of the women going?”

“Ah, yes sir, we were just getting to that.”

Donovan knew the Loot well enough to know that when he put on that poker face, he was seething inside. He should have seen it coming when Jackson broke a little smile.

“But first Detective Donovan was going to brief us on the narrative he has developed of our victim’s movements before his murder.”

Donovan blinked, ok, Mike, you owe me one, and gathered the folders with his notes in front of him. “Yesterday, approximately 1700 hours we receive a call from the proprietor of Sharon’s Corner, Dane Carson, who said he could identify the composite broadcast on the local evening news. Earlier, approximately 1300 hours, a

facial recognition search I had initiated came up with a possible id of the victim. The names matched, and in the process of questioning Mr. Carson, I learned that the victim had presented a poetry reading at his establishment, less than a week ago, last Sunday. There were approximately twenty people in attendance that evening. I interviewed one of them so far, the organizer of the event, Faye Angeli, and plan to interview the others on the list of attendees. I learned or confirmed that the victim, O.R. Phineas, was a kind of literary celebrity, a poet. Mr. Phineas was last seen driving away from Sharon's Corner in a silver BMW convertible accompanied it would seem by our first suspect, Melanie, who had come to the reading with May Naddy, as had the other two of our charming trio. That would indicate that she has prior knowledge of the poet perhaps leading up to the time of his death."

At Jackon's nod he continued. "In my interview with Ms. Angeli, who is a real estate agent, she admitted to at one time being a part of the following of radical women around May Naddy known as The Bear Cult, but had left the group after what she termed an 'unnerving incident.' She wouldn't say further what she meant by that but I'd guess that she witnessed something that still leaves her shaking. It's her contention that May Naddy is a witch, evil, at least."

Donovan pulled a print out of a photo from the folder and slide it across the table to the Loot. "Tack that one up next to the author's photo of Phineas." It was a picture of May Naddy from her last major film, *Mistress of the Beasts*. She wasn't wearing a lot of clothes in that one either.

"Is this your idea of a joke, Detective, a pinup on the murder board?"

"The relevance of May Naddy in all of this is in the fact that she is well acquainted with Phineas. I did a little digging on the internet and you'd be surprised with what you can come up with. Before she moved her animal rescue operation to Weston County, May Naddy had a similar enterprise on an island off the coast of Croatia. She was also a patron the performance artist, Yuri Dicey."

"I don't see how any of this is relevant to our investigation, Detective." Voss wasn't the patient sort.

"Yuri Dicey was married to Oscar Reynaldo Phineas. She was killed when one of her stunts went wrong. He was suspected at first but was eventually cleared. But if you read the comments on

stories about Dicey's death, there are people who believe that Phineas in fact had something to do with his wife's death."

"That's gossip, you've been wasting your time reading tabloids instead of doing police work!"

"One of those people is May Naddy. She has been quoted as saying she believes Phineas killed Yuri Dicey because he was jealous. I'll just throw this out, Naddy and Dicey were rumored to be lovers."

"And I'd throw that in the trash where it belongs. I don't know where your reputation comes from, Donovan, but this certainly isn't police work!"

"Hey, look at that!" Townsend held up his smart phone. "They found the hands and printed them! He's our guy. O. R. Phineas, poet."

Donovan sat opposite Bobbie Delyn at the table in the cafeteria with a paper cup of steaming caffeinated brown water and watched her chew the end of her pencil.

"What's a four letter word for 'martinet'?"

"Asshole."

"Too many letters."

"Voss."

"That fits, and completes the cross word 'retired police officer,' 'excop'." Bobbie gave what passed for a smile that creased her white scar like an odd punctuation. "The investigation not going well?"

"Our new chief of detectives is intent on charging the three, I wouldn't say undeserving but nonetheless not culpable, with murder. Unfortunately other than the bloody clothing nothing indicates that they were directly responsible for the victim dismemberment. Personally, and I'm not alone with this, I think it is physically impossible for them to do it."

"Because they're women."

"Of course not. Even a very strong man would be incapable of ripping a torso to shreds like that, even with tools. This guy was practically confetti."

"Ugh, now there's a pretty picture." Bobbie scribbled on the edge of the newspaper thoughtfully. "Some kind of animal, then?"

"Pan Troglodytes."

"Chimp. I know that one from doing the crosswords. But a chimp in R.K. Turis State Park? Who would. . .?"

“Let me finish that thought for you. May Naddy and her anxious animal ark. I got Woody Ames, the animal behavior vet out of bed early this morning.”

“The County Dog Catcher as he so often calls himself. Bet he was happy.”

“Because she operates a wild animal sanctuary one of the stipulations for the permit was that Animal Control had to regularly inspect conditions on the ranch, make sure they weren’t being mistreated and such.”

“Yeah, I think I heard Woody complaining about that.”

“There’ve been problems before. One of her cheetahs escaped and went after the neighboring ranch’s sheep. Fortunately, the cheetah was defanged. It just gummed a lamb. Unfortunately the lamb died of a heart attack.

“Gummed a lamb. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to erase that from my memory.”

“So Woody has an inventory of what kind of animals she has out there. They’re mostly arthritic big cats who have seen better days, all defanged, or blind. A black bear that is so fat it can’t walk, it can only roll, a couple of dogs pretending to be wolves, llamas who’ve lost their spit, a giraffe that can’t stand, horses one step from the glue factory. . .the usual assortment of misfit four legged, feral cats, stray dogs, and two legged runaways engaged in some kind of throwback evolution. . . .”

“His words, I’ll assume.”

“And a crazed chimpanzee. Said when he did the inspection, the chimp was kept in some kind of cage away from everyone, including the other animals. And believe it or not, went apeshit whenever anyone came near her. May Naddy was the only one who could calm the chimp down. Female I think he said. Probably the most dangerous animal out there. His opinion.”

“If I were to draw a conclusion from what you’ve told me, May Naddy’s chimp is the perp.”

“May is linked to Phineas through Yuri Dicey who was both their lover.”

“Sounds like someone was working all the angles hoping to get to the point.”

“Naddy blamed the poet for Yuri’s death. Either she had Faye Angeli lure Phineas to Weston County or it was by coincidence. Either way, May sees her chance at revenge.”

“And uses the chimp as her hitman? From what I’ve heard they’re strong enough. But why involve the three runaways?”

“They were bait. From what I’ve read about O.R. Phineas, he was a lady’s man, left a trail of broken hearts and promises from coast to coast. The silver BMW he was last seen driving was reported missing by some gal up in Eureka. . . .”

“Surprise!”

“And who didn’t want to press charges because she was certain O.R. had just borrowed it but changed her tune to stolen when we told her we’d found it torched in a turnout off a dirt road down here. I think May used these three kids to lure him to her place. Maybe even tortured him. The lab is putting together a composite of the body parts that might show indications of torture.”

“Adding insult to injury. But wouldn’t she worry that the three women would talk if they were involved in any of it.”

“She’s got some kind of psychic grip on them. The experience was probably so horrific they’re suffering from amnesiac shock. If we let them stew a bit longer, one of them might loosen their hold on whatever false scenario they’re clinging to.”

Bobbie penciled in an answer with a grunt of satisfaction. “Might be a little complicated for the new guy.”

“He as much said I should be writing for TV cops shows. It was the most farfetched narrative he’s ever heard.”

“He won’t last long.”

“You don’t think so? I’ll be long gone, but you guys are going to have to put up with him.”

“He doesn’t fit. Who’s ever heard of a Derrick Voss. Helen Reddie over in HR told me that they had a much better candidate, guy by the name of Hendrix. He would have been a perfect fit, she said.”

Donovan took a sip of his coffee which had gone from scald to just hot. “You’re not thinking of jumping ship soon are you?”

“Me? No way. I’ve got half a dozen years before I’m eligible.” Bobbie pointed to her knee. “Unless I go out on a medical.” Then she frowned. “Wait! How old do you think I am?”

“Hey, Sarge. No offense, you just look mature for your age.”

“Geez, like I haven’t heard that one before.” She sighed and tapped the pencil eraser on the table. “So how are you going to deal with Voss the boss?”

“Mike’s getting a search warrant for the Bear Ranch. We’ll see if we can make a match with the chimp. If so, then it goes in that direction and Voss will have to follow it.”

“He was hoping for something cut and dried, this sounds sloppy and wet. So what’s the motive besides sheer cruelty and mayhem? Revenge for the girlfriend’s death?”

Donovan shrugged. “That’s one of them.” He retrieved a slim volume from his folder and passed to Bobbie.

“What’s this? Poetry? *When Sunny Get Glue* by O.R. Phoneas, er Phineas?”

“Yeah, Fay Angeli had an extra copy.”

“So your saying he was killed because of his poetry?” Bobbie leafed through the pages, lingered on some passages, winced, looked disgusted, sighed, and then passed the book back. “With something like that, anyone could claim justifiable homicide.”