

The Law of Averages

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Millersville University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in English

Copyright © 2019

Alexander R. Coffroth

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

This Thesis for the Master of Arts in English Degree by
Alexander R. Coffroth
has been approved on behalf of the
Graduate School by

Thesis Committee:

Research Advisor: Dr. William Archibald

Committee Member: Dr. Dominic Ording

Committee Member: Dr. Timothy Miller

Date: 04/25/2019

*A copy of this approval page with original signatures has been submitted to Graduate Studies and Adult Learning

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE LAW OF AVERAGES

By

ALEXANDER R. COFFROTH

Millersville University, 2019

Millersville, Pennsylvania

Directed by Dr. WILLIAM ARCHIBALD

Abstract:

The Law of Averages is a detective novel, set in the fictional city of Circadia in the year 2026, which follows the exploits of Detective John Coffe. Coffe is a man who is haunted by his past as he tries to move into the future. Will he ever truly be a good man or are his actions forever influenced by the sins of his father? John must seek answers to these questions throughout the novel, all the while hunting down a vicious serial killer.

This novel applies elements of science fiction to the traditional tropes of the detective novel. Thematically, the reader will delve into the questions identity and memory as they try to determine John's fate.

As the story unfolds, the dark history of the city and the detective are laid bare for the reader to see. Coffe must contend with his own inner demons as well as external threats to keep his city safe. One false step, and John could succumb to the darkness inside him.

The Law of Averages (Thesis) contains excerpts from eight chapters as well as a summarized account of the remaining chapters. Following this writing, there is a metacognitive component that breaks down and reflects on the author's journey to creating this work.

Signature of Investigator:

Alexander R. Coffroth

Date: 04/25/2019

*A copy of this approval page with original signatures has been submitted to Graduate Studies and Adult Learning.

Preface:

The following chapters are an excerpt from a larger work entitled, *The Law of Averages*. The document is a dream-made manifest, courtesy of many. It has always been a dream of mine to write a novella or a novel – yet, I always found a reason to delay.

Finally, Millersville University has provided me with the opportunity to embark on this journey. The following thesis is the culmination of a five year journey at this university and the impact that numerous professors and academic peers have had on me. What began as a pursuit of more knowledge for a profession, became a journey of personal growth. Creative writing is a difficult undertaking and I owe a great deal of thanks to many people.

Foremost, thanks should be extended to Dr. Ordning and Dr. Miller for agreeing to be readers on my committee. These two professors served as my initial contacts at the university and have been a tremendous help to me over the years. Secondly, I must acknowledge the help provided by Dr. William Archibald. Dr. Archibald provided discussion sessions to tease out ideas and corrected my litany of mistakes. Additionally, I owe a great deal of thanks to Dr. Kristen Seligman, whose discerning eye scouted the pitfalls of plot holes and helped me to bridge the gap.

Finally, I am thankful for the support of my parents and siblings. They provided caffeinated support and the occasional meals to keep me alive throughout the writing. Without their support and the grace of God, I would never have reached the end of this journey.

Table of Contents

Approval Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	v
The Law of Averages.....	1
Prologue: The Coders.....	2
Chapter 1: The Scene	18
Chapter 2: The Chase.....	35
Chapter 3: The Lead.....	49
Chapter 4: The Doctor.....	64
Chapter 5: The Name.....	81
Chapter 6: The Theater	95
Chapter 7: The Request	111
Chapters 8-13: The Summaries.....	125
Chapter 8: The Bullpen	126
Chapter 9: The Turn	128
Chapter 10: The Sky-Rise.....	129
Chapter 11: The Gala	131
Chapter 12: The Fallout.....	133
Chapter 13: The Cicada.....	134
Metacognitive Journals	136
Introduction and Rational for a Creative Thesis	137
Genre Selection and Development	142
Character Development, World Building, and Thematic Research.....	148
Drafting, Editing, and Finding a Conclusion.....	156
Bibliography.....	160

The Law of Averages

By Alexander R. Coffroth

(Full Chapters: Prologue – 7)

Prologue: The Coders

"Nine-one-one operator. What is your emergency?"

"Help. She needs help! Oh God."

"Alright, sir can you tell me where you are?"

"I don't think she is going to make it."

"Sir. I need a location."

"Talan. T-Talan Industrial Complex."

"Help is on the way. Can you tell me what happened?"

"H-he killed them."

"Who?"

"My father."

--Transcript of Emergency Call

March 21st, 2013

Circadia City Police

February was an odd month in the city of Circadia, especially in terms of weather. It seemed noncommittal to the cold of winter, yet rejected the warmth of spring. Instead, the city's inhabitants existed in a perpetual state of discomfort as the weather vacillated between rain and snow. At the moment, the sun echoed brilliantly off the pristine parts of piles of snow that had accumulated the prior night in the storm. The refracted radiance did nothing to raise the freezing temperatures this early in the morning. Instead, it only served as an annoyance that nearly

blinded three lonely figures who were walking directly into the sunrise as they plodded through the narrow crevice between two massive snow drifts in the Southern Shore and the Old Talan Residential Neighborhood.

The breach of sunlight over the eastern horizon was not strong enough to melt the powder at 7:12 am and judging from the reports by local meteorologists the sun was going to disappear shortly. The forecast for the day promised above freezing temperatures and precipitation in the coming hours that would certainly make a mess of the entire city.

The three men were coders who had slogged their way through the cold, icy, and barely accessible roadways at the behest of their employer. Collections of old warehouses and tenement buildings of the Southern Shore, casualties of the recession, were being reclaimed in a city-wide renaissance led by the Florentian Company. Old patterns and beats of the city were being resurrected and revamped. It was a rebirth that could not be beholden to erratic temperatures and comfortable schedules. Change – truly meaningful change – requires sacrifice and pain.

These men were forced into the cold by the necessity of their profession, trading the warmth of their beds for the job. The city, divided by the storm the night before into two factions, was groggily rumbling to life. Those that could afford a slow start to the day remained oblivious to the plights of others, while those of the less-advantageous persuasion, such as the three men, plodded their way through work, resenting the other.

“I’ve never been to this part of the city before,” remarked the young blonde, wiry man with a chipper tone as crisp as the morning air. He walked with an anxious gait and kept trying to move at a faster pace than the other two would allow on such a narrow path. The snow and the disposition of the others forced him to stay at the end of the weary procession, which

necessitated that he converse in an overly loud voice. “Are we gonna to be in this district for much longer, Carl?”

“Heh?” the leader was spending most of his energy marching through the ankle high snow towards the series of apartment buildings that displayed on his toolpad. The little green line was slowly diminishing on the screen, indicating that they would soon reach the worksite. “What didja say Marcus?”

“Are we gonna to be in the Southern Shore very long?” Marcus replied nearly yelling as a diesel snow plow blew past the trio, kicking up sludge, and belching a cloud of black smoke into the air.

The Talan Residential Quarter was a project district in the city on the Southern Shore of the river that had sequestered itself from outsiders. It was a district that hardly ever saw the likes of repairs or new infrastructure, especially since the Talan Company had liquidated its holdings. The people here preferred to hide their problems or pretend they didn’t exist rather than seek outside help.

However, that all was about to change in the coming months. The tenants, or more likely the people who would be moving into their homes after these people were kicked out, would be receiving a tremendous upgrade to their infrastructure and cyberstructure. All of the upgrades were thanks to Mayor Shapiro’s rebirth campaign and the Florentian Company’s ambitious plans for the city.

“We’re gonna be here as long as Mr. Florentian says we need to be.” Interrupted the dour-looking man with the long face that was walking in the middle of the two. His voice

grinded out of a mouth that was mottled with a patchwork of bruises and sounded like a vehicle kicking up grit on a gravel road. “And no more yelling, my head can’t take your yammering.”

“Bout time you said something, Garrett. They dropped us off at 5:00 am and the most you’ve done is grunt.” Marcus attempted to walk beside Garrett, but was forced to scuttle backward behind the taller man lest he walk into a poster plastered pole.

“All I can do is grunt because you haven’t shut up since you transferred here back in ‘twenty-two.” Garrett growled through his swollen lips.

“To answer your question, Marc, he’s right. We’re gonna be working here as long as it takes. With that new campus going in -- and we gotta get all the code rot out of these lines before they can assess what needs replacing and what can take the upgrade.” Carl had been an independent code jockey for nearly twenty years and this job was the biggest he had ever seen.

Millions of lines of code would be purged or rewritten to accommodate the modern coding repository found in the Florentian Cyberstructure. It was the corner stone of a state of the art industrial campus that Florentian was planning to build. The cyberstructure was a technological marvel built to rival the Cloud and designed to usher in a new era of connectivity, automation, and revolution. Well, at least that was what the mayor had promised during his election campaign. “It’s probably gonna be months, even with all the contracted coders scouring the old Talan cyberstructure.” Carl concluded.

“Thanks, Boss-Man. Good to know someone can carry a conversation, ain’t that right?” Marcus quipped as he punched his friend in the back.

“Shut up.” Garrett growled.

“Both of you shut up. It’s seven in the morning and there are still people that live these buildings. Besides our job is right up here.” Carl gestured to a large, yellowing brick building. The street was still quiet this early in the morning, with only a few people dragging themselves into the cold. The north side of the building had four rows of bricked-up windows and a smattering of graffiti where the artists could reach.

“So any fun stories about this building?” Marcus asked. “I hear Fred and his crew get to go into the actual Waterfront Complex. Ya know the one where the South Shore Sadist killed all those people thirteen years ago?”

“Naw, it should be an empty apartment building. Factory workers used to use it for housing before the recession hit.” Carl carefully picked his path around a sheet of ice and started to make his way up the stoop.

“You said the last one was empty, but we got cursed ou-WHOOP” Garret was cut short as he lost his footing on the wintry mix.

Garrett was less observant than his supervisor and hit the sheet of ice full on. He flailed his arms about wildly grasping at air as the ground made contact with his backside, embracing the contact that his feet had rejected. He bellowed as the air left his lungs.

“You alright, Garrett?” Carl called over his shoulder.

“Yeah...” Garrett muttered as he pulled himself up and walked around the ice.

Marcus lithely skipped around the patch of ice while laughing uproariously.

“Well, this is the last apartment we got on our list, so don’t get hurt now. We finish here and we can get lunch, breakfast, or whatever.” Carl warned in an exhausted tone. “Like I said, it looks like this one is abandoned. So, we won’t hafta worry about getting yelled at.”

The old man punch a code into the large padlock with the Florentian logo on it. Carl unhooked the lock and the door squeaked open. The dust on the threshold kicked up and swirled through the dim daylight that eked in from the windows and the doorway. There were small paths cleared of debris that led towards the stairs and the hallway, besides that everything else was buried under mess.

The light grew as the door opened on a sinister smile. The darkness fled as the light flooded the building and a devil glared out from the darkness, disturbed from his sleep. Crimson eyes. Heavy and slitted, the beast glared from the darkness with the promise of violence. Its mouth cracked ever so slightly in a malicious smirk as it clawed its way from the pentagram that kept it imprisoned on the wall. There was a furious movement behind the acrylic monster. From the edges of the pentagram, tendrils of red and black spray paint wrapped the surface of the walls in alien letters. Two lines of red and black went up the main staircase and ascended out of sight into the rotting carcass of a building.

Carl clicked on his toolpad and shined the light around the entranceway, illuminating the crevices that the sun could not reach. Here and there, paint coalesced into larger images that varied from artistic to lewd. Most seemed to have been done by amateur taggers practicing their craft and had peeled and cracked with age. The devil was the only image that looked to have been done by a true artist.

“This must be a really old building. I doubt anything here is worth salvaging. Hell, I doubt the routers here can even handle our equipment if they are as old as the building.” Garrett remarked as he join his boss by clicking on his light which revealed more of the rot and disrepair.

A few doors hung crookedly on a set of mailboxes and the tiling had seen better days, but that was merely cosmetic. The drywall and the bones of the building seemed sturdy despite the years and must have been approved by the building inspectors during the initial purchase. Still, it didn’t bode well for the electronics in here.

“If we can’t salvage it, let’s get out of here.” Marcus hadn’t taken his eyes from the devil since they had walked in and the confidence had evaporated from his voice.

“You spooked?” Garrett chuckled and brought his heavy mitt down on the smaller man’s shoulder causing him to jump.

“No. I’m just hungry and tired,” Marcus ripped his arm away. “Besides, the building is too old for what Florentian needs. It’s just gonna get demolished anyway.”

“Naw, we ain’t leaving. There is an old server room somewhere in the building.” Carl said as he took his gloves off and began manipulating the screen of his tablet. “The building may be old, but this area of the city was bustling 20 years ago. They had to have had some sort of amenities. Just look there.”

The old man shined his light above the mail boxes. Through motes of dust and cobwebs, the men could make out a slightly brighter yellow cord disappearing into the plaster. There was wiring here, but it looked as if it had been grafted into the building as an afterthought.

“Hey, Carl? Florentian said he restored power to these abandoned acquisitions, right? No sense in carving out code rot if we can’t even turn on the server.” Garrett asked.

“Yeah, he lit them up about two weeks ago. Back when Fred’s crew got started with the code purge near the docks.” Carl responded.

“Well then, let’s see if we can’t get some power flowing,” Garrett said as he disappeared into a side room that used to be the residential office. The floor creaked as the dour man searched the room for a fuse box. After a few clicks and a bang, a fan buzzed to life and flickering lights illuminated the first floor.

“God, what is that smell? It’s like a gas leak and something rotting had a baby.” Marcus had paled even further making him appear translucent in the flickering fluorescence.

“Might be something in the ducts, probably a rodent or some other animal,” Garrett suggested as he pulled the door shut to alleviate the wind that had begun to pick up outside. “It was weird, Carl. Building’s got power, but the fuses were flipped off except for a few of the floors.”

The cold of the building congealed the rancid stench that roiled from the ductwork giving the air an acidic bite. The fluorescence in the lights ignited and the illumination spread down the hallway and up the stairwell. The trash and debris extended from the lobby down the hallway. It climbed the walls and had been piled in the corners of the building over the years, but at least now there was visibility in the apartment building.

“We aren’t getting paid to smell the building. Got to find the server room and start debugging the network.” Carl said as Garrett emerged from the office room.

“Why the hell won’t they just wipe the whole server remotely or better yet demolish the building?” Marcus whined.

“Right. I’m going to look upstairs and try to follow this cord. You two go down to the basement and see if the server is down there.” Carl marched up the stairs in an irritated huff, ignoring the pleas of his subordinates.

“Come on, Marc.” Garrett said. “The sooner we start, the sooner we are done. And you can get away from your friend HERE.” Garrett extended both arms and shoved the smaller man hard into the demon.

Marcus stumbled a bit and flailed his arms to gain balance, but went careening over a bottle that was lying on the floor. He let out a yelp, more out of surprise than fear, and bounced his head hard right into the devil’s eye. Garrett was laughing uproariously at the plight of the smaller man.

“How is that even funny, asshat?” Marcus stood up indignantly. Garrett had stopped laughing and looked a bit concerned. “What?”

“Are you alright? I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Garrett seemed genuinely worried.

“What? Yeah. I’m fine, dumbass. But you’re lucky I don’t write you up for assault.” Marcus brushed the dust from his pants.

“You’re bleeding” Garrett said pointing to his own forehead.

“What? No I am not.” Marcus reached up and wiped his hand across his brow. The back of his forearm was crimson. The red stain didn’t feel like blood. It was tacky and smelled like oil.

It was paint.

It was fresh.

The whole painting was fresh.

Looking around the base of the wall in the piles of leaves and trash, Marcus began to notice somethings that didn't look quite as old as the rest. There was a paint brush with red paint trailing from it. He bent over and picked up a can and saw that the label was from last year, 2025.

"CARL?!" Marcus yelled up the stairs, but there was no response. Before he could yell again, a door slammed down the dimly lit corridor that lead towards the basement of the apartment building.

"Come on." Garrett said and shoved Marcus in front of him down the hall in pursuit of the noise.

The two coders ran down the hallway towards a back stairwell. Garrett's mass was gaining momentum and Marcus was helplessly shoved forward in front of the large man. The service stairwell descended into darkness with a musty wet smell emanating from the basement.

"Hit the light on your toolpad." Garrett ordered and Marcus complied shakily.

The stairs only went down one flight and there was not much down in the cellar. There was dirt, a horrendously old boiler system, cardboard boxes in the corner, and two doors. The pipes seemed to pulse as the light from the tablets reflected off frozen moisture.

"Le-let's get out of here, Garrett. We should call the police." Marcus remained on the last step.

“Go check that one. Holler if you see anything.” Garrett gestured at the door under the stairs as he headed to the door on the far side of the room.

“W-what are you going to do?” Marcus looked less than enthused, but Garrett didn’t respond.

Slowly, Garrett reached down to the toolpad, pressed the light off, and reached for the door knob. He could hear a slight shuffling behind the door and a faint light stretched around the frame. He licked his lips in anticipation of a fight with his cornered prey. Slowly, he turned the knob and heard glass shatter. Cursing, Garrett threw the door open.

There was a leg sliding up through a small window and there was broken glass strewn upon the ground. Garrett lunged for the vandal and got a fist full of spandex. He yanked hard and the person on the other end squealed in surprise at the sudden resistance.

“Marcus! Get ov-ooff.” Garrett had bellowed over his shoulder, but was abruptly kicked in the jaw for his efforts. The kick connected with a bruise from the night before and sent him reeling in pain. Another sharp blow landed on his forehead and several of the stitches above his eyebrow ruptured. Slowly, blood began to leak from the wound. Garrett instinctively let go of the flailing legs and the body was up and out of the window in the span of a few seconds.

Garrett tried to follow through the opening, but he was far too large for the window. Garrett stood on tip toes trying to peer down the alley in the direction of his assailant, but couldn’t see anything more than a few trash cans and snow.

“G-Garrett...can you come here?” Marcus called from the other room.

“What do you want? He’s getting away!” Garrett grumbled as he turned on his light and headed over.

“I found this.” Marcus opened the door and shown his light in to the room beyond.

Inside, there was a large row of computer servers that were humming with life. There were low lights that blinked and blipped with activity.

“Hmm...I guess the old man was right. There was a server room after all. These suckers are old as hell though.” Garrett poked his head in and looked at a few of the racks. He picked up a thin black wire that was connected to a small black box. “This is odd. It looks like there is some non-standard equipment hooked into the mainframe.”

“C-come on, Garrett. Let’s go tell Carl and get this purge over.” Marcus was slowly catching his breath as he came down from the adrenaline high.

“Yeah. Fine.” Garret was still upset that he had lost his quarry into the alley. “Come on. Let’s find the old man.”

The two code-jockeys stomped up the stairs and back to the lobby. The front door was dislodged and hanging open again, despite having been closed. Marcus went and pulled it shut, while Garrett looked for Carl.

“HEY CARL!” Garrett bellowed up the stairs. “WE FOUND THE SERVER ROOM!”

No response.

“HEY BOSSMAN? Marcus called up. “WE CAN FINISH THE JOB AND GET OUTTA HERE.”

Still nothing.

“Let’s go find him.” Garrett grunted and began to climb the stairs with Marcus following after.

They reached the second floor and poked their heads into the hallway. The carpet was well-worn here and you could see the paths that the residents had shuffled down to get to their apartments. A little further on in the hallway, they could make out a lump slumped against the wall. The lump was dark and vaguely human-shaped. It was Carl.

“Carl, we found the server room. There was a guy here, I guess it was the one who painted that graffiti, but he got away—Carl?” Carl was just sitting there, not acknowledging anything.

“What’re ya doin?” Marcus knelt down to the level of the older man.

“Followed the cords...” Carl mumbled.

Garrett looked up at the cords popping out of the wall and going into the room. The plaster around this cluster of wires was several shades lighter than the surrounding wall and those downstairs. It must have been a recent addition to the building.

“Well, yeah...but why are you sitting on the ground? Plus, we found the servers downstairs. I dunno what those cords are for.” Garrett looked concerned and wondered if maybe Carl had over-exerted himself and had had a heart attack or some other ailment common amongst men of his age. “You alright? You need an ambulance?”

“Yeah...he could use an ambulance.” Carl had some spit-up on his shirt. It had to have been a stroke.

“He who? What are you talking about?!” Garrett was starting to get annoyed and shook Carl, trying to get him to snap out of his trance.

“The man in there...” Carl slurred in a halting speech.

“Stop it.” Marcus slapped Garrett’s hands off Carl’s cuff. He knelt down and looked in the old man’s flat grey eyes. “What man?”

There was no response from the coder, he just stared. Marcus tried desperately to get his boss back and figure out what the hell was happening. He pulled out water and tried to give it to Carl. Marcus was patient, but Garrett was fed up.

“Fine. I’ll go find out.” Garrett pushed open the door and the acidic smell from earlier blasted him in the face. He nearly gagged, but flipped on the lights and continued into the small apartment.

“Hello?” Garrett called out into the home. As he slowly crept forward, he entered a small kitchen/living room that seemed lived in. There was an espresso maker, a microwave, a flat screen monitor that dominated an entire wall in the living room.

“Anybody there?” Garrett covered his mouth with his sleeve and crossed the garish carpet that must not have been updated in decades.

There was a coffee table with some magazines scattered across its surface, but he was uninterested in those and headed down the hallway, towards what he assumed was the bedroom and the bathroom. Overall, the apartment was livable. Not pristine, but it looked like someone had made this place home.

“We are with the Florentian Company.” Garrett called out to the darkness. “We are doing some routine maintenance.”

Garrett flipped the light switch and the light popped loudly, showering him with sparks and plunging the hallway back into darkness. Darkness, except for the glow of a door frame at the end of the hall. The light didn’t look to be overly bright, so it must have been natural.

Garrett pushed on the door and was met with some resistance. The door was not hanging properly and it dragged on the carpet. He exerted more force and the door swung open into the bedroom.

“Oh-h my God.” was all that Garrett could utter before he gagged on his own bile and added vomit to the medley of bodily fluids.

There was a man lying on the bed. Rather, it used to be a man. The legs had been mangled and the stomach opened to the air old. The skin was flayed open from the lower chest to the waist. Blood soaked the sheets, forming crimson wings around the corpse. On the floor, there was a stain darker than the rest of the blood. It was a pile of intestines that stretched up to the body’s feet and back into the abdominal cavity. Garrett stared for a few seconds at the blood and viscera before his mind registered the images as reality.

Chapter 1: The Scene

“Welcome to my office, Roger. Please have a seat. My name is Dr. Leslie Fitzgerald and I am interested in helping you sort through your experiences. Mr. Florentian and his son are both my clients, I believe you are acquainted with them?”

“Yeah...I’m here because Cael said you could help me sleep again.”

“Ah. Yes, you are friends with the young Mr. Florentian. Well, I am sure our sessions will be able to help you find that peace of mind. Just for my sake, I will be keeping a written and audio record of our session. It will help me to understand what exactly it is that you need and help you. So let’s get started then. Can you tell me why you’re having trouble sleeping, Roger?”

“Sure. Every time I close my eyes the nightmares start.

“Can you describe your nightmares, Roger?”

“It starts with this beat. A beating in my chest. It’s weird. Like the beat is purposely opposite my heart. Then, suddenly, the noise intensifies. I can feel the thudding travel down to my toes and up to my brain. It itches. Like if I don’t move, I am going to explode. So, I start running to keep the beat satisfied. Then, I start to see the killing again.”

“The killing? You are referring to the incident in the Southern Shore last year?”

“Yeah, except...I am the one who’s holding the knife.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Well, Roger, given the trauma that you have experienced, it is quite common to—“

“Hey, Dr. Fitzgerald?”

“Yes? Can you not call me that name anymore? My middle name is fine.”

“Sure, John.”

-- (Coffer Session 1)

Audio Transcript

(07/23/2014)

“It’s too early on a Saturday morning, McNamara. Can’t Gaunt handle this on her own?”
I complained from the back of the squad car that was hurtling down the parkway.

“It’s 9 am. You should have been awake already, John.” responded McNamara in his usual grim deadpan. The man must have thought that sleeping in was a sin paramount to theft.
“Gaunt asked for us personally to check out this crime scene. I think it’s a homicide, but she seemed evasive on the phone.”

“Yeah, but--.” My head was still foggy from the whiskey last night and words were struggling to form. I had only fallen asleep four hours ago, yet made the mistake of answering the apartment door only to be accosted by my partner. Detective Jason McNamara was not one for gentleness when duty called. “It’s our day off.”

“Crime doesn’t take a day off.” McNamara took a hard right off of the Southern Shore exit ramp, causing me to crack my head against the window of the Dodge Charger. Pain blossomed behind my right ear where my cochlear implant had taken the brunt of the blow.

“Fuck. Are you Sam Spade now?” I fumbled with some buttons on my shirt trying to make myself presentable for being in public, but Jason was not making it easy.

“Who?” Jason flipped on the sirens and passed a few trucks that were chugging through the rainy slush that had started falling on our way over to the crime scene.

“You’re hopeless. The Maltese Falcon is a classic.” I sighed in exasperation as the last button refused to go through the hole. The car squealed to a stop in front of a yellow brick building. I would have been much more impressed if Jason had used the snow to power slide into a parking spot.

“Right. Here we are.” Jason flipped the car into park and hopped out. I had to bang on the window to get him to open the door for me since it was child locked. I fell out of the backseat and pulled up the zipper on my pants.

We had reached 3007 South Factory Road in the old Talan Residential Quarter on the Southern Shore of Circadia City. Aside from the other squad cars that were parked outside the old tenement building, the road was relatively lifeless. It was populated by a few civilian cars, a broken-down bus station, and a few shuffling bodies moving through the snow that was rapidly decaying into an icy slush.

In the distance over the roof tops, I could see the looming husk of old Talan Industrial Complex and felt cold in my chest as my brain registered the image. The black broken limbs of

machinery clawed at the steel sky and long-suppressed memories began to stir. I could hear a low beating beginning in the pit of my stomach as my blood began to pump faster.

Disgusted, I bit back the bile that began to creep up the back of my throat. I closed my eyes letting the cold rain roll down my cheeks. Slow, deep gulps of the frigid February air helped to calm the urgency. Slowly, I began counting backward just like Fitzzy had taught me.

“You alright? Gaunt is waiting.” Jason checked his watch, impatiently.

“Shut up.” I mumbled. I got to 87 and I was able to swallow the panic and turned my attention back to the task at hand. I pushed past McNamara and headed up the steps. “Alright, let’s go.”

I pulled on the heavy steel door and some of the flaking paint fell to ground as it squeaked open on the hinges. The foyer was even less impressive than the exterior. There was trash scattered around the entrance, a few mailbox doors hung at odd angles, and the lights flickered occasionally. A large keypad lock was on the floor directly inside and had the Florentian logo etched in its side. This building must have been one that Francesco had slated for renovation. Maybe demolition would be cheaper?

It seemed as if taggers had been through the place, leaving their various calling cards wherever they could reach. A particularly industrious artist had attempted a full portrait of a demon complete with pentagram and saliva spilling from its maw. The eyes were a little lopsided and smeared, which gave the whole mural the appearance of a poorly rendered black metal concert t-shirt. I crossed the threshold when it hit me.

“Gah! What is that smell?!” I buried my nose into my coat to try to filter the acidic rot that was floating through the air.

“Death.” McNamara replied from behind me in his grave basso.

“Ya know that you’re a walking cliché, right?” I mumbled through my sleeve, still not awake enough to tolerate McNamara – but he was right.

“Detective Coffe! Detective McNamara! Will you two quit dawdling and get up here?” The woman at the top of the first flight of stairs was wearing a CCPD jacket and glared at the two of us.

“—’Sup, Gaunt.” I called up as the stairs creaked under our weight as we ascended the steps.

“As always, Coffe, it is Detective Gaunt.” Detective Sarah Gaunt corrected. “And it is about time the two of you made it here. I called you nearly 45 minutes ago.”

“Well, I was sleeping and Jason would only drive 90 on the parkway.” I quipped as the woman stared at me, green eyes flickering with annoyance. “Besides, what is the rush, boss? A dead body is going to stay dead. It looks like y’all have the scene isolated?” I could see that a police line had been erected around an apartment.

“Yes. That may be true. Yet, I find the overwhelming desire to do my job in a timely, efficient, and superior manner. Naturally, I expect my subordinates to perform likewise.” She countered tersely. Gaunt was not in the mood. This body must be have been really awful.

“Fair. What’s the low-down?” The smell was growing as we got closer to the apartment. Tracks of dirt and dust created a stripe down the riotous carpet that seemed to be from the 90s. The hallway was worn with use and neglect. A dangerous combination for the longevity of anything.

“Well, without forensics, we know that the victim is Devon Patel. Gary found an old wallet with an outdated Florentian employment badge.” Gaunt continued as we walked down the hallway. “But other than that, no cell phone. The trouble is that the name is not in our database and cursory searches turned up no information on the name. We reached out to the Florentian Company, but haven’t heard back yet. He seems to be a ghost.”

“Odd. Any clues to the motive of the killing? A hate crime?” Jason piped up from the rear.

“Not ruling it out, but the methodology is far more complicated than a simple killing. Gary thinks that the body has been in its current state for 4-6 hours prior to discovery.” Gaunt explained. Well, that means that the body was fresh. The forensic guys should be able to get some more data with an autopsy.

“How was it discovered?” I asked, wondering how a body would be discovered in this derelict, crap-heap of a building.

“Code-Jockeys. They were scouting out infrastructure and assets for the Florentian Company,” Gaunt responded as she crossed the police tape and headed into the apartment. “This building was purchased last year when Florentian was buying up abandoned real estate.”

“In the Southern Shore? This isn’t exactly the best place for investment.” Jason remarked as he pulled a large paint flake off the molding around the apartment’s entrance. “Not much industry and not exactly the friendliest of neighborhoods.”

“Wait. I thought this building was abandoned?” I asked as I ducked under the yellow police tape.

“It was abandoned, until the Florentian Company bought it. The victim was a squatter living here. Probably broke in and staked a claim.” Gaunt reported.

“Is that all I need to know?” I asked with a detached air that must have come across as callous.

“The body was a man and he was butchered, Coffer.” Gaunt said with venom. “Last information of note, so listen up. There were no signs of a struggle and no murder weapon, yet. Although, it is safe to assume it was a blade.”

Our trio entered into a combined kitchen/living room. There was another hallway that extended to what must have been where the bathroom and the bedroom were located. The tell-tale signs of age and use were present.

The appliances and furniture were mismatched and looked like they belonged in a thrift store. The couch was fraying and had cigarette burns in the upholstery and an armchair lay sprawled open in the far corner. The most modern piece of equipment was the Florentian Media-Jack hooked up to a huge monitor. That set-up alone was a couple thousand dollars, which indicated the owner wasn’t hurting for money.

“There’s no sign of ransacking, so I guess that could rule out a robbery.” I noted absentmindedly as I walked around the room, inspecting it.

“The body is down the hall, Coffer.” Gaunt crossed her arms impatiently.

“I need to get a sense of the person was before I can see how he fits into the murderer’s pattern.” I said as I looked around the small living space. Despite the yellowed walls and godawful carpet pattern from the 90s, the floor seemed like it was a livable apartment.

The Media-Jack sat against the far wall and there was a crime scene technician hooked into it with his tablet. The computer had been released this past November with the intentions of cornering the market on cyberstructure technology. Supposedly, it integrated every aspect of the owner's life and developed algorithms accordingly to accommodate and anticipate the owner's needs. Judging from the images that were flitting across the screen, it had the newest software suite. I was immediately jealous because I was never allowed to have one of those as a kid, despite being friends with the inventor's son.

"Any cool games on there, Gary?" I asked the bespectacled man that crouched over the console. Gary was one of our crime scene technicians. It was Gary's job to organize, collect, and label the evidence found in the crime scene. He specialized in digital forensics, but due to budget cuts, had picked up some other skills by necessity.

"Nothing of note, Coffer." Gary looked up from his fiddling. "It looks like our guy was just using the thing for storage and data hacking. I am having trouble getting anything out of the device with just my toolpad, but it appears as if our body was a Tick. There are a bunch of malware programs and data harvesting software that are being used heavily, but I am gonna need my lab to crack the rest of the coding open."

"A console of that power used for data harvesting? Such a shame. I heard the new *Iron Desert* was a pretty sweet RPG." I pulled on my gloves and began to poke around the coffee table. "That is weird. *Wired*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Vanity Fair*... I haven't seen print magazines in, like five years."

"Check the dates on them, John." Gaunt piped up from the kitchen where she stood awaiting me to finish my appraisal of the scene.

“Looks to be from March about 13 years ago.” I pushed them aside to reveal a layer of plaster dust on the coffee table that was absent on the magazines. “They were placed here.”

“Exactly what I thought.” Gaunt confirmed with what almost sounded like praise. I could see Jason squirm awkwardly in my periphery. The stench was getting quite brutal if it was penetrating Jason’s unflappable persona.

“You said there weren’t any signs of struggle. The door was intact and so were the windows. “Think it was a drug overdose? Or a crime of passion?” Jason asked as he poked his head out of the coat closet. He was still fixated on motive, which was odd given his usual need of physical evidence to solve a crime. Mimicking my approach wouldn’t work out for him. Jason lacked perspective.

“Definitely not a drug overdose.” Gaunt seemed uncomfortable and I suspected that it was more than the smell that was bothering her. “It was a murder and it was methodical.”

“Ok. Here is the million dollar question: ‘Why the hell did you call us?’” I was still upset about coming in on my day off, especially since I had my appointment later today.

“I needed your unique *insight* for this case.” Gaunt’s face turned to granite and I sobered up real quick. I had studied serial criminals a great deal in undergraduate and seen many investigations first hand. Not always serial killers, but habitual criminals and their patterns.

“Ah. You think it’s serial?” I asked, my initial examinations had helped jog the exhaustion, but Gaunt’s implication brought everything into crystalline focus. “Were there any other bodies found?”

“Unclear if the perp had other victims at this point. Take a look at the body. It’s that way.” She gestured down the hall, but made no attempt to lead me to the scene. “Jason, the witnesses are across the hall. You and I can speak to them while John does his thing.”

Jason looked uneasy with leaving me alone with body, but I walked past him into the darkness and felt along the wall for a light switch. I flicked it twice with no result and accepted that the light had burned out. I could still see, but it wasn’t ideal. There was light eking out from around the door frame and I reached for the handle.

I tried to open the door and it dragged on the carpet offering some resistance. Putting my shoulder down, I forced it open and was hit full on with the smell of decay and a putrid mixture of fecal matter, blood, and other fluids. I could taste the bile rising again and gagged as I realized what I was looking at used to be a man.

Using my sleeve as a filter, I fumbled in my coat pockets and pulled out a mint to calm my stomach. It wasn’t enough, so I went over to the window and opened it to allow some air to circulate. The window was already unlocked and slid up with little resistance. I stuck my head out over the fire escape and took a deep breath of cold air. After a few, I was in a state where I could focus on the task at hand.

I had seen a lot of bodies since I began working as a detective. Bodies that had ranged from drug overdoses, vicious beatings, waterlogged drownings, and even executions. Each had their own pattern and rhythm, even if they were basic in motive and implementation. However, those cases were flat and lacked the intricacies that truly challenged my abilities.

I dug in my pockets and pulled out an MP3 player, a red one with a single headphone. I put the headphone into my left ear and pressed play. Soon the sounds of Beethoven’s Fifth

Symphony flooded my head. The rises and falls of the lilting violins and the emphatic crescendos of the orchestra overpowered the sounds from the street, but there was still a static in my mind. The music cascaded from my ears down my spine calming the nausea and the nerves.

Gaunt called us in on our day off because there are the rare killings that are done with an intricate pattern. Killings that are perpetrated with a purpose that have different rhythm than the crimes of passion. These were the killings that I had studied for years and been quite successful in solving, especially when in the right mindset.

I slid the red player into my coat pocket and removed another one from my pants. This other player was older than the red one and had scratches worn into its aluminum shell from hard use. No head phone was attached to this player, but instead it had an AV cord that I took and plugged directly in to the cochlear implant above my right ear. Sighing, I set a timer on it for ten minutes, closed my eyes, and pressed play.

A beat began low and primal, barely audible in comparison with the classical music. The steady, percussive rhythm beat counter to the delicate structures of the symphony playing in the left ear. The tempo grew more fervent, it didn't flow over me like Beethoven. Rather, the deep thumping blossomed within my chest and awoke a part of my psyche that I had inherited from my father.

I opened my eyes to a riot of crimson. There was a sweeter tang in the air that drew me towards the center of the space. The room, which at first had been threadbare -- just a bed, a night table, chest of drawers, and a body -- had changed. The scene was now an intricate display of interlocking patterns that hummed with meaning waiting to be uncovered.

There were piles of clothes and empty food containers that were shoved into the corners of the room leaving the floor at the center cleared. I was uninterested in them for the moment because the piles was not part of the pattern. They just created negative space that framed the activity on the killer's altar.

The bed had been pulled from the wall and placed at the center of the spectacle. I skirted the larger stains on the floor that looked to be vomit and urine, moving closer to the man lying on the bed. The upper torso was only half completed, judging from the ragged rips of skin.

The legs had been handled with brutal efficiency with each abnormal bend creating a visceral symmetry. A symmetry that seemed all too familiar. The killer had to have been a person of some strength or had prepared tools to bend the legs at such an angle.

The stomach was opened with several clean slices and the intestines removed for more materials for their grotesque art project. Again, symmetry and balance to the body using the organs to create a message. The killer had expected this body to be seen. But why? What was the message?

At the bottom, of the gruesome exhibition were the discarded materials. The floor had soaked up the fluids in a ragged patch surrounding the pile. Why had they not been removed? It ruined the picture and seemed placed as an afterthought to the scene. The killer had been basing their work on a symmetry, but it was either ruined by this haste or there was something I was missing.

This outlier clouded my interpretation, so I moved back up the body. The victim's facial muscles were relaxed in a placid death mask. No signs of pain in its features, only the tight muscles of a jaw locked in rigor mortis. The eyes, though, were otherworldly. They were a mess

of ocular fluid. What was the reasoning for the eyes? They were generally a portal to the soul. Suddenly, a realization dawned on me – I had seen eyes like this before, when I was much younger. It couldn't be *that* pattern – could it?

As I moved, the light reflected off the glassy lenses and gave a facsimile of life behind the horror. The reflection flickered with each step that I took. It drew me in like a moth to the flame, the primal percussion in my heart quickening as the inches between me and the corpse diminished. Anticipation. A cold sweat formed on the nape of my neck and I shakily reached a gloved hand towards the face – a darkness began closing my field of vision into a sanguine tunnel focused only on the man's mouth.

The door slammed open and the MP3's alarm rattled through my skull just before I could part the teeth of the body. I jumped back, yelping in surprise and pain. The sudden movement ripped the AV cord hard from my implant, silencing the alarm, and the little black box dangled from the side of the bed, its wire caught on the headboard of the bed.

"Judas Fucking Priest!" I exclaimed as my heart slammed in my chest, rocketed to a hum by the sudden burst of adrenaline.

"Sorry. Door was stuck." Jason replied as he helped me off a pile of pizza boxes that had broken my fall. "I finished with the witnesses for now. They were pretty tired, but cooperative. We may have a lead on a suspect. Apparently, two of them chased a perp out of the building before they discovered the body."

"The wha—" Reality settled back in on my senses and I remembered where I was and what exactly was going on. Waking up from the primal state I was in was like coming out of a stupor after a weeklong binge, being ripped out of it was exponentially worse.

The odor of death flooded back into my nostrils and a wave of nausea hit my stomach as I panted. This nausea lined the pit of self-loathing that was forming as the vile nature of my examinations dawned on me. Alcohol would have to kill that feeling tonight.

“You alright? You’re practically translucent.” Jason looked concerned.

“I’m fine. Where is Gaunt?” I unsteadily made my way to the window and climbed out onto the fire escape where I greedily inhaled the cold air. The rain was picking up and the frigid ozone helped to calm my nerves.

“Getting the final information from witnesses and briefing the forensic crew that is going to collect samples for the lab. You sure you’re alright? You look like you have been on one of your film binges again.” I must have looked really awful for Jason to be that worried about me, instead of telling me to ‘suck it up and deal with it’.

“I said I’m *fine*.” I looked down the fire escape at the piles of snow that were being dissolved in the alley below.

“Well, what did you find from this mess?” Jason was walking around the body examining some bits of the clutter in the far corner of the room.

“It was a ritual.” I said absentmindedly. A tiny black rectangle stood out starkly against the white slush. It had caught my eye in the snow of the alley and I made a mental note of it.

“I can see that, but were there any particulates? Any clues to the perpetrator? The coders said that the power was shut off when they got here, so any cameras on the premises would have been dead.” Jason needed the hard evidence. The footage or a DNA match. He had trouble

extrapolating motive and identity from the patterns of a crime scene; but then again, —there were very few who could do what I did.

“I got some ideas. A really good one in fact. I think I’ve seen this pattern before.” I closed the window and turned around.

“Really, where the hell did you see it before?” Jason seemed flabbergasted that anything like this scene could have existed before today.

“Can you pry open the jaw?” I asked, ignoring the question.

“What?” Jason hesitated at a request to disturb the crime scene before the forensics had catalogued everything.

“Just do it!” I was growing impatient, even though I knew exactly what Jason would find in there. I lowered my voice, meeting Jason’s wary gaze. “Trust me.”

He grunted his compliance, slid on his gloves, and carefully began to pry the grimace apart. The jaw was strong and even Jason’s bulk struggled with the rigor mortis.

“I got something. Can you get me some tweezers from Gary?” Jason called over his shoulder.

This was all a formality, I knew what was inside the mouth. The rest of the body hinted at what I already knew. All the same, I complied with the request and got the tools for Jason. He needed to see it for himself.

“It’s an insect.” Jason reported after he had finally dislodged the bug from the mouth.

“Not just any insect. It’s a cicada.” I didn’t even have to look. I just stared into the middle distance at the peeling paint of the bedroom.

“How did you know that? How did you know that it would be there?” Jason asked incredulously.

“Because that is where my father used to put them.”

Chapter 2: The Chase

“Can you tell me why you have a black eye, John?”

“Got into a fight, Fitzy.”

“Obviously. No need to be obstinate. You know that I was referring to the reason why you were fighting. Care to explain?”

“My roommate found out who my dad was. He plastered the dorm room with newspaper clippings. He thought it would be funny, I guess.”

“Did you explain to him that it is traumatic for you?”

“Didn’t have time. He called me by my dad’s name and I lost it.”

“Anything involving your father seems to trigger your baser emotions. You must control them or they will control you.”

“I’ve tried, but it doesn’t work.”

“Here, let me show you a simple technique...”

-- (Coffer Session 22)

Audio Transcript

(07/23/2015)

“Your father did this?” Confusion flushed Jason’s face as he tried to reconcile the idea of anyone’s father with the brutality of ritualistic murder. I recognized the look. It was the same look that my sister had had when she heard the charges over a decade ago.

“No. At least, I don’t think so.” Everything pointed to my father’s handiwork. The body was arranged just as his victims had been. There was even the same calling card. Sure, a few details were different. The body was above ground and there was a sloppiness to this scene, but all the hallmarks were there. Yet, it still didn’t fit with the reality of the situation.

My father had been locked up for nearly 13 years now, rotting in a maximum security facility. Admittedly, I hadn’t seen him since the trial. But, I had testified against him. I had seen them lock the chains around his ankles and heard the judges sentencing to him life without parole. He couldn’t be out. He just couldn’t. Fear and anger began roiling in my body.

“You’re going to have to give me a bit more than that, John.” Jason bagged the cicada, lay the tweezers on the bed, and picked up my black MP3 player that was dangling from the bedpost. He turned it over, examining the trace marks of age.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I snatched the device from Jason and headed back to the living room. McNamara had mentioned witnesses and I was eager to learn what they knew. If this was a copycat, we were already late. I wouldn’t let this evil back into my city—the evil that had torn so many apart.

Gary stood in a circle of crime scene techs and was debriefing them on the particulars of the canvassing and cataloguing the evidence. They would need to photograph and collect samples of everything. It would be quite some time before they would be done with the apartment.

“Gary, I am done in the room. Your guys can have at it. How soon can I expect a toxicology and autopsy report?” I was well aware of Jason towering behind me, fuming silently at the short shrift.

“Depends on how nice the guys at the morgue are feeling. The autopsy should be done in a few hours. After we get the body ready for transport, that is. Maybe the preliminary report by Monday at the earliest? Toxicology and other screenings could take weeks.” Gary responded dully over his clip board.

“Can I get the preliminary tomorrow? I got a feeling this thing could snow-ball real quickly.” Adrenaline pumped through my veins, working me into a frenzy. If this killing was a copy-cat of my father’s murders then there would be other bodies and soon.

“You willing to explain to my wife why I am not coming home for our anniversary?” Gary must have sensed my desperation and he feigned annoyance.

“Don’t bullshit me. Since when do people have a second anniversary in a year?” He had already used that excuse with me back in October. I had worked nights for a week straight so that he could ‘save his marriage’.

“Oh damn. Did I use that one already? Well, regardless, I don’t feel like catching hell from her by not being home.” Gary responded in monotone and went back to his clipboard.

“Tell her that you are taking her to a private screening at the Peckett. Any movie you want, if you get me the initial findings by midnight tonight.” I countered. Bargaining for expedited work was a dance that I had learned long ago.

“I will get it to you Sunday by noon and I want you to provide the popcorn and soda too. That shit is expensive.” Gary and I shook on our bargain. He returned to his crew and I left the apartment to find Gaunt.

“Hold up! John, you got to tell what you’re planning. I am your partner and need to know what the Hell is going on.” Jason was clearly uncomfortable being led about by his nose, and I couldn’t really blame him after the bombshell I dropped on him.

“Listen, I will explain in the car. Just let me tie things up here and I will tell you everything that you need to know.” I tried to sound as patient as I possibly could, but adrenaline caused my voice to have a sharp edge to it.

He looked at me, worried and annoyed. Yet, Jason grunted in affirmation and stalked off down the stairs to wait in the car. I was going to have to bribe him with several good cigars to be forgiven after all this was over.

Quickly, I opened the door across the hall to where the witnesses were being held. Inside was Gaunt, a beat cop, and three men who must have been the coders that Jason had referenced earlier. They looked surprised to see me rush in without a knock.

This apartment looked more like it belonged in an abandoned building. Chunks of plaster had fallen in portions of the room and there was a large water stain in the far corner of the ceiling. The whole place was empty except for a broken coffee table and some boxes that had been converted into makeshift seats for the men. The three of them were seated on these boxes and looked incredibly haggard. The oldest coder looked as if he could use a nap or at the very least, a stiff drink. His head hung down staring listlessly at a stain that was running down the front of his shirt. He seemed generally unresponsive to most of what was happening in the room.

The second coder was a young blonde man who furtively glanced from the officer to Gaunt. His eyes were wide and seemed like a puppy hoping for a treat, not knowing from where it would come. He kept trying to speak, but the last man kept talking over him.

The last coder looked like a thug and emanated menace, unafraid of the officers. He had deep bruising on his left cheek and dried blood on the corner his forehead. The man was far more animated than his colleagues and was yelling at Gaunt.

“Why are we being interrogated!? You all should be going after that guy that kicked me in the face. He probably killed that guy! Where is my lawyer?! When are we getting out of here! Why haven’t you called an ambulance for Carl!” the bruised man yelled at Gaunt, but she just stared through the outrage and responded with the tact of a seasoned detective who had dealt with countless difficult civilians.

“As I said before, Mr. McMullen: you are *not* under arrest and Mr. Jackson has declined the services of an ambulance which is his right. After we finish taking your statements, then you will be free to go. You will be free, provided that you do not leave the city while the investigation is ongoing.” Gaunt kept a level tone with the coder, but glared at me as I barged into the room. “Detective Coffer, have you finished your initial analysis of the scene?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I said and turned to the bruised coder. “What is this about you getting kicked in the face, Mr. --”

“It’s Garrett. Yeah, we was just doin’ some routine line work, minding our own business. Here, turns out that some tagger was in Florentian’s property. So Marcus and I chased him out, didn’t know what he had done up here. He’s the one that y’all should be after! You’re wasting time while that monster is on the loose.” The man tried to stand up, but I moved closer causing him to become off-balanced and slump back down onto the box.

“Oh my, Mr. Garrett. You really do want to be booked don’t you? I can promise you I have no life and would be more than willing to spend the day filling out paperwork. I am not as

patient as Detective Gaunt, here. Learn to speak civilly to an officer or I will teach you. How did this tagger get out of the building?” I pulled another box over and sat level with the man, staring directly into his swollen face.

“I already told them.” Garrett responded sullenly, turning his head and breaking my gaze.

“Tell *me*.” I smiled sweetly at the hot-head with just the slightest hint of violence. Gaunt apparently had had enough with my line of question and decided to intercede.

“Would you excuse us for one moment, gentlemen? Detective Coffey, a word?” Sarah Gaunt came between the two of us and gestured towards the hallway. I complied and she stalked after me, slamming the door behind the two of us.

“What the hell, Coffey? I have the situation under control and you are just pissing people off. I know that you have a certain unprofessionalism about you, but I will *not* have you flying off the handle and undermining my work.” Gaunt glared daggers and I glared right back. Urgency was the highest priority and there was no time to play nice with a bunch of blue collar coders. Gaunt may be my superior, but she lacked perspective – just like Jason.

“It’s just like his pattern, Gaunt. If this is a copycat killer, then we have maybe 72 hours before the next body turns up.” There was an edge of fear in my voice that I couldn’t suppress, so I rode that adrenaline into anger. “You, more than anyone, should know what these murders mean. You were in the CCPD for the first batch of killings!”

“A copycat of your father?” Gaunt nodded solemnly, pondering over just what that implied. Detective Gaunt had been just a beat cop at the time, but she was one of the first to arrive on the scene. She had seen the mess first hand. “Regardless, that doesn’t give you the

excuse to bash the investigation to pieces because it's personal for you. Go home and calm down. You're done for the day. It is clear you are too close to see objectively."

"WHAT!? You call me in on my day off, specifically to get me to read the scene. Now you're not letting me work the case?!" I erupted. This act was beyond unconscionable. This killing was my father's handiwork, regardless if he committed the murder or not. There was no way I was going to sit this case out on the sideline.

"I called you in because of your expertise. I called you in because of your insight. I called you in because I *thought* you could be objective." Gaunt continued.

"That's bullshit, you knew what you were doing when you called me in." I fumed. The doors to the apartments were shut, but that did nothing for the noise. I simply didn't care who heard.

"DETECTIVE COFFER. I will not be talked to in such an unprofessional manner. You will do as you are instructed to do. You will write your report. You will review evidence for the case, but you are done with the actual investigation. I will not jeopardize the case because you cannot control your emotions. Go home. Calm down. Enjoy your weekend off and let us handle the rest of the investigation." There was reason to her assessment, she had trusted in my professionalism and I had let her down.

"But –" I started.

"Thank you for your insight, Detective Coffey. I will see you and Detective McNamara in the bullpen on Monday." She turned and went back into the witnesses, closing the door behind her.

Anger, shame, and confusion froze me in place as I tried to process the emotional yo-yo of a day. I was forced awake, dragged across town, saw a copycat of my father, and got dressed down by my superior officer. That was a lot to process this early in the morning. It took me a bit, but I finally got moving again.

The stairs took a beating as I descended, nearly buckling with each stomp. The poor beat cop at the bottom of the stairs looked up at the commotion, but one glare from me and she quickly busied herself with some of the mailboxes until I slammed the front door. Was it the most dignified thing that I could have done? No. Did it feel good? You bet it did.

Outside, the car was idling in the street and McNamara was behind the driver's seat. Rain was falling in fits and bursts from the leaden sky. Walking around the car, I opened the door to the passenger side of the squad car and slammed it behind me.

"Everything alright? What does Gaunt want us to do?" McNamara gave me a side long glance.

"Fine. Gaunt said she'll wrap things up here and will see us Monday." I propped my feet up on the dashboard and watched the snow dissolve into water droplets that raced down the grey plastic of the glove compartment.

"You wanna talk about it?" McNamara turned off the car and tendrils of fog radiated upward, obscuring the street from view. The cold from outside probed through the metal now that the forced air had stopped.

"Just take me home." I was tired of people today and was ready to get back to my movie theater. I was even contemplating skipping my monthly session with Fitzzy today.

“Sure. As soon as you tell me how all of this is connected to your father.” Jason removed the keys from the ignition, emphasizing his commitment, and waited.

“You want to do this now? Can’t I tell you while we’re driving?” I snapped. Couldn’t he see that obviously, I was in no mood to talk? Ill intent emanated from my body and I crossed my arms in clear refusal.

“Nope, you’ll weasel out of it just like you did when I asked you if your landlord was single. Or when I tried to ask you how your mother was doing. I know you, Coffer. I might not speak as fast as you, but I’m not dumb.” Jason rationalized. He was right. I was hoping to ignore, change the subject, and avoid open discussion at all costs. “You don’t talk much about things that pertain to your life and that’s fine, but now your professional is intersecting with your personal and you need to talk.”

“Yeah? Well, I was just saving you the heartbreak because my landlord is insane.” It would have been absolutely tragic if the two of them had dated, especially if it gave Jason more of a reason to invade my personal sanctuary at the Peckett Theater.

“Apparently, so was your father.” Jason countered, refusing to be deterred.

“Touché,” I conceded. Jason did have some brains behind the brawn. “I am not going to give you a play-by-play of everything. You’re getting the abridged edition.”

“That’s fine. Can’t expect you to be completely forthcoming, can I? Just give me enough to help.” Jason turned the engine back on to let the car fill up with heat again.

Warm air rumbled through the vents creating a white noise by mixing with the patter of heavy rain drops that hit the windshield. It was made all the louder by the hush that stretched

between us. Silently, the battle between clarity and obscurity was waged. At first the fog resisted the encroachment of the heat, but it began to recede and the glass defrosted revealing the street once more.

“It was almost 13 years ago that my father was caught. I’m sure you heard of the Southern Shore Sadist?” I began. This was not how I envisioned my Saturday going. Hell, I never thought I would have to talk about any of this again outside of a courtroom.

“Yeah. It was the biggest news to hit Circadia City since, well...since ever. Seven bodies in three weeks. No clear pattern of selection, just the same configuration of the corpses. A family man who lost it during the recession and went on a murder spree.” Jason spouted off the basic facts that were plastered across every media outlet during the initial case.

“Well, that was dear old daddy. I was about 17 at the time and was out partying with my friend. We got drunk and broke into the Talan Waterfront Complex because he wanted to show me his father’s real estate project. It was fine. The typical stupid stuff that all teenagers did. Throwing rocks at windows and being where we weren’t supposed to be. We were about to leave, but then I saw my dad’s car parked behind one of the buildings.” My gaze had glazed over as I remembered that night when Cael and I discovered what my father truly was.

The night came flooding back. We had begun with a celebration of our upcoming graduation. However, by midnight, the party had shifted from a casual celebration of our graduation and had become another one of Cael’s famous Florentian binges.

We had been climbing over fences and exploring empty lots in the Southern Shore because it was off limits to a bunch of Northern Shore brats. I still remembered the bent husk of an old flood light that had fallen to either the weather or to other hoodlums. I still remembered

that the glass reflected viciously in the moonlight with the promise of tetanus and injury should someone fall on them, but more than anything – I remembered the wind that night.

The wind was whipping through the abandoned lot carrying the smell of oil and rust that burned my nostrils. It had mixed with the earthy smells of spring mud off the river banks and gained a weight to it. Each inhalation of air that I took was like having a nose bleed, but we kept running. Running and hooting around the factory. At least, until we saw my dad's car.

“He wasn't supposed to be in town. He said there was conference of some sort that he needed to attend, so, it was weird to see his car. I got worried. So, we investigated. We investigated...and we found him. In the basement of the factory, cutting apart a woman.” The words flowed out of my mouth in chunky segments rather than fluid sentences as I parsed my memories for human consumption.

The woman still stared at me in my dreams, when I had them. Her body still lay in that pit in the basement of the factory. It had been bisected from groin to gut. Just like the body upstairs, there were ropes of intestines splayed out around the corpse in a wing like pattern and the skin was sloughed in sections from the abdomen. The legs were bent at odd angles and the face...

It was autopilot. I hadn't talked about this stuff with anyone outside of therapy sessions for nearly a decade. Yet, it poured out from the dam punctured by today's discovery. Jason just sat in stunned silence, staring out onto the road as I dumped the details of that night onto him.

“Holy Shit.” Jason exhaled, breaking the quiet.

“Yeah. It broke my mother and drove my sister out of town. See why I didn't want to talk about it?” I stopped there with my story. My mother's current state in her assisted living facility

was another facet of the whole ordeal that didn't need to be unearthed. It was more than enough information to satisfy McNamara and rationalize my actions to him.

"Yeah, but how did you know about the insect?" Jason inquired.

"It was only in the mouth of three of the victims. The lady we saw didn't, but I think that was just because we interrupted him." I reflected. "Rhythms and patterns. Rhythms and patterns were all he was talking about when we interrupted him. The bug probably had something to do with it."

"Psychopaths do things that normal people don't understand. Their drives are alien to us. We just have to stop them. One last question." Jason pointed to his ear referencing my hearing aid. "So, what is that little black box for? The one you plug into your implant?"

"It helps me – focus when I am at a crime scene. Hey, do you see that?" I pointed to a thin figure in a large grey coat slowly walking down the street. The figure's head was furtively scanning the sidewalk, clearly looking for something. As they approached, I saw that the person's face was covered with a grey scarf. The person paused next to the alleyway, looked around the street, and proceeded to walk down it.

"I see them. Suspicious?" Jason asked.

"Very." I unbuckled my seatbelt.

"Investigate?" Jason turned the car off.

"You bet." I pushed the memories back down and put on my cop-face.

The alleyway was about 50 yards long and the person in question was crouched around some trash cans nearly halfway down it. Then there was the fire escape, which was a little further

beyond. Finally, the corridor ended in a bit of fencing, closing off the far end. The person was shuffling through the snow and trash near one of the basement windows, throwing it frantically behind them. We were in luck, though. It seemed as if they hadn't noticed us yet, so we could still sneak up on them and see what this was all about.

"CCPD!" Jason shouted reaching for his badge. "We would like to ask you some questions!"

The suspect's head popped up like a rabbit sensing a predator. There was a stillness for half a millisecond and I could make out long tendrils of black hair pressed forward from by the hood they had pulled tightly about their head. The suspect stared at us, processing what was being yelled at them. Then, the figure bolted.

"You dumbass!" I cursed at Jason, but he was already off like a shot. Pounding the pavement with his heavy strides, Jason was covering the distance a lot faster than I could. The rain and snow deteriorated my already poor athletic skills to near-comedic levels. I skittered and slid across the icy asphalt, flailing my way after the other two.

I was falling behind the chase and tried to push myself a bit faster, pumping my legs and stretching them as far as I could in an effort to keep up with my partner. It worked for nearly five steps before I lost my footing. There was a moment when I was completely horizontal to the ground. I stared up at the fire escape, wondering when the pain would come. I had my answer as the moment passed and my world inverted into stars.

Chapter 3: The Lead

“Ma’am, I would like to file a formal complaint.”

“What is it now, Detective McNamara? This complaint will be the fifth you have filed this year.”

“Detective Coffey’s actions are highly irregular and non-conducive to professional police work.”

“I asked ‘what it is *now*?’ I am going to speak frankly with you, Jason.”

“Ma’am?”

“You have noted every infraction and flaw you find with Detective Coffey. As your commanding officer, I will log and address every complaint you may have. However, I need to ask you, is all of this necessary? Or do you just not like the man?”

“I am not sure I understand what you are asking.”

“Coffey has been unorthodox since he joined the police force nearly seven years ago. You have been his partner for two of those years and in that time you have catalogued and reported every bit of paperwork he has misfiled...every word he has spoken to a witness...even the clothes he has worn. Everything. What is it that you hope to accomplish with all of this?”

“I am just doing my job, ma’am. I just want to do the right thing.”

“Listen, John has been instrumental in solving the past 10 major cases that the CCPD has had come across our desks. He is an ass, but he is also very good at keeping these streets safe.”

“But, does that justify the breach in procedure?”

"McNamara, has John done anything unethical?"

"No-"

"Anything that will jeopardize a case?"

"No, but-"

"Then your complaint has been noted and it will be addressed with the proper disciplinary action. You may leave now, Detective McNamara."

"Yes ma'am."

"Oh and Jason?"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Perhaps you should try to get to know Detective Coffey rather than just tolerating him during working hours? It may help you understand some of his actions. Ask him how his mother is doing or something?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That will be all."

"Yes, ma'am."

McNamara Formal Complaint

RE: Coffey and Hildsbrow Case

Filed: 08/15/2022

The sky was a kaleidoscope of swirling greys and blurs of dull, pastel blobs. Pain was blossoming through the back of my skull, but I could feel the freezing daggers of the rain falling on my face. Well, at least I wasn't dead. Then a voice cut through the daze, bringing me back to reality.

"Wake up, Coffey. Coffey. Detective Coffey, are you alright?" Gaunt crouched over me and I could see McNamara behind her talking to some of the other officers who were smirking at me. I wished I was dead.

"Did we get 'em?" I groaned as I tried to sit up on the icy slush.

"No, the suspect jumped the fence and must have ducked into one of the buildings while I was trying to get over." Jason reported.

"Damn." My head was swimming, there was a lump under my right butt cheek that would probably bruise, and my left arm hurt as I put pressure on my palm. "I thought you were faster than that?"

"I thought I told you to go home, Coffey. You have any cuts? It looks like there is glass in the snow from that window by your head." Gaunt asked. She leaned over and peered inside the small opening. "This must have been the window that the vandal escaped through."

"Naw. No cuts. My head hurts though and things are a little cloudy. I don't remember you saying anything about leaving." I smiled weakly as my senses slowly came back to me. I checked myself over from the ground and didn't see any bleeding, just felt a lot of bruises.

"Funny. Well, I am glad to see your sense of humor survived your fall. Now that the two of you have chased away a potential suspect, it's time for you both to head home. It will take the

rest of the day to scour the crime scene and I don't want you two mucking about anymore. Gary's crew can take it from here and I will pull some other detectives to handle this investigation." Gaunt mused to herself. "Maybe Ramirez and Kittredge are ready for something like this?"

"What?! Why are yo—" Jason sputtered, but I cut him off.

"You're right, Gaunt. We'll get out of here...I need some ibuprofen." I extended a hand to Jason and cupped my right leg, pulling it into a standing position.

"Hmm...you sure you're feeling alright?" Gaunt seemed wary of my sudden compliance.

"Yeah, I just need a nap." I shook the slush from myself, which was big mistake. The sudden movement just aggravated the pain in my skull and caused more stars to spin. I quickly put my right hand in my pocket and grabbed Jason's shoulder for support.

"Jason, can you get him home? I will brief you both on our findings on Monday and give you both your new assignments. Enjoy the rest of your weekend." Gaunt watched as the two of us hobbled out of the alley towards the squad car. Well, I hobbled and Jason stabilized me. The car doors slammed and the tires squealed as we sped away from the crime scene. We drove in silence as Jason stewed over the captain's dismissal of us.

"What the hell got into the Captain? Why would she take us off the case after bringing us in on this mess?" Jason fumed after we had made it back to the highway, finally breaking the tension.

To my knowledge, Jason had always finished what he had started. One time, Gaunt had put him on a cold case and I bet him that the case wouldn't ever be solved. The man spent three

weeks' worth of free time staking out suspects and continuously reexamining the crime scene. Even Gaunt had eventually told him that he could drop the case, but Jason kept going. I felt bad and decided to help him.

Jason wasn't satisfied until we had something tangible to go on. I found the murder weapon lodged in the ventilation duct at the crime scene, but it wasn't easy. We very nearly missed the entire NBA playoffs by spending all that time digging around in slum buildings. To top it all off, I lost \$50 bucks to him. Technically, the case was solved.

Being removed from this case, especially just as it got started, must have sat like an ulcer in his gut. I'm not sure if it was his pride or obsessive compulsive disorder, but Jason completed every task that was assigned to him.

"It's probably because we had a misunderstanding upstairs." I explained nonchalantly to Jason as I watched the skyline of Circadia blur by the window. "Gaunt thought that we should sit this one out, or something."

"Or something? Out with it." Jason raised an eyebrow skeptically, picking up on my evasiveness. I really didn't want to tell him because he was going to be pissed.

"Gaunt may have thought that I intimidated a witness." I confessed.

"Jeez, man. Again?!" Jason jerked the wheel with outrage and swerved back into the lane with the wipers thumping at full tilt, fighting the falling rain.

"...and at Gaunt." I said under my breath. It was at this point in the conversation that I fully thought Jason was going to reach over and strangle me.

“Christ, John! How unprofessional can you get? It is no wonder Gaunt is pissed at us.” Jason hit the rumble strips this time as he tried to turn to yell at me.

“Watch the road!” My head could not handle a collision on top of all the damage it had already sustained today. “Just listen. Gaunt said we couldn’t do anything more with the witnesses or at the scene, but she will still want our input on the case come Monday. Especially since *we* will have a lead on our suspect.”

“What do you mean?! I am pretty sure that Ramirez and Kittredge are going to be assigned to this case. Or did you stop listening then, too?” Jason was yelling now. I always got the sense that my antics irritated him, but he was fully raging at this point.

I fished around in the pocket of my coat, hoping that what I had found would calm him down. After a few seconds, I found the small, soggy wallet that I had pocketed after my fall and brandished it triumphantly in front of Jason.

“What is that?” Jason applied the break unevenly as the parkway merged into a more heavily congested intersection. The squad car rumbled to a stop, hitting the various potholes in the pavement. We sat in the traffic, waiting for the light to change.

Jason reached over and grabbed the tattered leather rectangle from my hand and began to look it over, flipping through several of its flaps. The smell of mud mixed with diesel fuel drifted through the vents, emanating from the box trucks that were idling in front of us at the intersection. They were probably on their way to one of the retail distribution centers that employed most of the people in this part of the town.

“I found it in the snow while you were busy playing parkour with the suspect.” In actuality, it had ended up under my butt after I had fallen, but I glossed over that portion of the

story. “I think this wallet is what that person was looking for back in the alley. It could give us a means to find them and then we could get some answers. Much more effective than yelling at them from fifty yards away.”

“Just so I am clear, you yelled at a witness? Then, you challenged a superior officer? Finally, you removed a piece of evidence from an active crime scene? Did you wake up today planning on ruining your career or did you just think it would be fun?” Jason flipped on his turn signal and nosed his way into the right turn lane.

“Neither. I plan on stopping anyone else from dying. Obviously, the killer is someone who is trying to copy the Southern Shore Sadist. They are trying to copy my father and it should be my responsibility to stop them. I am not going to sit out this investigation on the sidelines while the body count rises and neither should you.”

“Well, there is a problem with your grandiose plan of saving the day.” Jason responded.

“What is that?” I asked.

“First of all there is no license in the wallet. There are no credit cards. No employee badges. Which means, no identification of any sort in the wallet.” Jason tossed the wallet back onto my lap and made a right turn down Poplar Boulevard.

This road acted as an informal boundary between the uptown residential districts and the downtown industrial zones. Most of the walls on this street were plastered with old posters, plywood, and graffiti. There were people gathered on the stoops of the brick buildings, huddling under store fronts trying to escape the rain. It wasn’t exactly the fastest way back to my place. Jason must be running an errand.

“Really?” I flipped through the flaps and saw that he was right. There was no driver’s license. Not even a bus pass. It looked like there had been a card in one of the slots, but the only thing I could make out were a few letters and numbers that had been imprinted on the protective plastic sheath.

Well, that was disheartening. I upended all the contents into my lap trying to find anything that might have indicated the identity of our mystery man. I mean, the plan was never 100% guaranteed. Still, I had hoped to at least present Gaunt with some information and a possible suspect. That may have given her enough cause to put me and Jason back on the case. Now that there was nothing, I was probably going to be in worse trouble with the boss.

I guess it made sense though. Wallets were falling out of fashion anyway. With the increasing digitization of information, there was no need for the superfluous article of clothing. It was very possible that the person we were chasing was part of the growing number of individuals who were doing Biometric Registration. Access to their credit cards and other legal documents was a simple scan of the face or thumb.

Yet, something did not add up. Why would they risk coming back to the scene? If the wallet was worthless, why not leave it behind? They had gotten away from the coders and there was no other way to identify them that I had seen. It was too much of a coincidence that the person Jason had chased was not involved and this wallet had to have been theirs.

This wallet had to be the thing that they were digging through trash, snow, and broken glass to find. There had to be something here -- something that I could use to get an identification. Maybe a receipt? There were several really old punch cards, one of which was

close to a free coffee if it hadn't been several years too old. Just then, I felt the car make another turn.

"Wait...Where are you going?" I looked up from the pile of cards and mementos, realizing that we weren't heading towards the Peckett Theatre where I lived. Jason had started to merge back onto the South Parkway ramp.

"Back to the crime scene to give Gaunt the wallet." Jason said flatly.

"What?!" You're going to slow down this whole investigation. I mean, Gaunt is bogged down cataloguing the crime scene and here is a lead that we can follow. We just have to figure out what the lead is." I explained to Jason with urgency rising in my voice. "It's gonna be at least until Monday before the ball truly gets rolling with the whole thing. If the killer sticks to the pattern, there could be more bodies by then."

"Yeah? Well, I don't plan on getting sucked into your God complex... or vendetta...or death wish. Whatever it is you've got going on in that head of yours, I want no part of it. I want to keep my job. There are rules and regulations for a reason and one of those is preserving the integrity of a crime scene." Jason stared blankly ahead as we crawled through the traffic.

"Come on, Jason. We're just going to get information." I pleaded from the passenger seat. There had to be a way to get through to Jason the importance of moving quickly on this case. "I can save lives!"

"You really think that only *you* can solve this case? I've tolerated your unprofessionalism and sloppiness for a long time, mostly because it turns out that you are a good detective. But this is really messed up, John. Christ, how arrogant are you?" Jason roared back.

“I lived through this shit before. Not you. Not Gaunt. Not Ramirez and Kittredge. I stood there and watched my *father* cut into that woman’s face as he took her life. I have *seen* the decimation these murders cause...and if there is someone else out there... someone else reveling in these heinous...Look, I’ve got to stop it. I have to at least try.” It was getting harder and harder to articulate what was going on in my head, but I just knew I had to work this case. I couldn’t let another monster stalk my home.

“Look. I know this is personal for you, but –” Jason tried to calm the situation down by lowering his tone, but I was seething.

“You’re damn right it’s personal. That’s why I need to do something. This whole thing started thirteen years ago and I want it finished. I know that we haven’t ever seen eye-to-eye over the years, but at least try to understand that.” I stared at the pile of wallet contents at my feet, breathing heavily.

I wanted rage. I wanted to punch Jason in the face. How could he really understand what was at stake? How could anyone hope to know? Only Cael and I had been there to see the massacre. All that the others had seen were the results, the ending. They didn’t look into the darkening pits of the unearthly monster that was capable of these acts.

“I do understand. I understand more than you know, but I am not going to break the rules to justify the ends. Look, if you don’t follow the procedures in place, there are consequences. You could screw this case up royally and let the fucker walk on a technicality or missed documentation. Law is very rarely on the side of justice now a days.” Jason explained pragmatically.

There was a truth to what he was saying. I knew the rules and procedures did serve a purpose in protecting justice and ensuring that there were no legal loopholes for the guilty. However, there was a real urgency here to stop this killer. I knew the tempo of the killings would only increase as the killer's hunger grew and completely lost control at least that is what led to my father's downfall.

Control. I knew in my heart that I was doing the right thing, but control in all my actions is what Fitzzy always preached to me. I did lose it on Gaunt today and I was dangerously close to losing it on McNamara. I needed to lock down all the memories and emotions that were stirred up by today's events. The bombardment of negative stimuli had been unceasing since Jason had pulled me out of bed.

I looked at floor and counted the cards as I took deep breaths. I had to put my rage back under lock and key. There were nearly three times today that I had almost lost myself in that twisting nether of emotion. I would not allow those darker impulses to control me. I controlled them. I used them. They did *not* use me.

"Do you understand where I'm coming from?" Jason asked, breaking the silence. "We can still help, but we have to be objective here. Trust in the Captain."

"Art." The anger slowly receded as I stared at a small blue card labeled *Gannett-Art Pass*. There was a small serial number and barcode on the back that indicated the membership to the museum. It was an old method of data storage, but then again, art museums rarely had the funding to keep up with cutting-edge technology like Biometric Registration.

"What the hell?" Jason spluttered at the complete about-face mid-conversation.

“Art Pass.” I held the card up and showed it to him. It was a member’s card to the Gannett Museum of Art in the Palisades that had been pressed between the other contents of the wallet. “I bet they have record of who owns this pass and we are halfway to the museum anyway. We go in, flash our badges, and get a name for the owner of the card. We have a name to search and a lead to track down. Gaunt would have to forgive us then. You can even return the wallet and blame me. It will take an hour...two tops.”

“Pissed at *us*? She is pissed at *you*. Not me. You’re fucking looney toons, ya know that?” Jason massaged the bridge of his nose trying to process all of this information. Had I suggested this course of action to Jason four years ago, he would have already had me in handcuffs. Now though, he was at least thinking about it.

“Yep. I may be a little bit crazy, but I make up for it with my good-looks, cunning, and being a better detective than you. Let’s check it out.” I said as I returned the rest of the contents to the wallet. He continued to drive in silence. Jason was processing the implications of my discovery and weighing all the possible outcomes. His mind worked a bit slower than most.

“Absolutely not.” Jason finally said and he gripped the steering wheel with both hands hard enough to make the pleather crackle. “I told you that I am not going to be party to this crap.”

“Fine, but can you at least drop me off at my appointment before you head back? Gaunt will probably murder me right there on the sidewalk if you take the wallet back now. Plus, I am going to miss my doctor’s appointment if this traffic stays like this.” I asked him. I had an idea that might convince Jason to embrace his need to finish a case he started and suppress those pesky desires to constantly toe the lines of regulation.

“What appointment? We were just headed back to the Peckett and now you have an appointment all of a sudden?” Jason seemed skeptical. Admittedly, it was convenient for me to suddenly have an appointment, but it was the truth. I had scheduled this session with Fitzy nearly a month ago.

“It’s a doctor’s appointment and I always had the appointment scheduled, even before someone decided to rip me out of bed on my day off. See, here’s the email confirmation.” I put my phone in front of his nose since we weren’t moving anyway.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Jason pushed the phone away from his face.

“Gosh, I dunno. It might have been all the emotional outbursts and all the trauma from the past being dredged up. I figure that I ought to see my therapist today.” I explained placidly to my partner.

“Where’s the appointment at?” Jason sighed and there was my opening.

“The Palisades.” I revealed, not telling him that the office building was about a block away from the museum.

Dr. Leslie Fitzgerald tried to see me once a month over the past decade; she said she was invested in my health. Lately, I had been skipping the sessions because they seemed a bit redundant. There is only so much healing that can be done while rehashing old memories.

Now though, the appointment was too convenient an excuse to pass up. If I got Jason close enough to the museum, I hoped that it would tip him in my favor. If I had a good read on him, his obsessive work ethic would drive him to investigate the museum pass. At least, I hoped it would.

Jason's face screwed up with concentration. The gears were slowly turning as he processed the request. Finally, his facial muscles relaxed a tad and the repercussions of my statement dawned on him. He released his death grip on the wheel and flipped on the turn signal.

"You will owe me cigars." Jason said as he forced a merge again. Taking the exit for the westbound lane across the river. "And not the cheap ones that you've given me in the past. I can tell the difference."

"Only the finest Cubans for you, McNamara." I felt a little better now that there was chance to start pursuing this case. However, as the city blurred through the droplets of rain, I knew that there was someone out there intent on resurrecting my dark past. I just had to catch the bastard.

Chapter 4: The Doctor

“Hello, John. Welcome back.”

“Hey Fitzy. How have things been?”

“Good, my research progresses although I am afraid that I have lost touch with our friend, Cael. I don’t suppose he has contacted you for another one of his illustrious parties?”

“Nope. I haven’t talked to him in a year or two now.”

“I see. Well, is there anything new with you? I see you survived your procedure, how was it?”

“Meh, fine. I am still getting used to the implant, but it is weird to have balanced hearing for the first time in my life. It’s a bit unsettling because I keep thinking there’s an echo anytime I hear something.”

“The brain compensated for the loss. It will readjust for the return in time. Why did you wait until you were 22 for such a simple procedure? People get cochlear implants all the time.”

“*He* never wanted to spend money on the procedure. Said it was unsightly to ruin the symmetry of a person’s face...something about the natural world being corrupted by technology.”

“Still though, the last influence that he had on your life was nearly four years ago.”

“Insurance was a bitch to fight and money is hard to come by now that mom is living in that community. However, now that I got a job with the CCPD, I got the insurance they provide.”

“I see. And how was moving your mother? That facility that I recommended is quite good. I trust it is to her liking?”

“Moving was fine, but mom doesn’t really notice her surroundings much anymore. Though she certainly noticed when I came across a small pocket of *his* stuff that she had been hoarding. It was just some mementos, but I found this black MP3 player...”

-- (Coffer Session 32)

Audio Transcript

(10/16/2018)

Jason pulled up to the office building where I was to have my appointment with Dr. Leslie Fitzgerald. It took about an hour and 45 minutes of maneuvering through the midday traffic, so we barely made it on time. Fitzgerald was quite anal about punctuality, especially when she was giving sessions pro bono.

Fitzy had been my therapist for quite a while now and worked with my family after the incident. I had been coming to her building for some time, but I was always staggered by it. The building was not the tallest in the city, but the mirrored surface gave it the appearance of a steel monolith as it reflected the storm clouds that had settled over the city.

The building itself was located in the Palisades, which was a particularly ritzy portion of the city. It was the district with upscale shopping, expansive office complexes, and restaurants that required at least a week's notice to get a seat. The neighborhood was nestled north of the river and basically, was as picturesque as any portion of Circadia could get. Wealth seemed to flow to this area and radiate outward through the city. The Southern Shore used to look similar to the Palisades back in the late 90s and early 2000s. However, the recession hit the city and it all evaporated almost overnight.

"Thanks man, I will be done in about an hour." I unbuckled my seatbelt, but was stopped short of getting out of the car as Jason thrust his hand out.

"Wallet." Jason's expression looked deadly serious and invited no arguments. Reluctantly, I held out the object.

"But, I thought –" He snatched it from my hand before I could finish my statement. He flipped through its contents.

"I don't trust that you are just going to the appointment." Jason explained abruptly. "Card."

I looked at him flatly and then dug in my pockets and threw the little blue plastic rectangle at him. It hit him square in the chest. This whole excursion was not going as planned.

"Why?" I asked a little put off by the sudden wrinkle in my strategy. I was planning on popping through the building and head right to the Gannett Museum to investigate the lead after my meeting with Fitzy. "You can trust me."

“No I can’t, and there are multiple reasons why I am taking this from you. First, Gaunt can decide what she wants to do with this evidence when *we* return it to her. Second, the doctor’s appointment may save your career if we can convince Gaunt that you were just emotionally compromised and acted irrationally.” Jason had really thought this all out on the drive. I thought he was just concentrating on breathing and driving at the same time.

“Finally, with this wallet, I have insurance because you want it. Insurance that you will go to the appointment. Insurance that you will finally get help for your massive ego and obsession.” Jason concluded and forced an unnaturally sarcastic smile.

“Fine, but that will lower the number of cigars you’re gonna get from me.” I shut the door and heard the window roll down behind me. Jason leaned over the console and talked through the door.

“I am going to park in that garage.” He gestured down the street. “Get a validated parking pass proving you were there or I am taking this evidence back to Gaunt right now and you are taking the Underground back to the Peckett. I know how much you hate public transit.” He didn’t wait for my response. Jason just rolled up the window and headed to park in the garage.

Damn.

Outsmarted by a McNamara. These were dark days, indeed. Well, I may as well get this appointment over with and go see Fitzy. I turned and walked into the skyscraper.

The lobby of the building was an antiseptic white with a gold molding that was designed in that Nova Romantique style. It had florid designs and oblong shapes that were symmetrically laced together into ornate patterns. It was supposed to symbolize a meshing of the natural and

technological worlds. Personally, I found the whole architectural movement to be reminiscent of a Rorschach test.

It wasn't too busy in the building, probably because it was a Saturday. A few suits were milling about and a construction crew was working on some of the elevators. These men wore coveralls with FLORENTIAN COMPANY plastered across their backs. The hardware must be getting upgraded judging from the toolpads and coder gear they carried. Cael's dad had been working his men overtime this winter with the push to digitize. It felt like these guys were all over the city. I skirted the suits, checked in with the building security, and boarded one of the elevators that wasn't under construction.

The doors of the elevator closed and I looked for the buttons to indicate the floor. Instead, there was only a small black screen and a computer iris. It was one of those new Biometric Registration panels. This elevator must have already been upgraded by those workers.

I leaned over to check it out, half expecting the camera to glow red and hear HAL 9000's voice come through the speakers informing me to "take a stress pill, and think things over." Instead, the screen just flashed a white blank page followed by the scrolling letters of my full name and a series of instructions:

"Welcome, Roger John Coffey Jr to the Olsen Clifford Building. You are authorized access to the 13th floor. If there is an issue, you may return to the lobby and security can update your authorizations. Please indicate your selection by pressing the appropriate button."

Two buttons appeared below the message and the screen was still. I felt needles crawl up my spine at seeing my full name glowing in front of my eyes. I hadn't used my first name in over a decade. My full name was found on only medical documents and a few original legal certificates. So how did the Biometric Registration panel have this information? I most certainly did not authorize the use of my legal documentation to be stored in the Cloud, the Florentian Cyberstructure, or any other network for that matter.

A male voice filtered through the speakers and began to read the message to me, but I quickly selected the floor for Fitzzy's office cutting the recording short. I rode up in an uncomfortable silence as I wondered what else of mine had been digitized without my knowledge. I was going to have to double check everything to make sure there was no loose data out there for cyber-ticks to take.

The bell chimed and I walked down to the office labeled B. I pushed on the door, but discovered it was locked. I knocked and received no answer. That was odd; it was nearly noon and Fitzzy was never late for a meeting. Ever. Her timing was so good that she usually opened her office door as I stepped off the elevator.

Fitzzy was an older lady, maybe something had happened to her? Maybe she had fallen in her office? Mom had had a spill at her assisted living facility, broken her hip, and passed out about a year ago. She was on the ground for nearly two hours before a nurse's assistant had found her.

Worried, I knocked again. After receiving no answer, I began to fiddle with the lock. Luckily, this door still had analog locks and I could bump the tumblers using a bit of metal, or in

this case, a pen core and an old credit card that I kept around for just such an occasion. These old things still had their uses.

It took a bit to get the lock popped. I hadn't picked one since I was seventeen. Plus, I didn't have Cael who was always the better hoodlum. Finally, the lock clicked open and I cautiously pushed the door open.

"Fitzy? You alright? I'm here for my appointment." I said as I entered and looked around the office. Two overly plush leather armchairs sat in front of a gigantic desk and formed an intimate discussion area for certain sessions. There was a therapist's couch for those that preferred the more traditional approach to therapy sessions. The wall was covered with various publications, awards, and two book shelves that were filled to the brim with alphabetized psychology textbooks. There was a squeaking noise coming from a cage in the far corner of the room.

Inside lived the two white lab mice that I had dubbed Algernon the Eighth and Oz. Each were indistinguishable from the other. One was running in a small wheel and the other lay listlessly in the corner. The one who was running paused his exercise briefly to examine the large pink mass staring into their home. He blinked twice, and then resumed his activities inside the cage.

The other, I assumed was Algernon. He didn't even react to the new stimuli, just lay in the bedding listlessly staring at the water dispenser. I guess there wasn't too much to worry about when your whole world was controlled by the owner of this office.

I circumnavigated the room and everything looked to be in order. The office had the same sanitized, sterile, and synchronized professionalism that I had come to expect from Fitzy. Nothing seemed amiss, outside one exception. The large mahogany desk was a wreck.

The mahogany desk sat a good six inches higher than most office desks and gave an imperious view to whomever was seated in the high back chair behind it. Usually, the desk was cleared with the exception of Fitzy's session notes. Today, it was covered in files and papers. This mess was highly unusual. The woman kept a schedule to the minute and reliably wore outfits that corresponded to the day of the week. Curiosity got the better of me and I decided to investigate them.

On the cover of the topmost folder was a label for NORTHWOOD HAVEN, a maximum security mental institution in the northern part of this county. Fitzy must have been volunteering up there. Donating her time for some of the patients. The file contained session notes and pictures for one of the patients. There were several other individual folders, but the largest file was labeled: ROGER JOHN COFFER Sr.

I grabbed the file and began to flip through the pages and noticed that there were several sessions in this folder with the most recent being this past Thursday. There were some archival pictures from the murders and a few that had never made it to print. There were marks circling portions of the images and notes taken in the margins. It seemed more like a case study than an actual therapy session. What was she doing visiting my father?

The bell in the hallway chimed, signaling the arrival of the elevator. Despite almost having a heart attack, I managed to put the folder back as I had found it and leap into one of the

leather chairs as the footsteps approached the office. I didn't want Fitzzy to know that I was snooping through her stuff.

“Breaking and entering, Mr. Coffey?” A stern, yet warm voice said from the doorway. Despite her generally robotic demeanor, Fitzzy was attempting to tease me. “As an officer of the law, you should know the illegality of your actions.”

“You're late Fitzzy.” I made a dramatic motion to look at my wrist watch. “We had an appointment nearly five minutes ago.”

The pepper haired woman walked to the coat rack behind her desk and removed a maroon overcoat that was absolutely drenched. Luckily for her, the rain had not penetrated to the pale pink pants suit that she wore emblazoned with a golden scarab broach. Her hair remained pulled into its traditional steel bun, but droplets clouded her red rimmed glasses and her heels were covered in dirt. This was probably the most disheveled that I had ever seen her.

“You do realize that it is traditional to wait in the hall when the owner is not present?” She asked as she wiped the grime off her shoes using an alcoholic wipe that she had procured from her drawer.

“I thought you had fallen and might be hurt in here. You're welcome.” I lounged in the leather chair that I had sat in so many times before.

Dr. Leslie Fitzgerald was a brilliant woman with an innate patience that bordered on superhuman, although some of her responses could be grating. Leslie was a shrink to the rich and powerful. Usually, she dealt with addictions and anxiety-induced stress for corporate big-wigs to pay the bills. Her real passion was running clinical experiments for whatever her next publication was bound to be.

However, she slumped it a bit for me. I liked to think it was because of my charming personality. In reality, it was because I knew Francesco Florentian via his derelict son. He kept Fitzgerald on retainer for Cael. I guess he had hoped to cure Cael of his wild ways. In addition to all that, Fitzzy said that my case was interesting to her and I wasn't about to knock free healthcare.

We had started our sessions just after the incident with my father when I had been lost and angry. After a few sessions, she agreed to take me as a client. Fitzzy even waived a lot of her fees to help me. If it hadn't been for her, I would have been left as broken as my mother, or worse, in the gutter like Cael.

"You do realize that I am only approaching 60? I am quite capable of maintaining my balance. However, I suppose that this blatant lack of decorum is unsurprising and indicative of your personality." Fitzzy mused half to me and half to herself as she cleaned the fog and water from her lenses. "To be quite frank, I would have expected you to skip our session again as it has become a rather common occurrence with you over the past year. I assume you are finding these sessions becoming rather useless for you?"

"You assume a lot, Fitzzy." In truth, she has very nearly right. I wasn't drowning in liquor during waking hours anymore and very rarely had panic attacks since she had taught me the breathing techniques. Although, this morning had been a trial.

"I extrapolate. I take the data inputs that you present to reach my conclusion. In your case, your pattern of actions, history, and genetics. Then, I make logical guesses that help me to guide you towards—" Fitzgerald paused and stared at the stack of papers I had been looking through. I felt my face grow hot and my palms a tad sweaty, anticipating her being outraged.

Nothing angered Leslie more than people who tampered with her papers, except maybe those who were late. “– healing.”

She finished her sentence and quickly scooped up all the documents and placed them in a drawer. Pulling a ring of keys from her coat pocket, she quickly closed and locked the drawer. She then took out a legal pad, a sharpened pencil, and placed an old analog audio recorder on the table to begin our session.

“Anything in particular you wish to address in today’s session? Unfortunately, it will be a bit shorter today. Despite my tardiness, I will still need to end our session promptly at 1:00 pm as I have other clients today. Naturally, you will not be billed for the inconvenience.” Not that she ever billed me much to begin with, but I did like free. Her pencil hung above the paper prepared to write my response.

“Yeah, I was hoping to discuss my father’s case with you. You’re a psychologist, maybe you can help me tease out his motives.” I leaned back, closing my eyes, and propped my feet on the coffee table. I may as well take advantage of a clinical therapist while I was here.

Behind my eye lids, I could see the hulking form in the warehouse’s darkness framed by incandescent light. The smell of rot hanging in the air. The darkness began walking towards me in halting steps, but I snapped my eyes open as the hand reached for my face. My memories sure were riled up today.

“Any reason why?” Leslie said as she narrowed her eyes. If she suspected that I knew about the files on her desk, she quickly covered it with a forced smile.

“Just an investigation that reminded me of the case. Thought I would talk about it with you while the memory is fresh.” I didn’t want to go into too much information about the case, but Leslie knew my past and she could help without going into too much detail.

“Well then, it is fortuitous that you came in today.” She explained. “It is very nearly the thirteen year anniversary of your father’s murders. Shall we start with your memories from that time? Perhaps any dreams you may have of the event? Maybe there are some clues in your subconscious that we can trigger? Sons do often pick up certain traits from their fathers.”

What the hell? It sounded like she was implying something, Fitzzy often forgot social cues because of her clinical nature. As a result, she could be a little cold and mechanical at times. However, she had never been so brazenly callous before. Annoyance and disgust stirred in me at such a flippant statement.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Doc. There is nothing like that psychopath inside of me.” The liquor I drank at night made sure that those demons died in a stupor. I could feel my annoyance turning into anger. “Your implications that I have even a sliver of a monster inside me... that I am anything like Sadist of the Southern Shore are vile.”

“No one is calling you a monster, John. That was not my intention.” Leslie’s voice had a calculating and clinical air about that rubbed me the wrong way. Sometimes she did like to say certain things that would provoke a response and force me to confront certain issues. Today was definitely not a good day for that. “You asked to discuss the nature of your father’s motives. I am merely suggesting that we examine your memories and dreams. Perhaps there is something deeper embedded in the more basic drives that are innate to the genetics?”

A silence passed between the two of us and I mulled over the idea that she had set forth. I did have a dark side that I tapped in to for investigations. It was a reality that I didn't like to acknowledge, although I had discussed it with Fitzzy in previous sessions.

There was a monster inside of me, an evil that did have a bloodlust. A primal part that I could awaken using my father's black box. I only used it when I needed insight for a case, otherwise I tried to drown it.

I could see the clarity of a kill -- the patterns of a kill better than anyone else in the CCPD, which is probably why Gaunt put up with me. It was hard to explain, but my body of work was enough evidence for me. Maybe there was a genetic part to all of this? Maybe I had inherited my father's curse?

"I'm not sure about genetics, but I know I can't remember my dreams anymore." I blurted out, breaking the silence of my thoughts. "When I do sleep, I just blink out and wake up a couple hours later. Most of the time there is just static in my brain and I fall asleep with movies playing."

I sat back down on the couch and stared into the middle distance. How were we talking about my dreams when we started with my dad? Fitzzy just stared at me and processed what I had said, then furiously wrote some notes on the legal pad.

"Movies and cellphones at all hours? Well, that could be why you don't remember the dreams. Your brain is working overtime processing all the images and goes right into the REM cycle out of exhaustion. You should try to sleep without any stimuli. It would help your health." Leslie offered.

“I doubt it. I won’t be able to sleep without a distraction...or booze.” I loved watching the old movies from the Peckett’s archives while drinking some concoction that could amount to paint thinner. It was nice to escape to simpler worlds.

“Perhaps your memories can help, then. You’re looking for a motive or a method? What do you remember from your encounter with him?” Leslie asked.

“I am looking for both I suppose.” I thought about it for a second, wondering how I best could tackle tracking down the copycat. What were the steps to solve this pattern? If I knew the prey, I could head the killer off before the kill. “My memories of that night Cael and I broke into the factory -- finding him over the body. Then, Cael with his shovel knocking him out. I don’t know anything about selection or motives.”

“And why is that?” Fitzzy was doing her Socratic analysis. I sensed that she knew the answer, but it was more fun for her to force me through the thought process. “Why do you not know more?”

“Well, I never reopened the case after that night. I wasn’t a detective or anything then so there was no access. Now, I guess I just wanted to keep what is left of my family together and forget that it ever happened.” I reasoned. I succeeded in forgetting what had happened to an extent, but my family was shattered beyond repair. Mother had disassociated herself from reality and Callie was gone to who knew where.

“Then it stands to reason that there are only several options left for you to uncover the motive.” Fitzzy analyzed. “You need to speak to someone who was there.”

“I haven’t heard from Cael in a year or so.” I responded as I thought about where those old court files might have been stored and who I would need to bribe to get them.

“There is one other person who you can talk to, one who has knowledge of the crime.”

Fitzzy stared as she waited for the realization to dawn on me.

“My father isn’t an option.” I responded flatly.

“Fine, but it is an option. However unpalatable it may seem, it is an option.” Leslie finished her notes. “Well, that will have to conclude our session. I am afraid I forgot to account for my travel when I quoted you the 1:00 pm timeframe. I will see you in two weeks’ time? I assure you that I will be back to my prompt self.”

“Yeah.” I muttered quietly as I checked my phone and thought about the implications of the suggestion. There was a voicemail from an unknown number and several missed calls from Jason. “I gotta go too. Thanks, Fitzzy. You be safe out there.”

She stared blankly at me as if there was something that I had said that didn’t quite compute with her. Finally, she dug in a drawer and stood up to walk me out of the office. She pressed a small pill bottle in my hand as she opened the door to the hallway.

“For sleeping.” Leslie said as she smiled. Fitzzy showed teeth this time, the smile not quite reaching those green-grey eyes of hers. I almost laughed at the awkwardness of the woman, but I smiled at her attempt.

“Thanks, for the --” I said taking the bottle and squinting at the label. “Melatonin? You shouldn’t be handing meds out though. That’s illegal.”

“Says the burglar. Besides, Melatonin is an over-the-counter supplement that does not require a prescription. Take one each night and put on some simple music, perhaps even into that

implant of yours. You mentioned that it helps you find the right state of mind when you do that.”

Fitzy explained as she started to close the door behind me.

“Oh! One more thing, Fitzy?” I stopped the door from shutting completely.

“Yes, John?” She asked.

“Could you validate my parking?”

Chapter 5: The Name

"Hey Coffer, you got a sec?"

"What do you want, McNamara?"

"I saw the report that you wrote for the Grigorio case."

"What about it?"

"It's wrong."

"No it isn't, the asshole is going to prison, his drug running is done, and those kids are in protective services."

"Yeah, but the report is not accurate. I am the one that assaulted him, not you."

"So?"

"It's not right. You are lying to Gaunt."

"Look, she expects that shit from me. I will get placed on administrative leave with no pay for two weeks and life will move on. Dude was scum. He deserved the broken nose."

"I still don't feel right about this."

"Well, then let me ask you this. Why did you hit the fucker?"

"I guess it was because when we were arresting him, I just lost it."

"Why?"

"One of his drug mules, a boy no older than my son, started to overdose. The tiny body just lying there on the dirty ground. Seizures and foaming at the mouth and there

was nothing I could do to help the kid. I couldn't save him and he just stared. He stared up at Grigorio looking confused. Looking for help ---“

“--and Grigorio just laughed.”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I felt the same way. Plus, I know what it is like to get lost in emotions. The way I see it, you just beat me to the punch.”

“Heh. It still doesn't answer why you would cover for me.”

“You mentioned you got a custody hearing coming up, right? For your son?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, kid needs his father. I figured the court wouldn't be too pleased if you were on unpaid leave during your hearing. Besides, now you owe me.”

“Oh yeah? Do I now?”

“Yup. Now, remember alcohol is a great gift for ol' Coffer. Old movies and food work well as payment for me. Just no more of those gross cigars that you gave everyone for Christmas.”

“Those were expensive Cubans.”

“Still gross, maybe just a beer?”

“Sure thing...and thanks, Coffer.”

“Don't mention it, McNamara.”

Detectives Jason McNamara and John Coffey

RE: Grigorio Case

Filed: 08/15/2023

I felt goosebumps as the Biometric Registration system in the elevator wished me well by name and I scrambled out of the machine. In the lobby, the workers had gone and were replaced by a series of what looked to be interns. They were huddled in the corner arguing quite loudly over some legal cases. They seemed quite self-absorbed, and I had to push my way past them so I could answer my phone. Finally, I managed to find a quiet corner and began to check my messages, in a corner away from the interns and any other cameras that were watching.

I opened my phone and there was the text from Jason:

John, parked on floor 3 spot 52. Ran an errand, will be back in 20 minutes.
Leaving at 1:15pm with or without you.

Great. I wonder what he had to do in the Palisades. McNamara better not leave me behind or he would never get anymore cigars from me.

The other message was from an unknown number. They had called twice and left a message, so it probably wasn't a telemarketer trying to sell me insurance or give me a rebate in exchange for my social security number. I pressed play and a voice I hadn't heard in years came through the speaker.

“Hey John, its Cael. I am back in town for a bit. Was hoping to catch up with you? Give me a call back. You still at the Peckett? Anyway...hope all is well. Talk to you later.”

*Click

The voice on the phone sounded tired. It sounded worn. There was a haggard nature to it that seemed worlds away from the bright effervescence that I remembered from our time spent at Sacred Heart Academy and partying in the East Side. Then again, the exhaustion was hardly surprising given what he had put himself through over the past decade.

Cael was back in Circadia and he knew where I lived? That was surprising. I hadn't seen the man since I had moved in there; Hell, I hadn't had a meaningful conversation with him in years.

Last I had heard, Cael was bouncing from rehab center to rehab center in a constant quest to get clean. The treatment never stuck for more than a couple weeks before he was back in the gutter. Plus, I thought Francesco Florentian would have kept his son as far from his company as possible.

Cael Florentian loved to party. In high-school, we would sneak out and use his father's driver to find someplace that was bumping. Clubs, bars, college parties -- it didn't matter to us and there was no place that was off limits to the Prince of Circadia. Cael would pull strings and we would rage until the early morning. While I would get chewed out and grounded when I got home, Cael would just sleep off his hangover and head back out.

However, after the night we discovered the Southern Shore Sadist things changed for Cael and me. I was occupied trying to fix what was left of my family and move on with my life;

partying didn't interest me anymore. I decided to grow up, which meant that Cael had to spend his nights by himself.

New friends took him a lot deeper into the drug scene. Drug charges were a bit harder to sweep under the rug. So, Francesco decided to invest in his son's mental health, but didn't see a fast enough return on that investment – so that experiment ended quite quickly. Cael continued to burn through his money and friendships like they were rolling papers until the only people that were left in his corner were his mother and me. Luckily, we convinced Cael to go to rehab away from the city.

The last I had heard of Cael was that his father had stashed him away in a rehab facility somewhere in Europe. Francesco claimed that he agreed with his wife and wanted to help his son get clean. However, I suspected that the exile of Cael was more of a business move than an altruistic one.

I listened to the message again. I could hear wind whipping past the microphone and assumed that he must be calling from somewhere outside. Near the end of the call, I could hear a rapid clanging. It was loud and tinny, but could have been anything from a church bell to an automated tone. There was too much interference and I couldn't place it.

I guess it would be nice to see Cael again after all these years. Hopefully, he was in a better mental state than he had been in when he left. I would call him after I met up with Jason. The clock on my phone read 12:55 pm. I needed to hustle if I didn't want to get stranded at Fitzzy's office.

The door of the office building scanned my face and slid open. Outside, the rain still poured from the leaden sky with the wind adding to the mix. Each gust whipped the water into a

cold, stinging spray that made umbrellas completely worthless. The month of February really was the most miserable month in the city. The construction workers from earlier were milling about outside and looked to be waiting for pick up. These men seemed absolutely miserable standing in the rain and were generally out of place amongst the tourists and white collar workers. A few of them glared at passersby, but one man perked up and stared intently at me with dark eyes.

The staring man had a full beard and greying hair pulled back into a long ponytail revealing dark brown eyes that were way too close to a very crooked nose. The top of his coveralls tied around his waist exposing thick arms that were folded aggressively across his chest. His undershirt was unbuttoned as if he was trying to invite pneumonia into his chest. As I assessed him, he examined me. It was the oddest thing. I felt that I knew his face, but I couldn't place it. Unsettled, I turned and quickly made my way to the parking garage trying to put as much space between me and my observer.

The downpour soaked my pea coat and froze the fibers of the cloth. The polluted slush that had frozen overnight was still slick in some spots and provided a treacherous walking experience. Adding that to the rain and the press of the crowd, walking was downright dangerous.

I had to adopt an odd stumble-skip of a gait to avoid falling as people pushed me along. I had a few missteps and my shoes were completely soaked to complete my bodily freeze, but at least I hadn't bit the dirt again today. The only part of me that was still dry was my aviator hat.

My sister had given it to me a few Christmases ago and it offered a bit more protection since the exterior was GOR-Tex. Yet, it was all useless in the end. After about a city block, I had gone completely numb and just glided along with the crowd until I got to the garage.

The squad car sat on the third floor of the parking garage and was idling with Jason in the driver's seat. As I approached, he clicked open the locks and I slid into the passenger side. The heat was blasting from the vents and I pressed my hands as close as I could, rejoicing that I could feel the tingling returning to my fingertips.

"How did it go?" Jason asked.

"Fine. Here is your parking pass, Mom." I thrust the little blue paper into his hand. "What errand did you have to run?"

"I got you a name." Jason responded as he took the ticket and began to pull out of the parking spot. "I got you a name, but that is as far as I am going to go with this crazy scheme of yours. Hopefully, Gaunt has calmed down a bit from this morning. If we tell her you were emotionally compromised, show her this pass from the doctor, and return the wallet; you should be able to keep your job."

"A name? What's the name? How did you find it out?" My hunch had been right, McNamara's curiosity got the better of him. It was nice to know that I was rubbing off on him after all these years working together. I knew I could break him in.

"Jessica Belle. I got it from one of those information kiosks at the museum. Apparently, if you swipe the card you can access a personal account for the Gannett Museum with store credits, viewing guides, and access to special exhibits." Jason revealed.

“A lady? Hmm, ok. What else did you get?” Surely, there was more information to be had if she had an account like this with the museum. They had to have something on file that could be used to track her down.

“Unfortunately, that was it. The welcome screen said ‘Hello, Jessica Belle’ and then it asked for a password.” Jason explained.

I sat silently, pondering over what to do. Where do we go now? We had a name. Names were useful, but if that was all there was then we had hit a dead end. There was no place of residence or employment attached to that name. There had to be a way to find out more information. I took my phone out, typed the name into the browser, and searched it on the internet.

At first, this exercise was useless. The search engine regurgitated a vast number of hits. There were several billion results for the name “Jessica” or “Belle” or both. I tried a Boolean search and it only turned up marginally fewer. This line of investigation would be futile. I needed to limit my search options, so I selected one of the popular networking platforms, SLYDR, banking on the fact that nearly everyone published their lives for people to see.

I had found that social media was a huge boon for me. Well, not me in particular – I didn’t partake in the phenomenon. I wasn’t a big fan of my life, so there was no need to publish it. However, social media was really useful for my work, especially now that Biometric Registration was becoming popular. Everyone’s information was digitized and available for public scrutiny.

People put their whole lives online for anyone to access, and we didn’t need a warrant to google someone. With a few searches, I could find out a person’s eating habits, number of pets,

and favorite dry-cleaner. Unfortunately, there were still nearly five hundred users on the SLYDR site with the name Jessica Belle, but at least I was getting somewhere.

“What are you doing?” Jason asked. He had stopped in the middle of the garage to watch me furiously tap on my phone screen.

“Filling in the blanks.” I muttered. I was engrossed in my search, trying to figure out the next step of the puzzle.

Ok, now I added a location. Typing in “Jessica Belle + Circadia City” was a bit more productive and I got about seventy hits on the social platform. Still, that was far too many to work through, especially without a clear look at their face. I narrowed down the location and tried again. The term, “Jessica Belle + Circadia City + Southern Shore”. Unfortunately, that returned no results. If that was too specific, what else could I add to the search?

“Try adding ‘Art’.” Jason suggested as he looked over my shoulder. Well, it made sense. We had found a member card to the art museum, so our Jessica Belle must be involved in art in some capacity.

“Jessica Belle + Circadia City + Art.” I repeated out loud as I typed the search into the phone. “Ha-ha! Good call, we have a winner!”

The list was narrowed to three hits. None were guaranteed to be our suspect, but at least three was a manageable number of suspects to investigate. Hell, I could probably narrow it down even further judging from the pictures. Although, I probably shouldn’t rule out the fifty year old woman and the dude named Jessie – I did. I figured the top result was going to be our suspect.

The first Jessica Belle was a young woman whose blog page labeled her as an *Urban Visionary*, or in more appropriate terms, a vandal -- a vandal that turned out to be quite attractive, at least in the non-conventional sense. She had long blue hair with highlights that changed in each of the pictures. The tendrils of the secondary colors were matted in some places and worn as dreadlocks. I noticed that the girl was painfully pale and wore heavy makeup that was just as much artwork, if not more so, than her creations.

The pictures of her creations were from all over the city and I recognized a few of them. Jessica stood in various poses next to huge murals and odd piles of trash. Below each picture was a title for the work, followed by a bevy of user comments that praised each work for its depth and complexity. The last picture in her public album was a flyer for an art show.

Apparently, Jessica Belle was prominent enough to have her own section of an art show. Belle was planning on revealing a new piece at an exhibit in the museum this week. The Urban Art exhibit was designed to kick-start the five year farewell tour to the old museum before it moved into a new facility sponsored by the Florentian Company. The exhibition ran from February 17th to March 21st.

“New plan. You go to Gaunt with the wallet. I am going back to the museum. If she is having an exhibit, the museum will have an address to find her.” I was already unbuckling my seatbelt and getting out of the car before Jason could respond or lock the doors.

“You don’t even know it’s her that we’re looking for!” Jason said urgently. “What if you’re wrong? What if you need back up?”

“Listen, I need to be doing something and this little bit of investigation is probably the most harmless thing I can be doing. Plus, I don’t feel like getting yelled at again today. Gaunt

can do that Monday at work.” I did feel a little bad because Jason did wait for me and was legitimately trying to be helpful while maintaining his professionalism. “Look, I am just going to get some more information and ask a few questions. I will give you a report when I get home tonight. Yeah?”

“You really must be bothered by this if you’re going to take public transport home. Fine, call me tonight and I’ll try to smooth things over with Gaunt.” Jason nodded and pulled out of the garage and left me standing in the rain.

I looked out into the city and saw people bustling from shop to office to home with a regular synchronicity. A rhythm of life that beat with each door click and honk of the taxi. It all faded into a lovely tapestry of white noise that settled my thoughts. The patterns that people unconsciously created were comforting. Each person had a purpose and fit into Circadia City. It was kind of relaxing to just step back and appreciate it.

“Nice city, eh Coffey?” an oily voice to my left remarked causing me to jump.

The statement had come from a man who was nonchalantly leaning against the wall of the parking garage. It took me half a second to realize that it was the same man that was staring at me outside Fitzzy’s office. What was he doing here? Who was he?

As those thoughts flashed through my head, he cracked a crooked smile at my confusion. In that grin, I could see the shine of a silvered tooth reflected in the gray light and I remembered the scum. It was Rafael Grigorio.

“Grigorio.” I nodded at him. “You got uglier. I didn’t recognize you with that beard and mop on your head.”

“You’re one to talk. Are those greys I see?” Grigorio started to walk toward me, but I held my ground despite him probably weighing a good thirty pounds more than me. You couldn’t show fear to a scavenger like Grigorio.

“You got a few yourself, but I expected a full head of white by the time you got out. What has it been? Only two of the thirty years since you got locked up? How did you get out?” Casually, I slid my hand inside my jacket pocket and held it there, staring at him directly in the eyes.

It was situations like these that I really wished I still had my sidearm. If that stupid law hadn’t been passed two years ago, I would be able to keep this creep at bay. Detectives should still be allowed to carry guns. I was hoping that Grigorio didn’t know about the regulations and I could fake it.

“I guess the judge thought that thirty was a bit steep for self-defense against those junkies—”

“Kids. They were kids that *you* hooked on *your* drugs to make them mules, Fuckwad.” The flippant way that he talked about all the lives he had ruined was stomach-churning. Jason should have hit him a lot harder.

“Heh. Right.” Grigorio shrugged, but kept a wary eye on the hand that was in my jacket. “Was that McNamara in the car? Where is he headed? Off to visit that boy of his? We have some catching up that we need to do.”

“Careful, Grigorio.” I growled with a promise of violence. “I would choose your next words very carefully because I just need to show one clip of you threatening the family of a police officer and whatever deal you got evaporates.”

We were standing right below a camera and there were a few more across the street that I could see. I was sure that there were more than that as well, hidden in the various crevices of store fronts and cellular devices. Grigorio was openly threatening a police officer and his family. I was sure that this had to be a violation of his parole, whatever the deal had been.

“Easy, Coffer.” Grigorio chuckled softly. “I didn’t say anything of the kind. Besides, I think the cameras on this block are on the fritz right now.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. I looked up and saw that the red light on the camera was not glowing.

I returned to glaring at this piece of human debris, and a long silence passed between the two of us. Each waited for the other to blink. He stared back directly into my eyes, knowing that we were at an impasse. Then, Grigorio cracked a toothy grin and patted the toolpad at his hip.

“Well, duty calls. Got a new line of work now and there is money to be made.” Grigorio turned to leave. He made it a few steps and looked back. “It was good seeing you. Give McNamara my regards won’t ya? I’m sure I’ll be seeing y’all around.”

Grigorio grinned like a hyena and crossed the street, disappearing into the rhythm of the city. He blended back into the pattern of Circadia, leaving the day a lot colder than it had been a few minutes ago.

Chapter 6: The Theatre

"I'll see you soon, Cael. You'll be back in no time."

"Sure. Most definitely..."

"You don't seem as confident as you usually do."

"It's just...What I mean is..."

"T-tuh-tuhday. Out with it dude! You got a plane to catch and if you're gonna get all mushy, you better hurry up."

"Ha. I was just wondering how long *it* stuck with you, Johnny? How did you get over it?"

"Get over what?"

"That night. I am there every time I close my eyes. I can't escape."

"Same. It's on repeat. We run in. Father rushing me and pushing me to the grou—"

"I can still see her face, Johnny. Cracked open. Blood pooling in the dissection. Not gushing. Just slowly rising to fill the emptiness. She looks so peaceful under that horror. Then I see that insect -- the cicada, staring out at me from her teeth with its segmented eyes. Just watching. Always watching."

"..."

"..."

"Cael, you talk to Fitzzy about this?"

“Naw, it’s crazy. She wouldn’t get it. You’re the only one who could understand it.”

“...and that’s why you’re headed to rehab. We aren’t alone in all this. People will help you, if you let them. They helped me.”

“Sure.”

“Just give the place a real shot this time?”

“Yeah...well, I gotta go. See you in a few months?”

Cael Florentian and John Coffey

Circadia International Airport

12/14/2020

The warm, yet musty air of the Peckett Theatre hit me in the face as soon as I cracked open the dark mahogany double doors to the annex of the hundred-year-old cinema. Quickly, the building’s heat scrambled to escape into the darkening streets of the city.

I breathed a sigh of relief to finally be home after such an eventful and miserably confusing day. The art museum excursion was a bust. Despite wandering around the public exhibits for hours, I couldn’t finesse my way into the private areas. Frustration and my badge

only made the employees wary of me and more evasive. The place closed down for the night and I was forced to leave empty-handed.

The ride on the underground was miserable, but now I was home and could process the day in relative peace. I quickly pulled the first door inward to lock it in place. I had to yank the second one up and to the right as hard as I could to set the aging door back onto its frame and lock them. I disrobed.

I started with the cloth that was covering my mouth. I had picked up a scarf from a stall in the Palisades on my way to the museum to hide my face. No more unwanted Biometric Registration recognition for me! After the run in with Grigorio, I wanted to cover my face. I wasn't sure if he had access to all the information in the system, but I wasn't taking any chances. I was going to have to have a word with Francesco about how in the hell all my information got uploaded to his cyberstructure in the first place.

As I unwrapped the scarf, the shivering began to subside and I could feel the stress leaving my body. The anxiety of being around people and the traumas of today was subsiding and being replaced with a calm. Heat slowly returned to my extremities and the numbness was replaced with the tingle of feeling. It was the one place in this city that offered the solace of thousands of worlds -- thousands of realities that were different from my own. It was good to be home, and home for me was the Peckett Theatre.

The Peckett Theatre, opened in late 1920s by Arthur Peckett, was the oldest continually operating cinema in the country. It had seen several reinventions, but had persisted through the years. This theatre and the rest of the building was used to house the National Cinematic Archive. It was a pretty popular spot during the waking hours.

This place was usually crawling with tourists and students in the peak season -- heck, even in the off-season there were numerous screenings and events that drew in the film buffs. I wasn't the biggest of fans of the masses of people, but the trade-offs were worth the early departures and late arrivals to my apartment.

I traded my lack of sleep and my general annoyance at being around strange people for the close proximity for this paradise. Many people had an idyllic happy place that was a metaphysical place, existing only in their minds with no physical manifestation. However, for me, it was reversed.

My mind was a place that was filled with anxiety-inducing emotional eruptions, but my happy place existed in the reality of this antiquated theatre. I loved the movies – the crackle of the old speakers and the larger-than-life heroes that existed on the reels. They were relics of a bygone era and were preserved here.

The Peckett had been a large part of our family excursions when I was young and I learned to love each and every film I saw. In fact, this theatre was one of the few places that I had from my childhood that remained untainted by that night.

A few years back, I saw that there was an apartment available to rent on the premise and a part-time archivist job. I jumped at the chance to be here. Yes, the apartment was small and had thin walls, but that was never a problem for me; I came home as the museum and theatre were closing for the day.

On the weekends, I got to listen to the legends of cinema in their most iconic roles. In particular, I enjoyed listening to the old detective movies and westerns. The rumble from the

gritty basso of the hero's voice and the pop of the gunshots were clear in my mind despite my auditory failings.

John Wayne, James Stewart, Claire Trevor, and Andy Devine were my favorites. I could hear them as I poured over documents from the precinct or from the archive. The voices had a comforting rhythm and rumble to them, even if they were scripted. They offered no ambiguity as to who was the good guy and who were the villains -- an elegant simplicity for a complicated world.

With the archivist job, I could set my own hours around my actual job. The National Archive only needed me to keep ahead of the cataloguing and intake of various films and memorabilia. It was an easy job and the mindlessness of the sorting and spreadsheets helped me to quiet the static in my brain and think through cases for Gaunt. Plus, the key card access let me avoid the crowds that plagued the front of house staff and I could watch whatever I pleased.

There was none of that usual hustle tonight. For the moment, the annex was empty of any customers or guests despite an hour remaining of normal operating hours. There were no hordes of people with their cell phones taking pictures of posters and architecture. No crying children being dragged into mile long queues to see Judy Garland in one panel of film from the original *The Wizard of Oz*. No gaggles of graduate students standing en masse discussing the problematic portrayal of I. Y. Yunioshi at the original poster for *Breakfast at Tiffany's* signed by Truman Capote and Audrey Hepburn.

No, this off-season the Peckett was operating on a skeleton staff and there were crates of films everywhere being marked and packed for shipment across town. The array of boxes and moving supplies had turned the vestibule into a menagerie of cinematic paraphernalia. The faded

cardboard produced many odd vignettes thanks to the haphazard placement of the various mannequins and props by the moving company.

These boxes would be my task for the next month or so. Head Curator, Gregory Smyth, who was just as British as his name, had cornered me earlier in the week and told me I needed to provide inventory for the transfer to the new facility. The vaults were in a bit of an upheaval with all the packing, but I was managing to get it all done in my free time.

I had planned on cracking open the catacombs where the really old stuff had been stored - the things that the original owner had put there before the Peckett had become a protected historical site, but today had really gotten in the way. Now, I would have to put off the work for another few weeks, until I could wrap up this case.

Taking a deep inhalation in the silence of the annex, I filled my lungs with the stale smells of the oily popcorn in the display case. It was an interesting historical component to the theatre that many overlooked: if you were to examine the trough of yellowing kernels, you would notice that a historical cross-section of the many strata of snacks pressed against the glass could act as a means of dating the building.

The lowest layer of the corn could be traced back to the opening salvo of kernels that had issued forth from the giant cast-iron belly of the popcorn machine during the very first screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari* in 1920. The musky odor of the ancient fabrics that had been brought up from the bowels of the archive and draped over the counter mixed with the scent of the popcorn and amalgamated into pure distillation of nostalgia.

The snack bar, itself, had a beautifully garish nature that glowed with the neon and fluorescent advertisements. These modern installations had been added throughout the passing

decades and were historical in their own right. Originally, they were an attempt to coax coins from the patron's pockets for sugary snacks, but now they coaxed coins for their history alone. These gimmicky and flashy signs paled in comparison to what lay beneath this thin, commercial veneer. The foundations of this theatre would stand the test of time.

Leaning against the counter, I sat my coat on the glass and allowed myself to relieve some of the mental stress by taking in the most beautiful sight in the whole theatre. When a person entered the Peckett, they could become lost in the grandeur of the forgotten art of balance and detail -- patterns and rhythms that brought the Peckett to life. There were the rising golden pillars that soared to the ceiling in the mathematically crystalline forms attributed to the Art Deco movement of the Roaring Twenties.

The geometry of it all took my breath away as the lines and arches raced around the annex giving definition to every facet of the room. Thousands of unique patterns and shapes coalesced into a beautiful unity that one would be hard-pressed to find in modern architecture, but Arthur Peckett hadn't stopped there with his masterpiece. The practical elements were awe-inspiring, but the original artwork was sublime.

The real-estate mogul had wanted his shrine to the arts to leave a lasting impact on anyone who came to visit his theatre. Mr. Peckett reached back into history and pulled from its eternity. He called upon the memories of the ancients, drawing the patrons in preparation for a reflective and creative mind-set. At the top of the pillars, they gave birth to otherworldly beauties that stared imperiously down upon their inferiors.

The centerpiece of the mural was unfortunately obscured by a rather brash lighting fixture that had been installed by his son after Arthur Peckett had passed. However, if a person

knew she was there, if one could see past the mask of obscuring incandescence when they looked at the ceiling, then Mnemosyne would command their full attention.

The goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, sat on her throne of light robed in a rich green toga the color of the deepest woods. She was a calming matron whose delight was evidenced by a fragment of a smile that she gifted the observer as she watched her daughters play.

The nine muses of Greek mythology danced across the fresco and around their mother. They danced, delighting in the world that had been created just for them. Calliope argued historical record with Clio over wars that had long passed from memory. Euterpe played her flute while Thalia and Terpsichore held hands and danced to what was surely a merry tune. Erato wrote of the most beautiful loves as Polyhymnia stared sternly over the shoulder of her frivolous sister. Urania was lost in the stars and constellations, but my favorite of the muses was Melpomene.

The muse of tragedy sat further away from the others and stared longingly towards the box office windows. Melpomene's visage was painted more or less directly below my apartment, so she was the last one I saw before I climbed the stairs. Plus, she was easily the most complex of all the muses in the painting. According to some documentation that had been kept during the theatre's construction, Mel was the last muse completed on the whole mural due to some piping issue.

However, rather than flagging in his efforts, the artist had appeared to have placed deliberate emphasis on this young goddess. The steel-blue green of her eyes shone with an intense depth and understanding that seemed lifelike against her alabaster skin. She wore emerald robes to match her mother, but it was none of these physical attributes that gave

Melpomene her depth, it was her gaze -- a gaze that spoke of an intense longing for what lay beyond those doors. A longing that would remain forever unfulfilled. A longing to join a world of which she could never be a part.

I tried to explain that all to Jason at one point, but his eyes had glazed over the moment I mentioned the word “architecture.” While McNamara never appreciated the theatre, the grandeur of the whole place was never lost on me. Every time that I came home, I spent a few minutes in the lobby and took in all I could from such a magical place. Thankfully, I would get this place to myself in a few years.

The Peckett Theatre wasn’t going to be home to the National Cinematic Archive much longer. The goddesses would find their worshippers diminishing after recent legislation and building plans. The current city council and Mayor Casey Shapiro decided to build a modern museum and multiplex to house the hundreds of thousands of film reels, records, and various other audio-visual artefacts that currently sat decaying in the underground catacombs of the Peckett building complex.

Despite the new construction, the Peckett would remain standing. It was a historical landmark after all, and a beautiful example of early 20th century architecture. They had plans for the Peckett to retain its own museum and the storage space below was to be repurposed to hold duplicates and various items for special exhibits. This was great news for me because my apartment would be left untouched and the tourist traffic would lessen considerably once the new campus was completed in the spring.

The new National Cinematic Archive at the Francesco Florentian Campus across town would combine the Peckett collection with several other smaller collections and be used to

preserve an estimated 1.1 million films in a climate-controlled, state-of-the-art facility. I assumed this would explain all the coders and land acquisitions by the corporation. Francesco had become increasingly obsessed with his legacy of late and been pitching all sorts of ideas to the city council.

This facility that Francesco had pitched would not only maintain the artistic heritage of film and the audio-visual medium, but also increase the city's tourism revenue. The projected incomes had Shapiro salivating, since the mayor was struggling to maintain the city's budget in the current political climate. This project would be great for re-election, but none of that concerned me so long as I still had a bed.

Exhaustion hit me full on as I relaxed in the calming atmosphere of the theatre, and I knew that I was only moments from collapsing. I could parse through evidence in the morning. Gary still owed me a preliminary report. I turned to head up to my apartment when a slight shine on the floor caught my eye.

In front of the counter, there was the sheen of a slowly congealing soda spill on the concrete portion of the floor. Thankfully, the soda hadn't been tracked onto the ornately woven sage carpet, yet.

It seemed as if the porters who had been emptying the storage were too lazy to clean up their mess -- and judging from the musk of the reopened vaults mixed with the souring body odor that the laborers had left behind, they were also too lazy to clean themselves. All these smells and more would be stored in the upholstery and fabrics of the Peckett for perpetuity, which acted much like the baking soda that came with my apartment eight years ago and kept all the wonderful flavors of my foods. Indeed, it would be a rich tapestry of odors for all to enjoy.

I was ready to decompress in my apartment, but decided I had better clean up this mess before Mr. Wimble came in for the night shift. That crotchety old security guard hated it whenever anything was out of place and would always come banging on my apartment door, regardless of the hour.

I set my winter apparel back on the counter and tried to see if there were any napkins or paper towels, but apparently those objects had been stored or had not been reordered while the place was in a state of flux. The bathroom should have some toilet paper for the mess on the floor.

That was odd.

The bathrooms should be untouched, yet the stalls were in pieces. The sink had been removed, and several of the porcelain thrones had been reduced to piping. Maybe they were going to remodel the bathroom and revamp some of the more-trafficked and less-historical portions of the theatre to ensure the building would last? New piping would be great – I might even be able to get hot water upstairs for once.

With the paper towels in hand, I closed my path. The boxes were stacked neatly where they had been and I was careful to return the everything back to their original places – wouldn't want the workers not to know who to call for a good time if something went missing, would we? I flipped the light off and went back into the lobby. The mess hadn't gone anywhere, but a wild-haired man had appeared behind the snack-counter and seemed to be absentmindedly shuffling through the contents of my coat while sipping on a soda.

“Cael? Is that you?” I was floored, seeing him before me after all these years.

Cael spluttered on his soda and yelled a greeting back. “Johnny-Boy!”

My brain could not process the juxtaposition between what I was seeing and my last memory of Cael. He was wearing a dark charcoal suit that looked like it cost more than I made in a year. Cael's gaunt frame had been replaced with a confident musculature that would make women drool. There was glow about him that emanated from the trademark Florentian smile, a smile that I hadn't seen in over a decade. This man leaning on the counter looked every bit the part of Prince Florentian, not the broken husk I had put onto a plane all those years ago.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I gasped as my friend crushed me in a bear hug, lifting me off the ground.

"Didn't you get my voicemail?" Cael asked as he set me back down on the green carpeting. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't expect to see you here. I didn't even call you back." I was stunned. It was like I had stepped into a different reality. This was the Cael that was supposed to be. The man he was supposed to have become.

"Yeah, I just figured I would drop in and catch up with you." Cael smiled expectantly and I gestured for him to take a seat on one of the plush chairs. "I had to leave the Peckett and come back a few times to finally run into you, since someone didn't return my call.

"You look great, dude. Rehab is done, then?" I asked sheepishly. I really should have called him back at some point today.

"Rehab and sobriety are never truly done. There are things that I still need to work on, but I am feeling more alive than I have in years." Cael took off his suit coat, and as he did the sleeve on his right arm became caught.

The sleeve caught on a button and became dislodged, revealing heavy bandaging on his wrist. There were several crimson lines stretching vertically up his forearm that had soaked through the gauze. Instinctively, I grabbed his wrist to look at the wounds on his arm.

“Like I said, I still have somethings I need to work on.” Cael yanked his arm back and reaffixed the button, covering up the cuts. “I’ll get there. So, what’s new with you?”

“Well –” I began, but was stopped short by a buzzing that was coming from the counter. “—one second.”

I hopped up and began rifling through the pockets of the jacket, trying to find my phone. It was probably Jason, since I hadn’t called him yet. For the life of me, I couldn’t find the damn phone. In frustration, I whipped my coat up and down trying to get the phone to fall out. It succeeded, but only after I had dumped the entirety of my belongings contents across the floor.

The screen displayed Jason’s name and number. I would call him back in a few minutes. So, I hit the silent button and knelt to pick up all the loose change that had been scattered.

“What is this?” Cael was holding my black MP3 player. He stood there staring intently at the small device and was tracing the deep gouges that were etched into the side.

“It’s my MP3 player.” I said and stood, reaching for the box, but Cael quickly withdrew it before I could take it back. He pulled it into his chest and annoyance flashed across his face.

“Heh. Kidding.” Cael offered the device to me and cracked an award-winning smile, without his eyes leaving the machine.

“Right. Look, Cael...I am exhausted. Would you be free for dinner later this week to catch up?” I offered, only half lying. I really was exhausted, but my phone kept buzzing in my pocket and I doubted that Jason was going to stop any time soon.

“Yep. Sure, I got some business to attend to anyway. Tell you what, Dad is having a big thing at the Gannett Museum celebrating the beginning of construction of his new campus. It’s this Tuesday. Care to attend after you get off from work?”

“That sounds awesome. Text me all the details and I’ll see you then.” I walked Cael to the door to make sure he sealed it right when he left.

“Sure. Have a good night, John.” Cael stepped out of the lights of the theatre and into the dark of the city, heading towards a BMW that was idling in front.

“Oh, Cael?” I called after him.

“Yeah?” He asked from halfway into the backseat.

“I’m real glad you’re back.” It was really good to have my friend back after all these years. He just flashed a smile and closed the door to the car as I closed the Peckett’s front entrance. Inside, I pulled out my phone and answered the call.

“What is it?!” I said, a little too harshly, into the receiver.

Jason’s voice was strained as it came from my phone. “Coffer, we got another body.”

“Where?” I felt chills shoot up my spine. This killer was moving a lot faster than my father ever had during his rampage. They must be getting comfortable.

“Still in the Southern Shore. Marina this time.” Jason relayed.

“Come get me at the Peckett.” Suddenly, the exhaustion I felt was eradicated by the rush of adrenaline and fear.

“I’ll be right there.” Jason confirmed. “And Coffey, there is one more thing.”

“What is it?” I asked hesitantly, McNamara seemed hesitant or scared to say the last part.

“Gary found an audio recording at the scene.”

Chapter 7: The Request

"RJ, will you vacuum the carpet?"

"Sure, Mom. Why are you getting all dolled up?"

"I am going out and don't want to look like a slob. Be sure to pick up those movies you've left scattered all over the floor."

"Yes, Mother. Where you going?"

"To dinner, there's this really nice Italian place over on Second Street that I have just been dying to try. Are you getting hungry?"

"Yeah, that sounds wonderful, Mom. What time are you leaving?"

"Just as soon as Callie gets back from soccer practice."

"Mom, I don't think Callie is going to be back in time for dinner."

"Oh."

"It'll be fine, Mom. We can go. We can still have a nice dinner."

"I just really wanted to have dinner as a family again. It has been so long. Oh well, I'm sure she'll be able to make it next time."

"Yeah, next time..."

"Did you pick up those old movies that you brought over? I only watched a few of them."

"Yes, Mother."

“Good. Well, since we don’t have to wait on your sister then we can leave once your father gets back.”

“ ... ”

“RJ, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

John Coffey and Susan Coffey

St Raphael's Assisted Living Facility

05/12/2015

“Wake up, John.” Jason shook me awake.

“Hmm?” Groggily, I wiped the sleep from my eyes. All three hours of it.

“We’re here.” Jason confirmed.

The two of us had just finished driving through the night. At first, we had agreed to take shifts for the three hour drive up the interstate. However, after I hit the rumble strips for the fourth time, Jason took over piloting us up to Northwood Haven. We were at the maximum security mental facility on the orders of Gaunt and, once again, I was working on a day that was supposed to be one of rest. However, this Sunday, I was grateful to just be working.

After Jason and I had arrived at the docks, Gaunt chewed me out for a good long while. When she finally stopped to catch her breath, I had to kiss a lot of ass and lick a lot of boots to avoid administrative leave. Gaunt eventually gave in to my charms after I promised to work

parking tickets on Saturday mornings for five months, and said we could help with the case again with the department “stretched so thin” as it was.

Jason and I were now assigned to find out how the hell a recording of my father had found its way to the Southern Shore. From what I gathered, it was divide and conqueror. Gaunt and the others would finish cataloguing the newest murder scene while Jason and I did footwork to gather some other leads. For some reason, she didn’t want me anywhere near the crime scene before they had photographed everything. Apparently, I might “contaminate” the scene.

Then, come Monday, all the detectives would get the preliminary autopsy report and share notes on how to proceed with the case. There were a few more people involved than I would have liked, but given the brutality of the murders, Gaunt made it clear that it was all hands on deck.

“Yeah...gimme a sec.” I grumbled as I stretched life back into my cramped limbs. “Can I hear that audio file one more time before we go inside?”

Jason grunted and handed me the tablet. Gaunt did at least see fit to give us one of Gary’s toolpads with some pictures of the victims, initial notes, and the audio file on it. The original was on an ancient flash drive that had been found taped above the victim’s head, but it had already been catalogued as evidence. I pressed play and the small speakers crackled to life.

“Can you tell me about your projects?”

“I have so many, you will have to be a bit more specific.”

“Your project to renew the cycle?”

“If one of them can see the **pattern** clearly, they will naturally embrace the renewal process and continue my **cycle**.”

There were two voices on the recording, but there was so much masking that it was hard to get any information without the lab. One spoke in a hushed, distorted tone and asked the questions. I could barely make out the words, let alone identify the voice. However, the other voice was recognizable; the other, who answered the questions, was a voice that I knew all too well and I could analyze that one.

“Why do you keep listening to the recording? There is nothing useful on it.” Jason remarked.

“Wrong, McNamara.” I said as I rewound it and listened again. “Here. You can hear the emphasis that he is putting on the words of ‘cycle’ and ‘pattern.’ Serial killers tend to have a set pattern or ritual so that is what they are talking about.”

“So?” Jason asked through bleary eyes.

“So, whoever is talking to my father is probably the copycat.” I explained “But the one thing I don’t understand is the ‘one of them’ remark.”

“Maybe there is more than one copycat?” Jason asked yawning.

“You going to survive or fall asleep mid-interrogation?” I asked sarcastically as I got out of the car.

“Shut up and let’s go.” Jason responded.

The two of us walked into Northwood Haven and checked in with an orderly by the name of Marvin Ortega. He was stout man that only grunted in affirmation or dissent with any inquiries that we had about the facility. Quickly, I learned to just stop the process entirely and simply let the man guide us through the various wards. Although, I did manage to get him to tell us that we were headed into the eastern wing, the section of the facility that had been my father's home for the past decade.

Northwood Haven was a large state-run facility used for all persons deemed too dangerous to be released into the public, but too insane to be sentenced to the federal penitentiary. Not all of the inhabitants were violent criminal offenders though. In fact, many were simply people who needed the support of a dedicated staff and access to regular medication to keep the voices at bay. Unfortunately, like most government entities, there was a huge disconnect between the funding that was needed and the funding that was actually received by the facility.

As we walked further into the bowels of the facility, the sounds of a distant struggle echoed dully off the rubberized and sterile hallways of the ward. This ward was the bottom floor of the secure east wing, but was not quite at the level of sequestration that the maximum secure sector endured. Apparently, Roger had been on good behavior.

The lax confinement in this section meant that there were a few patients wandering up and down the corridor muttering to themselves, lost in the dark pathways of their delusions. The bathrobe wearing patrons seemed oblivious to our trio as we marched right past them and into a conference room that was set up for just such visits. Lawyers and therapists were constantly frequenting the facility for check-ups and appeals with their clients.

Jason and I sat in the small room and waited for Ortega to retrieve Roger from whatever crevice he was hiding. As we sat, it occurred to me that I hadn't seen him in a decade. I had not lain eyes on this man...this monster in over ten years. Fear began to rise in my throat and fill it with cotton.

Fear. Honest to goodness fear began in my chest and started to blossom into full-blown terror. I could feel my face growing hot even as I knew the color was draining from my cheeks. My palms were getting sweaty. I tried to stand up and walk around, but my knees were jelly and my arms were lead tubes that became plastered to my side. I was pretty sure I was going to throw up that gas station pasta I had grabbed from the Sunoco station during the ride. The last time I had spoken to him was at the trial, but I wasn't even really talking to him. I was talking at him for my testimony.

"You alright?" Jason asked, noticing that I was becoming tenser as each second passed.

"Fine." I said, but the crack in my voice betrayed that response.

This was stupid, the man was nearly sixty-five years old now and locked up. Roger was no longer the Southern Shore Sadist. He was vulnerable and harmless, and I was not the frightened seventeen-year-old boy whose father came at him with a knife. I needed to get my anxiety under control before I lost myself in the panic.

"One hundred...ninety-nine...ninety-eight" I breathed as I closed my eyes and began the counting ritual that Fitzzy had taught me. The counting was next to useless, but rather it was synching my inhalations with each syllable I muttered. The focus allowed me to move away from the thoughts that were inducing the panic and to build back my reserve of will-power.

“Seventy-one...seventy...sixty-nine” I continued. I heard the door open and the chair squeak as someone sat down. I opened my eyes.

A man sat in front of me in white coveralls and soft slippers with his hands steepled on the table in front of him. This was not the large shadow that haunted my dreams, but what looked to be a simple man. An elderly man with lively blue eyes sparkling under the sharp white eyebrows and a mop of thinning white hair.

“Hello, son.” Roger said placidly as he smiled at me.

“You don’t have a son anymore.” I responded coldly, not being fooled by the exterior that contained the sadist. The counting had worked, but the adrenaline was still there and I could use it as an edge. “You lost that privilege.”

“Must I placate his delusions?” Roger turned his head and directed it at Jason. This small deference to Jason was a manipulative technique that I hadn’t recognized as a child, but was more than aware of now. That simple question and gesture was a carefully designed ploy to both degrade my status in the discussion and win over Jason by elevating him in the conversation.

“I’d say his statement is more accurate than yours.” Jason responded to Roger calmly. I smirked at that retort. Well done, McNamara. We won this volley, now to get some actual information.

“Fine. What brings you two here after all this time? I haven’t had a visitor in ages. The only person who visits me is your sister and, as I said, that was quite some time ago.” Roger leaned forward in his seat. He seemed more focused now that we had challenged him.

“No need to lie, Roger. I know that you have had visitors recently and we have reason to believe that one of them was a big fan of your work. I just want to know who.” I said as I took off my hat and mimicked his motion. I was ready for this fight now.

“Well, now, my boy. You came prepared to spar with daddy-dearest, didn’t you?” Roger grinned like a jackal at the prospect. “I will be more than willing to help you, if you have my black box. It helps me get in the mood.”

“Sorry, I threw it out when I sold the house.” I said flatly.

“No need to lie, son.” Roger smirked and it was all I could do to keep my composure. “I know that you have it on you. My visitors recently told me what you use it for and I must say, I am a big fan of *your* work.” Roger echoed my words back at me and seemed to relish the confused look on Jason’s face. The Sadist was trying a new tactic now.

I squirmed a bit in my seat. Roger was probing the conversation with expert feints and lunges. In that one statement, he had banked on my secrecy and exposed the origins of the box to Jason. This remark left me with two options. I could deny him the box and return to square one or acknowledge that his statement was correct giving him the satisfaction that his sickness lived on. A remark here and a gesture there, Roger was in his element.

I chose to parry the attack rather than take the damage from a hit. You couldn’t win a war of words by reacting to the ploys. I needed to go on the offensive. I said nothing and took out the tablet that Gary had given us. I flipped it open, pulled up the pictures of the first crime scene, and slid the device under Roger’s nose as he stared.

The tablet sat on the table between us as we stared back at each other. Roger broke first and looked down at the pictures in front of him. Roger pulled the tablet forward and slowly

picked it up. The man held the tablet inches from his face. The computer was blocking it from view, but I could see that he was flipping through the images intently.

“My, my, my...Is this your handiwork?” Roger looked through the work. Occasionally, he gasped or tut-tutted, like a teacher who was examining the first draft of a paper. “You really should let me teach you the family profession.”

“I didn’t do that,” I remarked before I could see that he was just trying to stir me up.

“What do you mean that it is not you?” Roger said in mock indignation. “Some cretin has usurped your throne...your birthright. Some pretender is seizing our legacy!”

“There is a message on the tablet. Press play.” I commanded, ignoring his flourish. The toolpad played the garbled recording and I watched him for any reaction. A small, almost imperceptible frown flitted across his face.

“I don’t know what that is supposed to be.” Roger’s voice was harder now. The playfulness was gone.

“Don’t give me that. I can get a judge to subpoena every stitch of documentation they got on you here. Why don’t you do something good in your life and just tell me what I want to know?” I explained. It was rare that Roger left himself so vulnerable. I saw an opening in the discussion, so I pressed my assault.

“Good? I raised you didn’t I? Here you sit – perfectly alive and aggressively pursuing the truth. You’re making the world a better place, just like I was doing.” Roger smiled again as his last words sealed his trap.

“ENOUGH.” I began to lose control, but I didn’t care very much. I snapped the tablet back from him. “I am nothing like you.”

“It is the law of averages, my dear boy.” Roger said sternly looking up into my eyes, his voice rising in crescendo. “After all, you may pretend that you are nothing like me. You may act like you are normal, but the reality is that I made you. I am your source code and, like a machine, you can never deviate too far from your programming -- from what I have provided for you. Eventually son, you will regress to the mean. Embrace it.”

“I will be nothing like you.” I snarled back, but there was a slight catch to my voice. There was blood in the water now and Roger knew it.

“I know that you can hear the beat.” Roger stood now and leaned towards my face. “I know that inside you exists the same pulse that is in me. Fight it all you like, but it is stronger than you. It was stronger than me.”

“You’re wrong.” I knew it was a mistake to show weakness, but I couldn’t fight it this time. He was my dad and there was always going to be a part of me that respected that, no matter how hard I tried to fight it. I sat back down.

“It is nature in its most primal form.” Roger’s voice softened like a father comforting a child who was ashamed. “You are a predator, my dear boy. It is in your genes. Fight it all you like, you will never be free of it. It might not be today or tomorrow, but the Pattern must be satisfied. You will b—”

I looked up from my lap. Marvin Ortega, the orderly, had walked behind Roger and shoved him back down into the chair. The force of Ortega had broken Roger’s rhythm and his trance over me, but I had to get out of this room. It was useless to have come here.

“We are done here. Officer McNamara, I think it is time to go.” I collected the tablet and rose out of my seat. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Ortega. I am sure we can find our way out of here.”

“Right.” Jason responded, obviously still stunned at what had transpired.

Together, we rose from the table and put on our winter coats. The door opened to the hallway slowly on old hinges. We got about five steps down the hallway before we heard a bellow.

“WAIT!” Roger growled from the room. He stuck his head out in the hallway and looked to be dragging Ortega with him. I paused, more in curiosity than actual courtesy for my father.

The man was transformed. The elderly man that was so calm and collected earlier was now the hulking brute once more. The shadow that haunted my dreams was now manifest in the corridors of Northwood Haven.

Corded muscle rippled beneath the old, crinkled skin as Roger pulled himself through the door frame and into the hallway. The blue eyes had been swallowed by the blackened pits and only the void stared hungrily out at Jason and me. I could hear sinews and joints popping as he clawed his way along the wall towards us with the orderly wrapped around his waist, yelling to other guards for help.

“The killer...you’re look...ing for copies my actions, but they lack...fin...esse.” Roger gasped through teeth gritted with physical exertion. “The copycat using the prey to fill their own holes rather than using their gifts to bring them to a higher---.

His words were cut off as he was swallowed under the weight of the orderlies who had rushed to the scene. It took four of them to get the screaming, flailing mess back under control. When they finally got off of him, he looked once more like the frail old man that had been brought to us a few minutes ago.

We found our own way out of Northwood Haven. Jason and I stood in the cold February air, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. Finally, I broke the silence.

“He is right ya know. I do still use his black box.” I confessed to Jason.

“Oh yeah?” Jason responded dully.

“Yeah, it’s probably psychosomatic...when I listen to that beat of his, I get a clarity and I can see patterns in crime scenes much clearer.” The words tumbled out and I could hear how crazy they sounded. No one, outside Fitzzy, knew this about me.

“That’s fucked.” Jason responded simply.

“Look, if you wanna report--” I started, but I was quickly cut off.

“I mean my old man used to hit me when I was a smart ass. But shit, Coffer. You really got fucked when they were giving out parents.” Jason clasped me on the back and walked me to the car.

“McNamara, you don’t have to pretend everything is alright.” I said, stopping in front of the car.

“Look, Coffer. Explain what you want to explain. I’ll listen, but I won’t judge. I really only get pissed when you break protocol. We each have our own rituals that we do to get the job

done and as far as I can tell, yours is harmless. Best of all, it isn't against regulation." Jason threw me the keys. "I need sleep though, so you are driving after this useless trip."

"It wasn't useless." I smiled a little as I climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Oh yeah? How's that?" Jason asked as he buckled himself into the seat.

"I know *what* pattern that I am looking for now." I explained as we pulled out and headed back to Circadia City. "Just gotta find out who it belongs to before it gets any bigger."

Chapters 8-13: The Summaries

Chapter 8: The Bullpen

Detectives Coffey and McNamara return to the station on Monday morning to report their findings to Gaunt and receive the preliminary reports on the bodies. During the debriefing, they discover more about the victims. Gary cracked into the Media Jack and found information about Patel. Devon Patel was a 20 year old cyber-tick that had been hiding malware in Florentian Cyberstructure. He had been spoofing the search protocols in the system to avoid detection. Once Gary searched for Patel using the precinct's cyberstructure, his record appeared.

Apparently, Patel had bounced around the foster system and at age 17, he was arrested for being in possession of heroin with intent to sell. He was given a lighter sentence of specialized rehab because he testified against his boss, Rafael Grigorio. Patel had been hired by the Florentian Company as a coder through a criminal justice program allowing for retraining of felons. Within a year, Patel was back on the streets with a new skill.

The second victim, where the recording was found, was a coder named Lindsay Wright who had a similar background to Patel. Wright was a retrained convict who had found her way back to petty crime. The murder was similar to the first case. It occurred in an apartment building owned by Florentian. Her body was arranged in a similar fashion as the body of Patel, complete with a cicada – although the cuts seemed cleaner this time. The only meaningful difference between the two bodies is that there was skin found under her nails – Wright had fought her assailant and given forensics the possibility of DNA evidence.

Gaunt has dealt with the press by refusing to comment, although by now the murders are known to exist and the imaginations of Circadia City are haunted by the memories of the Southern Shore Sadist. Coffey reveals to McNamara about Grigorio's release and hostile actions

in the Palisades. John is suspicious of the connection between Grigorio and Patel. They devise a plan to pursue and track down Grigorio for questioning and then attend the Gannett Gala to meet their vandal and possible witness, Jessica Belle.

Chapter 9: The Turn

McNamara and Coffer track Rafael Grigorio down to a halfway house in the Southern Shore, but they wait until late afternoon to approach. When the two detectives confront the ex-convict, they are treated to a foot race as Grigorio bolts. McNamara finally tackles him to the ground and manages to subdue the man.

At first, Grigorio blusters and complains about police brutality. However, Grigorio wilts at the threat of more jail time in response to his veiled threats earlier. Time has become precious for Grigorio because he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and is desperately trying to get enough money to go back to his childhood home one last time. Grigorio works two jobs and even moonlights as Mr. Florentian's driver for his late night trips around the city. This statement peaks John's interest, wondering why a man of Florentian's status needs a convict to drive him around. So, he presses the drug runner for more information.

Grigorio confesses he just gets a text message, shows up to the Florentian Sky-rise, and drives to an address that he gets on his phone -- all without even seeing the man get in or out. With no evidence to link him to the murder, the two detectives let the former drug runner go. This new information surprises John, but reasons that Francisco Florentian does have access to certain buildings and the victims were his employees.

Perhaps, it would be worth a trip to the Palisades? However, the two must be careful even suggesting that a figure as powerful as Francesco Florentian is connected to these heinous crimes. Therefore, Coffer offers to go by himself to see if he can figure out what is going on since he has ties with the family and a friendship with Cael.

Chapter 10: The Sky-Rise

Jason forces John to take him along, but agrees to wait in the car while John visits. Rather, John will informally investigate the information that he received from Grigorio. It has been years since he had stepped foot inside the Florentian's penthouse, but he is welcomed with open arms by Sofia Florentian. She is the mother of Cael, cares deeply for her son, and may be an enabler for some his worst habits.

The two catch up and reminiscing about good memories. They discuss all the adventures that Cael and John had during their youth. The conversation turns to Cael's current plans now that he is out of rehab clinic and Sofia begins to become distressed.

Apparently, Cael had shown up on their doorstep weeks ago. He was fresh out of rehab claiming to have found peace at last. Things were fine for a few days, but Francisco suspected his son was lying and began tracking his movements through a few of his connections.

It turned out that Cael was associating with some of the felons hired by his father. Francisco had confronted him about his choice of friends and the situation blew up. Cael claimed they were friends from rehab that were helping him stay stable. Francisco was enraged at the idea of his son associating with scum and began cursing Cael out. The disagreement had come to a head this morning and Francisco disowned Cael and legally severed ties.

On this down note, John decides to leave. As he departs, he asks where he can find Francisco or Cael. Sofia informs him that Francisco has been spending most of his time at his office in the Southern Shore inspecting his latest acquisitions and overseeing portions of construction. As for Cael, she assumes he will be at the Gannett Gala tonight since he enjoys parties.

After leaving Mrs. Florentian, John calls Cael. At first Cael seems distracted or busy, but when John tells him that he plans to attend the Gannett Gala, his mood changes. Cael is excited to spend time with his old friend again and tells John that he will pick him up at the Peckett and they can head over together. John and Jason develop a plan to get some answers from both Cael Florentian and Jessica Belle at the party.

Chapter 11: The Gala

Jason uses his badge to get into the event, while John and Cael arrive at the Gala in a limo. Almost immediately, Cael is approached by one of the coordinators to give a speech in place of his father who is nowhere to be found. Cael takes the news in stride, hugs John apologizing for being a bad host, and departs from John's company to prepare for the speech. Meanwhile, Jason has found Belle's dressing room and gathers John to go investigate.

The two detectives find her planning the finishing touches on her latest "urban vision" when they intrude. Jessica is evasive at first, especially regarding her time in the Southern Shore. John reveals they found her wallet at the scene of major police investigation, so she better start talking. Jessica relents and explains her connection to that building.

Jessica Belle had been commissioned to paint images of the Southern Shore for her new exhibit that was supposed to usher in the innovations of the Florentian Company. Originally, she was supposed to create external works that could be enjoyed by the city. Instead, Jessica decided to make a statement about the gentrification that endangered those neighborhoods.

Over the past few months, Belle had broken into derelict buildings and camped out inside them while she worked. This past Saturday, she had been finishing up the final mural dubbed *Sulfur and Sadist* while her boyfriend, Devon Patel, was upstairs. With this revelation about her connection to Patel, John informs her that he was dead, but does not go into the details just yet.

Jessica is shocked at the news. Jason wants to know why she never reported him missing, but she confesses that she had known that Patel had criminal dealings. It was nothing for him to

disappear for a few days – especially since the cops had been crawling all over the place. John then asks her why she came back.

The coders had startled Belle and she ran, fearing that she would be arrested before her show. In her escape, she had dropped her wallet with her driver's license in it. John remembers that they didn't find one in the wallet. Jessica then remembers that there was a man with wild hair staring at her from the fire escape as she crawled through the window, he may have taken it. She continues that Patel constantly brought odd individuals into their apartment for whatever scheme he was working on. She thought nothing of it on Saturday when he brought in a "friend from rehab." Jessica concluded that it must be the same guy.

Jason and John want Belle to come to the station with them immediately, but she resists. John presses the issue, trying to convey the necessity that they get her statement so they can find the killer. Finally, she does agree to go after she accepts her award from Florentian. The two reluctantly agree to wait.

Cael delivers his speech and expertly works the crowd in his father's absence. At his conclusion, he calls Jessica to the stage. As they are shaking hands, she goes deathly pale. Cael just smiles for the cameras and pulls her closer before releasing her backstage.

Chapter 12: The Fallout

John sees Jessica's discomfort and wonders if she's alright, so he heads to her dressing room. Before he can leave though, Jason takes a call from Gaunt – a third body has turned up. This time it is the body of Francisco Florentian found in his Southern Shore Office by a night janitor. Over the phone, Gaunt relays the fact that the body doesn't have the same ritualistic pattern. It is as if the murderer had just up and left.

John realizes that Cael is the copycat killer. He has yet to figure out why, but he frantically scans the crowd for Cael, knowing that he is after Jessica. Cael is after her because he knows that she is the one person who can place Cael at the scene of the Patel murder. John cannot locate either one of them, even after he checks the dressing room.

The dressing room is empty, but in disarray. It appears that there was a struggle that knocked over the tables and chairs. Jason discovers Jessica's phone in the mess and assumes the worst has occurred. He assumes she has been abducted by Cael.

Coffer decides to plug in his father's beats again, thinking it will give him insight into Cael's plan. However, as he reaches for the MP3 player, John realizes it is missing from his coat pocket. Cael had to have taken it when he had hugged him.

John then realizes where Cael has gone. Cael is trying to recreate the moment where he was infected with this evil. Coffer deduces that Cael has gone back to where it all started – The Talan Industrial Complex and he has taken Jessica to be his sacrifice.

Chapter 13: The Cicada

Gaunt already has sent cars to the Florentian Penthouse, but agrees to dispatches Coffer and McNamara to follow John's hunch at the Talan Industrial Complex with the promise of armed back-up as soon as it is available. Coffer and McNamara are already speeding to the Talan, hoping to save Jessica even though they are weaponless.

When the two arrive, they see the body of Grigorio lying outside the entrance to the factory. Jason confirms that Grigorio is dead, most likely by the two gunshot wounds to the chest. John remembers the layout of the site in painstaking detail, so he takes control of the situation and directs Jason to take the back stairs to the subbasement to cut off any escape.

Armed only with pepper spray, John enters through the main entrance with Jason taking the back route. Nearly crippled by anxiety, John relives the horrors of the past. However, he manages to overcome them and make it the basement where he confronts The Cicada.

When John enters, Cael is standing over an unconscious Jessica, preparing to complete the ritual. John manages to distract him by appealing to his humanity and past. It is not a particularly effective ploy. Cael sees these rituals as the only way to fix his brain. He claims that drugs and alcohol could not kill the visions, but embracing the pattern had quieted the beast.

Cael reveals he stole the audio recordings from Fitzgerald, that he had drugged Patel for his first human experiment, and that he got sloppy with Wright. He hoped that John would join him, which was why he left the recording with Wright. Cael needed a partner and he assured John that he would soon get it right -- that he would master the art as the Southern Shore Sadist had done.

Before Cael could finish his raving, Jason manages to subdue him with a shovel. John retrieves the knife and stands over Cael's body as the rhythm grows louder in his chest. Jason is too preoccupied trying to resuscitate Jessica that he doesn't notice John's stare.

John rationalizes that he could kill Cael here and remove the Pattern from existence here and now. In doing so, the pattern would absorb him. Reluctantly, John lowers the knife and awaits the backups as the beat fades in his chest.

Metacognitive Journals

Metacognitive Journal:
Introduction and Rational for a Creative Thesis

Creative writing is difficult and you cannot learn it any way aside from actually doing it. No matter how hard I researched, listened, and read; there was no better learning of creative writing than by simply doing the act.

The design for *The Law of Averages* was one that took some time for me to realize. I knew that I wanted to create something because my mind had been percolating creative ideas for years. These ideas often manifested themselves in role playing games, one-shot chapters, and short bursts of poetry. Ultimately, none of them ever left my purview because they sat on my computer half-baked and wanting.

Yet, the drive to create still drove me forward. I wanted a challenge for my master's thesis that was outside of my comfort zone. There were plenty of ambient ideas, but I needed more than that for this project to work. I would need to create a longer, more complex, and sustained form of writing than I ever had in the past.

With my advisor, Dr. William Archibald, I settled on an excerpt from a novel. A novel that had begun to coalesce out of the various strands of thematic questions and interesting scenarios that had gathered in my brain over the years. Submitted will be an eight chapter excerpt from my novel entitled, *The Law of Averages* as well as this metacognitive journal. This journal will summarize and analyze my intentions, investigations, and my methods for creative writing.

The first goal that I had set for myself for this creative thesis was finding the correct mindset to begin this particular writing process. This intention was far easier to hold in my mind than it was to actually achieve. My academic writing methods were fossilized because I had

cultivated these skill since middle school. It took numerous drafts and test writings to break myself of academic habits.

I found that the view I have of writing a research based paper is similar to that of a sprinter. The paper is linear, no curves or deviations from the point that is being made. There is a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion. When I wrote for literary examination, I often had narrowly defined goal for the document with specific questions that needed to be addressed. As a research writer, I pulled from the collective weight of previous papers, books, and lectures to support my work on whatever topic I was investigating. I used these citations to guide my papers to arrive at my conclusion, guided by formal structures and the thought leaders that came before me.

Each assertion I made was propped up by quotes and ideas of the established scholars, hoping to establish credibility and evidence for their ideas. The goal of an academic paper is to integrate itself seamlessly into the critical cannon of whatever field that will publish the work. I found creative writing to be a different beast entirely.

Creative writing is difficult. A fact that is overlooked and generally dismissed by those who have never partaken in the study with earnest. Admittedly, I was a bit naïve as to the expertise required to engage meaningfully with the craft. This difficulty of engagement seemed to arise from the fact that the vision, the approach, and the goal of a creative piece are wildly different than that of any academic work. For help to understand the creative method, I elected to study creative writing at Queen's University at Belfast.

The courses I took in Ireland were helpful, even if I did not feel the impact of them immediately. First, I studied under Jimmy McAleavey, a playwright who was born in “West Belfast and educated at Oxford. He has written for stage, radio and screen.” (Jimmy McAleavey) Professor McAleavey introduced me to ideas of character construction, plot structure, and thematic development. In this class, I was exposed to a technical approach, but had to delve into the practical creative writing for myself.

So, I began to write creatively. I wrote for classes at Millersville University. I wrote for classes at Queen’s University Belfast. I even wrote for a gathering of creative professionals in Dublin, Ireland. These professionals opened my eyes to what it took to pursue creative writing as a career. These professionals I met when I went to a Dublin writers’ conference called *Writer’s Game*. This journey provided me with inspiration and guidance for my project.

The conference gave me the opportunity to network with professional writers and gain a little insight into their process for producing prolific works. Several speakers talked on publishing, screen-writing, and promoting. However, the most important information for me was found in the presentation by the writer of the movie *Atomic Blonde*, Antony Johnson.

Johnson provided great insight into the writing process and ideas for developing meaningful dialogue. By trade, he is a comic book writer who made the jump to the big screen. As such, he had tremendous expertise in this field. I took what I learned and applied it to *The Law of Averages*. The application of these teachings is elucidated upon further in subsequent sections of the metacognitive journal.

This thesis allowed me to explore the world in the literal and figurative sense and apply those explorations into a meaningful growth as a writer that will help me and my students for

years to come. The excerpt of eight chapters combined with this journal will embody all that I have learned through Millersville University and provide me with a benchmarks as to how far I still need to go. This entire process has helped me to grow as a writer and an educator.

Metacognitive Journal:
Genre Selection and Development

The Law of Averages is a detective novel that was born from my affinity for the genre. Beginning in the second grade with *The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids* and the *Boxcar Children* series, I have loved mystery. Eventually, I ran out of novels to read based on recommendation and resorted to purchasing books based upon length to satisfy my need to read. The more pages I could get for my lawn-mowing pay, the better. Since I was tackling a new field of English study, it made sense for this love of mystery to be the foundation for my thesis. I chose to delve into a genre that I devoured as a child and continue to enjoy to this day, but needed a more nuanced understanding of the genre in order to progress.

As the research began in the early summer, I quickly learned that reading for pleasure and reading for stylistic acquisition were vastly different. There were rules for detective fiction that I had taken for granted; portions of the story-telling that I had just accepted and never really noticed on a conscious level. To build a foundational understanding, I returned to the research based inquiry of my undergraduate and the bulk of my graduate courses. I investigated the beginnings of the genre through the use of online databases.

Initial examinations turned up many essays that were disparaging of the genre. I found these results to be rather disheartening. Often the writers remarked on the mass-produced nature of detective fiction and the simplistic pleasures derived from action. Therefore, I adjusted the search parameters and a more positive collection of writings were revealed which acknowledged the place that this style of writing has had in culture.

The revised search of the genre turned up an essay authored by Robin W. Winks, an academic who had been on the faculty of Yale University and had written extensively on the subject of detective novels to the tune of at least one hundred and fifty published works in six languages. I began with the essay entitled, *American Detective Fiction*.

In this essay, Winks acknowledges that often times, "...detective fiction [is] quickly labeled "trashy lit." (Winks 4) Although further elucidations throughout the essay do seek to explain the value and layout foundations of this genre. Winks continued that the "Detective fiction, together with its out-riders, the gothic novel and the spy thriller, has long displaced the cowboy novel as the staple of American popular writing." (Winks 3) This statement about the popularity of the genre is certainly the case given the number of shelves dedicated to the books and the vast offerings available in the digital space via Amazon Marketplace and Apple Books. While it is a popular genre, this popularity does not grant the genre a particularly prominent place in literary cannon. It has become my understanding that the popularity of the detective fiction has stemmed from the escapist sense of adventure craved by most readers and the driving plots propelled by a mystery to be solved. My goal is then to emulate these constructions within my writing, *The Law of Averages*.

There were a lot more questions that I had regarding this genre, but at least there was a direction that I could take with the writing. My plot slowly formed over the summer, coalescing around questions that I had and elements that I found to be compelling in a detective story. Quickly, I realized that my story was very focused on a character driven plot. This gravitation towards a complex character was inspired by the works of Jim Butcher and Mike Carey. Two writers who had created the most memorable detective stories of my youth with protagonists just as intriguing as the murder that was being solved. I discovered that this character-centric plotting was another aspect of the genre.

Wink wrote in a further section of his essay about the appeal of the genre extending beyond the simple evolution of the western. He remarks that aside from the adventure and mystery, "Detective fiction helps one explore changing perceptions of personal integrity. It

shows us how to laugh in the midst of frustration, how to take joy from experience, how to tolerate complexity.” (Winks 7) A detective story is a personal experience for some readers who see the characters as reflective of some aspects of their lives. Admittedly, the relatability of a characters is the case of all successful novels, but the essay revealed this as an aspect of detective fiction that I had taken for granted as I devoured the stories.

The mass consumption of the detective fiction was something I enjoyed as a kid, but now it gave me some pause as I plotted out my story. I drew on these feelings of adventure and intrigue to produce my chapters. These were hallmarks of detective fiction that I knew I wanted to address in my writing. What I did want to avoid was the ‘consumable’ nature of Detective Fiction, fearing that my story would lack the complexity that I wanted to apply to it. Especially since, “All literature contains a mystery, but this does not mean that all writers are writing mysteries.” (Winks 4) I wanted to add a little twist on my creation that would allow me to layer in some interesting components.

Looking back on the two writers that I mentioned above, Butcher and Carey, I wondered what it was that made their universes so compelling. The common link was a blend of fantasy in to the gritty world of a hardboiled detective. Both series were a subset of detective fiction that fell into urban fantasy. I figured out that what entranced me about those tales was the fact that I needed to unravel character motivations, the mystery at hand, and the very rules of the world. Therefore, I elected to blend the detective fiction genre with science fiction elements to add “meat to the bones” of my story.

Now, my story is decidedly not science fiction despite containing elements of this genre. The elements act as a stylistic choice to better provide a vehicle for some themes that I was trying to examine in my tale. In *The Law of Averages*, I introduce elements of science fiction to

help further the thematic struggle of my protagonist. I was intrigued by the notion of genetic identity and constructed identity. Therefore, by accelerating the timeline a couple of years into the future, I was able to examine the nature of social technology and automation.

James Gunn, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Kansas and award winning science fiction writer, suggests that science fiction is “fantastic naturalism, or naturalized fantasy, or simply that which hasn't happened yet, that we know of, treated naturalistically.” (Gunn) The setting of *The Law of Averages* is an evolved world that responded “naturalistically” to certain technologically stimuli that are already happening and present in the world.

In *The Law of Averages*, automation has decimated the economy of the city, which creates a vacuum for new powers to emerge as the population adapts the new laws of their worlds. I suppose a better word than “decimated” would be “changed”. The word “decimated” implies a catastrophic or apocalyptic event has occurred and I wanted to distance my writing from dystopian literature. Still, this change falls in line with Gunn’s assertion about the connection between naturalism and science fiction. Man reacts to the environment, “responding to environmental forces and internal stresses and drive”. (Gunn) The new technology has created new problems to be solved, different modes of interpretation, and different professions -- all in the world I created.

My characters are not only seeking to solve the murder, as is this case with most detective fiction, but they do so in a world progressed beyond our own. A world where identity is digitized and stored. A world where automation has progressed to a point where there has developed a new blue collar workforce, the coders.

The genre selection was the first stage of my thesis and required a lot of cognitive lifting. Perhaps the hardest part of it all was isolating my own thoughts and ideas into a singular, cohesive vision for the story. It turns out that there were a lot more ideas and concepts in my head than I had anticipated. For now, many of those are dead ends and had no place in a master thesis.

I sought out discussions, advice, listened to podcasts, read books (both academic and pleasure) and even went to museums. Basically, I wanted to expose myself to as many ideas and visions of creativity as possible in order to build my story. My attempt to find the best genre really helped to clear out those extraneous thoughts and solidify my ideas, thereby enabling me to bring them to life. Selecting detective fiction was the correct choice for me and for the story that I was about to create. Combining it with scientific elements really helped me to make it my own.

Metacognitive Journal:

Character Development, World Building, and Thematic Research

After I selected the genre for my piece, I needed to do research. There were so many half formed ideas that were floating around in my head and I was in search of a direction – a shape to build toward the end goal of a novel. A murder would be the inciting event, but I needed a character, a world, and some bigger questions to address in the novel.

Foremost, I needed a compelling character, a protagonist – a detective. Old detective movies and stories provided some traditional hallmarks to help start my creative process. I found that there were the typical dark and brooding detectives, the logical detective automatons, and the off-kilter renegade cops who were loose cannons. All were wonderful, but they were not mine and I desperately wanted to build something on my own that did not just check the boxes of what a detective should be like.

Most of my early inspirations for character concepts and world building came to me while I existed outside of time and space during the bliss of long solo drives to the Midwest. As the highway stretched in front of me, I developed scenarios in my mind and listened to stories. There was nothing else to do as I trekked for half a day on the American turnpikes. During one of these opportunities to think and examine the world, I heard the idea that would give birth to my protagonist -- John Coffey.

After I burned through my second audiobook, I became fascinated with the *Serial Killer's* podcast over the thirteen hour sojourn. The tales were historical retellings of some of the most heinous crimes to have ever been committed and they were perfect for laying the groundwork for *The Law of Averages*. The presentation of the story was professional, analytical, delved into the psychology of these monstrous beings, and were packaged in convenient one hour segments to help me work through the monotony. I thought that these stories would be a great opportunity for me to get to the root of my murderer. Fiction is always more believable and more terrifying if

there is some basis in reality. Surprisingly, instead of my antagonist – my protagonist was created.

About midway through one of my extended driving sessions, I was listening to the history one of the more vile monsters to have ever been spawned by humanity. It was the tale of Clifford Robert Olson, also known as the Beast of British Columbia. He was a terror who haunted the Vancouver area in the early 1980s. This psychopath led me to the idea of Detective John Coffey.

Olson was a killer who scored impossibly high on the Psychopathy Checklist and was responsible for the murder of eleven children of varying ages. At first glance, it seems absurd to be inspired by such brutality. However, it was not the horrific actions, the monster, or even the arresting officer that got my imagination buzzing. My creativity was inspired by his family.

The inspiration was delivered at the end of an episode as ancillary tidbit, a little bit of background information that demonstrated the obsession that the psychopath had with control and legacy. Olson had demanded that he have a son who bore his name. I attempted to delve more into the story, but there is nothing more that I could uncover about the child. Although, it was a dead end for fact-finding, it gave me an idea with which to build my detective.

The idea was born of several questions that popped into my head. How would someone live with the reality of their father being an inhuman killer? To top it off, how would they bear the emotional weight of having to carry a portion of the monster's identity for their entire lives? These questions became the internal conflict for John Coffey or as Professor McAleavy explained-- need conflict. Throughout the story a character is driven by a desire and must make a

choice that calls this desire into conflict. John wants to know if he will be able to transcend his father's evil or if his identity is inextricably intertwined with his heritage.

All the greatest detectives that I had read about were psychologically complex, therefore I figured that a psychologically complex character was one of the hallmarks of the detective genre. In the *Introduction to the Analysis of Crime Fiction*, Danytè explains that “Moral evaluation becomes more important in Golden Age than in earlier kinds of crime fiction in part because of a greater interest in human psychology that became common in the early 20th century with the influence of psychologists like Sigmund Freud.” (Danytè 15) John is driven by the morality of his actions and trying to find absolution for crimes that he never committed, but became his burden by birthright.

This concept really excited me and I felt that it would fit right in with a detective fiction. Especially since, “Good crime fiction reveals that many people have secret lives and bear guilt for earlier actions, although only a very small number of them actually commit crimes.” (Danytè 15) Solving a crime is a mental exercise first and foremost, so having a character that has guilt and moral conflicts makes him much more compelling. There was quite a lot of tweaking that had to be done before I reached his final form.

John took several iterations to become the delightful mess that he is now. The first version was so broken that I had to be reminded by my advisor to “have some redeeming quality for the character.” Originally, John was a stuttering and obsessively anti-social individual who seemed hardly capable of getting out of bed, let alone solving his own internal struggles and a murder. Through numerous revisions, I found ways to still ask the questions that had so inspired me while making John compelling and effective as a detective.

I focused on John's skills and removed the introversion. After all, how entertaining is a character who does not like to leave their house? I elected to establish, that despite his flaws, Coffey was a brilliant detective who could tap into a darkness that was innate inside him. This skill, he assumes is born of his father, is useful to solve murders. It is a state of focus that allows John to see patterns to crime scenes otherwise unnoticed.

Coffey discovers this "murder sense" in the aftermath of his father's conviction by uncovering a possession. The beats activate his ability to understanding the minds of killers in ways that others cannot. Therefore, the one skill that makes him extraordinary is attributed to the very thing he hates. That he is related to a serial killer. Even though it disgusts him, and further compounds his guilt and identity crisis, John must embrace the darkness to solve this crime.

Secondly, with the protagonist constructed, I set my mind to creating a world for *The Law of Averages*. I selected an urban setting for a gritty detective story, it seemed only fitting. I wanted to place him in a world that would force him to deal with his past and cities seemed the most logical. The brick and mortar of urban communities are often home to both the height of human achievement and the depths of depravity. Instead, the city was going to be one of my own design.

I elected to create my own setting for *The Law of Averages* because I had ideas for places of significance that did not exist in the real world. I needed certain buildings and locations for my plot because I hoped to parallel the setting to John Coffey. Namely, the Peckett Theater and the Talan Industrial Complex. Each place required a history that I wanted to build into the novel, so it was easier to build a world than appropriate one.

For Circadia City, I pulled from my knowledge of New York City, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. These cities were at the top of my list due to the familiarity I had with them and the “blue collar to white collar” aesthetic that I was going. Circadia is a city that is in stasis between resurrection and collapse as the world progresses around it. All of these cities have had to reinvent themselves over their history in order to survive, especially Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh has found solace in the very thing that had destroyed it, technology. Circadia City pulls from these inspirations for its own struggles. This battle between decay and revival was designed to mirror John’s own struggles.

Just as Coffer seeks purpose free of his father, Circadia City has lost its direction. The city is in the midst of emerging from a recession that occurred because of automation, but now is embracing these new innovations. Developments by the Florentian Company are resurrecting the economy through the same automation that almost destroyed it.

The Peckett Theater really caught my imagination. I kept envisioning the pillars of soaring gold that stretched to a beautiful chandelier at Radio City Music Hall as I was creating it. The Peckett is a relic of a forgotten age that seems out of place in Circadia. This building had tremendous significance to the story and to John.

The theater was home to the last vestiges of his childhood, so he hides here. John stays sequestered in this place, living a solitary life amongst the relics of the past. The movies, in particular the westerns, allow him into a world that is free from moral ambiguities. It is this simplistic view of the world that he craves, a world where he can tell the good guys from the bad. The theater allows Coffer to escape into any dream world that he chooses – forgetting who he is for a short while. Additionally, there is notion of changing identity that is always associated

with acting and the theater. It felt like apropos place for the thematic questions I wanted to address.

Finally, I wanted a persistent current to drive the plot. The murder may be compelling, but I wanted something more for the characters and readers to ponder. The solving of the crime would drive the basic progression, but I wanted a deeper level and complexity for *The Law of Averages*. I wondered what other questions were there, that I could to address in my story. The internal struggle of my protagonist was going to be just as important as the physical problems. This desire sparked my memory and imagination and I turned to literature and philosophy classes. I tried to think of which ideas provoked the most interest for me and settled on the topic of identity.

John Coffey struggles with his past and his identity. A struggle that is exacerbated by the murder and the revival of his past. Coffey feels that he carries the burdens of his father. He fears that his genetic inheritance means that he will succumb to the same deprivations. I wanted to know how a human mind creates an identity. I wanted to know how malleable the psychological construct would be in the face of external stressors.

I converted my interest into actual research. I found books on the differing concepts of identity and sought out experts in the field. This narrowed my broad understandings into a few questions. Queen's University Belfast had a tremendous library and I found myself in the psychology section when I had free time. I found text books on psychology, abnormal psychology, genetics, as well as numerous articles published online. While my initial readings were cursory at best, there were several of the ideas that stuck out for me.

Are identities a collection of memories as John Locke posits in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*? Was B.F. Skinner right that there is no free will and only operant conditioning? I soon found that in the numerous articles and countless studies that have been conducted on this subject, but none have produced a clear answer for my questions. Instead of becoming frustrated, I tried to absorb as much information as I could and develop my own interpretations.

These readings lead me to John's struggle with identity. Coffey wants to find a balance with his past and his future. He needs to know that even though he is the son of a monster; he is far more than that. The memories haunt him and dictate his actions, but the actions are in contradiction to the serial killer – he just needs to realize it.

The research portion of the novel took forever, but I expected that. Research has always taken me a long time. First gathering my thoughts from the ether and then finding evidence to support my reasoning. It has always been the longest part of academic writing. I expected creative writing to be the same. Ideas came in explosions of fevered reading and note taking, but there was no cohesion to the ambient ideas – until I started the drafting process.

Metacognitive Journal:

Drafting, Editing, and Finding a Conclusion

Throughout my thesis work, I discovered that creative writing is a constant task. This fall and into the spring, I found myself carrying a notebook around in order to scribble about my story. Any free time that I had was used to draw diagrams and jot down names or questions for the novel. Some of them I used, but many of them I did not. That was my experience with the drafting and editing process – do each task a lot and do it often to refine your work.

The problem that I had with drafting was trying to create a detailed map for *The Law of Averages*. A task that I was failing to accomplish – I could produce no clarity on the subject. Then, during a lecture for writing, I heard the act described by a phrase that has stuck with me. “Writing a novel is like driving through the fog with one headlight out”, the clarity comes only when the writing begins. (Gaiman) While the initial stages of the writing process were overwhelming me. I was trying to capture the ethereal into a neatly designed outline. I just needed to write.

Reading about drafting was not helping me very much. Most of the information that I found about drafting and editing were simple platitudes or analogies, like Stephen King’s “toolbox”. King suggests that all writers need “to construct [their] own toolbox”. (King) This analogy compares writing to a box that carries many specialized skills. These skills are tools you collect and if you know how to use them, you can “perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.” (King) The analogy is amusing and a good illustration of writing. If I wanted my tool box of tricks, I just had to get them for myself.

As for drafting, I required a bit more solitude and time for that. I wrote at least seven rounds of drafts for each chapter produced. Some were tiny changes, while others were complete re-writes. All had to be done in a library, coffee shop, or a quiet room. Editing took far more concentration to bring all of the story together. The hardest part I had with editing was changing

text that I loved, but did not place in the narrative. “Change is the bedrock of life and consequently the bedrock of narrative. What’s fascinating is that like stories themselves, change too has an underlying pattern” (Yorke) When I was editing, the story had a life of its own that grew and changed with each draft.

Stephen King had my favorite quote about writing and one that really kept me going. He said:

“I want to suggest that to write to your best abilities, “The first is that good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, and the elements of style) and then filling the third level of your toolbox with the right instruments. The second is that while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.”

(Stephen King)

I know that I’m not Shakespeare or Faulkner, but I like to think that I’m at least a competent writer. Stephen King acknowledges that not everyone is going to write the next *To Kill a Mockingbird*, no matter how hard they work. However, hard work can give me the tools to create a story worth reading.

The *Law of Averages* is my creation. It took time, effort, pain, and joy to make. The excerpts give me a good foundation, not only for the story, but also for the students that I will be teaching. Creative writing is different from anything that I have ever undertaken done before. After this thesis is done, I will have a better understanding of the process and effort required to

make something – to tell a story. I can learn from these experiences to provide creative writing opportunities for my students in the future.

Bibliography

Works Cited

Danytė, Milda. Introduction to the Analysis of Crime Fiction: A User-Friendly Guide. Vytautas

Magnus University Library, 2011

Gaiman, Neil. "NEIL GAIMAN TEACHES THE ART OF STORYTELLING." Master Class.

2019.

Gunn, James. "The Worldview of Science Fiction." The Science of Science-Fiction Writing,

1988, www.sfcenter.ku.edu/sfview.htm.

"Jimmy McAlevey." Playography Ireland, Irish Theatre Institute,

www.irishplayography.com/person.aspx?personid=45359.

King, Stephen. Stephen King on Writing. Scribner, 2000.

Kraus, Michael. "Do Genes Influence Personality?" Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 2013,

www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/under-the-influence/201307/do-genes-influence-personality.

Schechtman, Marya. "Memory and Identity." Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for

Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition, vol. 153, no. 1, 2011, pp. 65–79. JSTOR,

www.jstor.org/stable/41487616.

Winks, Robin W. "American Detective Fiction." American Studies International, vol. 19, no. 1,

1980, pp. 3–16. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41262202.

Yorke, John. Into the Woods: a Five-Act Journey into Story. The Overlook Press, 2015.