

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a purple bikini, is hanging upside down from a metal hook attached to a rope. She is curled up, with her arms crossed and her legs tucked. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*...and the
steel slithers
through*

a 'sex-thriller' by
**Jo-Anne
Wiley**

...by a
THREAD

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...by a THREAD
a novel by Jo-Anne Wiley
ISBN: 978-1-950910-76-2
A Pink Flamingo Ebook Publication
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Chapter One

How she hated bedtime- hated The Service.

To take her mind away from the fact it was midnight, the girl stood watching cute pink toes: A papa bear, a mama bear, and three little baby bears; two families, one on each foot. She wiggled her toes.

The toes looked back at her from beneath the hem of an ankle-length, white cotton nightdress. It was homespun and had been hand-stitched by one of her Sisters. There was no embellishment; no lace, no ribbon, no embroidery. The buttons had been rescued from a thrift shop workshirt and were done up to her chin.

The girl wiggled her toes again and tried to forget.

All she knew about herself was that she had been raised as one of The Chosen, and as such, she had never received a formal education. She had no idea of her birth-date; had no birth certificate, no driver's license, no social security number, no official paperwork at all to prove the origin of her birth. She had never seen a television, let alone watch one, and never read a book or flipped through a magazine. She had been kept isolated by her Sisters and never allowed near girls her own age. All she knew for certain was she was being prepared for something. Or someone, she couldn't be sure which.

"Hey? You out there? Come kiss me goodnight."

It was the sound of her Sister's voice and it sucked all the goodness from the girl's heart leaving her shaken and empty. But she dare not hesitate; she would be publicly beaten. "Yes. I am here, Sister," the girl called back, trying desperately to keep her voice from faltering. She took a steadying breath and went to the bedroom door.

Inside, her Sister lay spreadeagled on the rickety bed that supported a straw mattress. She was face-down and naked; her buttocks like pudding cups and her dimpled thighs splayed open. The young girl felt sick to her stomach.

At the sound of the bare footstep at the side of the bed, the older woman lifted herself on elbows. "I'm such a terrible sinner, you understand that, don't you, Little One? I try hard, so very hard, but I have such unclean thoughts. I can't seem to help myself. I see you and the others, and I can't help myself. All those lovely young bodies. I need to be punished. You can understand that, can't you? I need The Service. Need to be punished and cleansed. Are you still pure, Little One?"

The girl lowered her chin. "Yes," she whispered.

"Let me see," her Sister asked. "Let me see the pinkness of your purity. Step to the light and show me."

The young girl took a step closer to the oil lamp that flickered on the bedside table and lifted delicate hands to her neck. "I am still pure," she said and worked the buttons loose, one at a time down the front of her nightdress.

The cotton opened to reveal a thin torso. Her etched ribs, carved like a Grecian slave-girl's lyres harp, supported the tiny mounds adorned with feisty nipples. Her stomach lay flat between narrow hips. And lower, as she parted her nightdress, she presented her Sister with a surprisingly prominent pubis. She was sparsely covered with honey-colored curls that did nothing to hide the two puckered fillets of flesh that were nestled between her legs.

She pulled her nightdress from her shoulders, let it slide down the length of her thin frame and stepped from the confines of the cotton. The girl made another tentative move toward the light.

"Show me."

The heat rose in her chest and she struggled with the humiliation. She hated this but bravely squatted, bending on knobby knees and pushing her hips toward her Sister's upturned face. Then separating her legs, the girl reached down and opened the folds of her sex for the older woman's inspection. "I am still pure," she repeated, reassuringly.

“Yes. But I will lose you soon. To marriage. You are of age, and a pretty morsel my Little One. You will be assigned to one of the Tribunal and then your duty will be to him. But you must promise me, always: You will never speak of what you do for me and for the others. Promise me that.”

“I promise. I know what would happen to me.”

“My, you are a good girl. As long as you are pure, you have the ability to preserve me. The Lord knows my terrible thoughts. He must be so despaired, but he has a divine purpose for me. So instead of lifting me up, he has sent you here, to save me. Do you understand what I am saying, Little One?”

“Yes Sister.”

The older woman lay her head back on the pillow. “Good. You can continue... continue with my punishment.”

There was a nod of acceptance and the girl came around to the side of the bed. She crawled up and positioned herself on her knees between her Sister’s outstretched limbs and leaned forward to place a lingering kiss on each of the woman’s buttocks. She blessed her, making the sign of the cross.

“That’s good, so good,” the older woman murmured. “Kiss me again.” And reaching back she opened her cheeks. The tight whorl of muscle compressed when the girl’s lips first touched it. Then, holding her hand like a pistol, she pushed hard, knifing two fingers deep into her Sister’s rectum. The older woman heaved, her breath caught short in spasms. But a moment later she barked, and smothered her giddy laughter into the pillow.

The girl curled her fingers inside her Sister’s bowel and, hooking her by the anus, she got her feet under. She balanced precariously on the shaky mattress. “Ready?”

“Yes. I gladly receive my punishment.”

The girl bolted upright, lifting with both legs. Her fingers slipped and she dug in harder, gripping with fingernails and pulling her Sister’s knees up from the bed sheets. Her Sister

felt the tearing inside and howled, "Oh yes! Again. Again. Make it hurt. Make it bleed."

The girl eased off, lowering the older woman back down. She forced deeper inside and redoubled her claw-hold, forcing her nails into the rectal wall. She widened her stance and hauled up again, lifting her Sister from the mattress a second time and shaking her like a cat does a mouse.

She held her Sister's bottom, hooked in the air, until her own muscles cramped, quivering uncontrollably for relief. She pulled hard to the side of the mattress and, straightening her hand, she dumped the older woman to the floorboards and landed down on top of her.

"Now finish it," the older woman gasped, on her knees again and writhing in anticipation.

The girl nodded and jammed her hand back into the woman's bleeding rectum as hard and as fast as she could. With only her wrist showing between her Sister's buttocks, she knotted her fingers inside. Then leaning back, she wrenched her fist free.

The woman's breath caught and she bit back a strangled cry.

As her hand broke free, the girl saw the anus bulge to pass the obstruction; the small opening stretching thin and bloodless to allow for the withdrawal of her gnarled fingers. She hated her Sister for what she made her do and, maddened by the thought of what was to come, the girl thrust forward again, punching into the woman with all the strength her thin arm had left. In a frenzy, she finger-fucked her Sister's until her hand ached. And, knotting her fingers for a final time, she tore out from between blood-smearred buttocks.

To the girl's disgust, she heard her Sister convulsing in gleeful laughter. And when her Sister had taken a breath, the girl heard her mumble, "Cleanse me now. Cleanse me of all the poison."

In all her short life the girl had been taught to obey and now, nodded wordlessly. It sickened her to place her hands on the outside of the older woman's thighs and lower her face down. But obedience was mandatory and she licked the anus; licked it clean. She closed her nostrils to the earthy smells and licked and sucked and probed.

"Lower," her Sister finally encouraged. "Do me there as well." And the girl licked her there, licked and sucked until her Sister heaved over and turned face up. "The seed," the woman cried, "is bursting with poison. I can feel it."

And the young girl took up her Sister's clitoris between her lips and sucked until she was grabbed about the head and wildly told to stop. And all the while, as she performed The Service, all that was running through the girl's mind was how much she hated being used this way. How much she hated bedtime. How much she hated the lesbians.

She was desperately alone with no one to protect her; no one to fend for her. Her mother had strayed, bedded another man without first seeking Father Benjamin's permission. The man was reprimanded and forbidden to attend the communal meals for seven days. Her mother had been Raptured.

She would never rid herself of the sound of her mother's tormented screams piercing the night air.

The girl had stood by the wall in the compound, listening, and finding it hard to believe that the bloodless shrieking coming from the Meeting Hall was from her own mother's mouth. Women, crossing the compound, turned away, eyes downcast. Others ran, hands clasped over ears. Later, she watched the procession wind its way up the hillside like a ghostly serpentine; fiery torches lighting the way. She saw her mother supported between two men, her right leg useless, a foot trailing behind in the dirt. The men dragged her into the pine trees and the girl never saw her mother, ever again.

Chapter Two

Victim No.7 was a pretty accountant by the name of Beverly Dalton and employed by a firm on the East Indian School Road near the old downtown center. Barely twenty-two, she had just started a promising career and was living, for the first time, in her own apartment. Bev wore her soft blond hair swept over her forehead, had expressive blue eyes, and, her best feature she thought, full, sensitive lips. She was a good girl, still single, and spent the weekends in the desert, at her father's stable where she exercised the horses.

She was a petite little thing; a slip of a girl, as folks liked to say, with long swan-like limbs. Anyone who had been fortunate enough to meet her, was immediately taken by the shyness of her exquisite charm.

The only dark spot on what had been, up until now, an idyllic life, had been the sexual assault: Bev had been molested in her apartment elevator. It happened six weeks ago, after work. She had parked in the underground, locked her car, and pushed the button for the fifteenth floor. The elevator stopped at the lobby and a man, about thirtyish, stepped through the doors, selected the top floor and mumbled something about visiting friends.

Bev was sorting out her apartment key at the time and hadn't taken much notice until she felt his hand on her shoulder. Startled, she looked up to find the muzzle of a gun pointed at her left eye. When she tried to scream, the gun moved quickly down to her lips and, pushing her back, he lodged the barrel into her mouth. Bev was pinned into the corner of the elevator while he roughly ran his hand across her breasts. Then, moving down the front of her business suit, he groped her between the legs.

A moment later the elevator doors opened and he was gone. It had happened so quickly, Bev wondered if she might have imagined the whole thing. But there was no mistaking the taste of gun oil on her tongue.

She had reported the incident to the police but not told her parents. She didn't want them to worry. And besides, she convinced herself, nothing had really happened. It wasn't like he had followed her into the apartment and forced her. It was humiliating, sure, but she felt more stupid than anything else, for letting it happen. Damn, she couldn't even give the police a description of the guy and it was no surprise that she heard nothing further from the detective who documented her complaint. So in the end, she took it as a warning to be more vigilant and a month later had dismissed the incident altogether.

She was running late. Bev had spent two hours, pro-bono, straightening out the accounts for the Women's Rally. A shoe-box of receipts had been dropped off and she dutifully sorted through the paperwork; entering expenses into a computer spreadsheet for submission to the IRS.

It was a Friday and well after six o'clock when she finally left the office; she knew her mother would be holding dinner. As Bev negotiated the dense, Phoenix drive-home traffic, the steaming asphalt seemed to pulsate under her wheels. She grimaced when saw the backup of cars waiting to negotiate the on-ramp to Interstate 8 and made a decision that would ruin the rest of her evening: She decided to take the Old State Road out onto the desert.

Bev didn't like the road, especially at night. There wasn't any street lighting for one thing; the road was little used and crossed a barren, empty desert. But it would cut twenty minutes from the drive to her parent's ranch. So, with the sun already dipping below the mountains in the west and throwing the sky into a wild dance of color, she turned onto the Old State Road and watched the shadows reaching as night-time closed in.

Her headlights picked out a stretch of highway she knew ran straight to the horizon where, against the dark purple night-sky, she could just make out the dominating profile of Monastery Peak. It cut out the starlight leaving an empty

black hole in the night sky. She knew the road took a turn to the south, skirted the mountain, and a half-hour after that, she would be sitting at her mother's kitchen table, enjoying a glass of wine and catching her parents up on her week in the City. Bev took a deep steadying breath, the fragrance of her mother's roast of beef already manifesting itself in her nostrils. She smiled to herself and accelerated into the darkness.

The road was empty. Two cars rushed past on their way into Scottsdale for city shopping or restaurants and bars, perhaps, but other than a couple of bunnies that bounded away from her tires and the light reflecting from a coyote's eyes, she was alone.

Suddenly, angry headlights flared up and hung on her rear bumper as if giving her the once-over. But just as suddenly, she watched the vehicle slow in her mirror, back off, and finally disappear as she made her turn to the south. Bev wondered if some cop was checking to see if she was wavering out of her lane. The terrain to her right had gained definition, sloping up in the darkness and she could smell the pine trees that grew in the lower ravines around Monastery Peak. She was almost home.

And then the unthinkable happened: With a sickening shudder, the engine faltered. She was stupefied. It couldn't be possible. She worked the accelerator, pumping it hard. The engine caught again and momentarily, she clung to the hope that the problem had been short-lived, a bit of water in the fuel perhaps. But no; her luck had run out. The engine coughed once, and died. Her car, as lifeless as a tin coffin, rolled to the side of the road and the foreboding silence of the desert descended about her slim shoulders.

With her stomach tuning knots, she fought the panic: First turn on the flashers. Check the fuel gauge. Fine. Try the key again. Not so fine... Okay. Call dad.

Bev was just reaching for her bag when the pulsating yellow lit up the interior of her car. That was quick, she

thought. The light-bar was mounted on the roof of a truck and squinting into the cascade of bright light, she watched a guy in a red checked shirt step down. He walked alongside her car, hunched as if it were raining and she suspected an older man.

“Where did you come from?” she asked through her open window. “I was just about to call my dad.”

“I’m outta Avondale. Patrol this stretch of road all the way to the border and back, most nights. It’s not the place to breakdown, Miss, fer sure. You outta gas? I gotta a can in the truck.”

“I wish it were that simple. I filled up yesterday and the gauge shows three-quarters.”

“Humph. Probably electrics, then. Here, let me pop the hood.”

With a sense of dread, Bev realized her mistake far too late: Before she could protest he pulled back on the car door and squatted to reach for the hood release under the dash.

Bev had pretty legs; a fact she celebrated with short skirts and by wearing four-inch pumps.

He ran his eyes along the calf muscle, up to where her dress was hiked, held back by the seat cushion. Bev watched his hand snake toward the hood release but a moment later, his fingers diverted. He touched the softness behind her left knee and ran his hand up the curve along the bottom of a bare thigh. Bev was so shocked she made no cry nor offered any protest. Not until his hand forced up the hemline of her dress.

Her chest caved. “Don’t,” she threatened and tried to get an arm up. But he just laughed and reached in to get a grip on her throat. He dragged her scrambling body from the driver’s seat, bucking and kicking. He lifted her clear off the ground by the neck. Suddenly there was a second man. Bev was aware of his hands, first running across her breasts and then, reaching around, he cupped and squeezed her

buttocks. He clamped his arms around her waist and hauled her bodily toward the truck.

“No,” Bev screamed, knowing there would be no saving herself if they got her inside the cab. She kicked harder. Someone hit her across the face.

The shock of violence stilled her and the hands about her throat tightened. With dread she realized he might choke her to death, right there, at the side of the road. Her body seemed to crumble.

“Now you just do as you’re told, Miss, and everything’s gonna be fine,” the man in the red shirt hissed in her ear. He pulled her up by the neck again and gave her a shake. “You hear me?”

Bev nodded. He shook her some more before setting her down.

She stood by the truck, her nerves lacerated and her bowels feeling loose.

“You’re a nice little piece,” the man said, running a hand down her bare arm. “A bit of City ass for some good ol’ country boys. What’dya say, sweetie? You gonna help us out?”

He was much younger than she first suspected, but his hard-planed features were weathered and his eyes unforgiving. “You’re going to rape me?” Her voice was small.

“Not just me. There’s three of us, sweetie. You’re in for a busy night.”

The strength drained from her legs and Bev reached for the truck fender to stop from dropping to her knees.

“Please,” she managed. “Please don’t do this. You can’t.”

The man in the red shirt just laughed again. He was standing too close, smothering her. She looked up, pleading into his face. “You can’t.”

He ignored her and turned back toward her car. “Get a hook on this thing,” he called out. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.” There was movement inside the cab and the gears ground as the truck was expertly backed up to the front of

her car. She gasped as a third man piled out to attach the chains.

Oh God, all three, she turned her face away and wiped the tears on the back of a hand.

Bev was herded up onto the front seat of the truck cab. Standing a mere five-foot tall, Bev's feet didn't even touch the floor mat and, squeezed between the men, she had the sensation of being very very small. With her mind clouded with apprehension and her pulse thundering, she tried to be brave. Bev decided not to resist. She would just do her best to please them, let them have what they wanted and she hoped that, in return, they would be gentle with her. So when the driver slid a hand up and cupped the bulge of her inner thigh, Bev offered him a little something: She opened her legs. And she made no protest when the man on the opposite side lazily stroked her right breast.

They drove a mile further on with her car swaying in the chains and turned onto what appeared to be a logging road; just a dirt track winding between the pine trees. They ground to a halt in a clearing and the headlights picked out a trestle where hunters had hung deer to be gutted. She saw the leather straps.

This is it, she tried to focus. This is where it will happen.

Bev was dumped from the truck, landing on hands and knees in the pine needles. The men tumbled out after, and taking hold of her arms, forced her up and stood her in the harsh circle of light from the truck's headlamps. There was the hungry look of coyote in their eyes and Bev felt helpless and very alone. The men retreated.

Bev stood, swaying silently, her high-heels sinking into the soft earth, and tried to make out her assailants in the blinding lights. The red shirt was there, lounging on a fender and looking at her legs. She could just make out a second man, standing behind. He was of a heftier build, dark skin and greasy hair. A Mexican maybe.

Another was sitting on the front bumper, hands on knees. She recognized him. He had been in her apartment building and now he called out to her. "You got a pretty pussy for us?" She tried to confirm his features in the glare of the headlights. This time she would have a description.

"Yeah," the red shirt chimed in. "C'mon now. Lift your dress, baby. Let's see what you got hidden up there."

The men began laughing and Bev heard the pop of beer cans. Oh god!

"Your panties getting wet?" someone else asked. She didn't answer.

Red shirt pushed off the truck's fender and stepped into the circle of light. Bev watched him coming, too frightened to move. He smiled and underhanded her crotch.

Bev screamed, bent forward at the waist, and tried to back away. She pushed at his hand but he got a fistful of her hair and slapped her hard across the face. Her eyes came up, startled, and her mouth hung, open and ugly. He drew back and hit her again. His fist was closed this time and he knocked her to the ground. He stood over her, a stupid grin on his lips.

The other two men raced forward and hauled her to her feet. "Nice little titties, baby," the red shirt said, reaching to tug on a breast. "You got long nipples? Or tiny rose buds?" Bev managed to get a hand up but he pushed her into the arms of the man opposite who spun her around, slapped her ass and shoved her toward the Mexican. He grabbed Bev from behind, a hand on each breast.

"No," she cried, but suddenly hands seemed to be everywhere- up her dress, on her breasts, digging in the crack of her bum. And all the while, there was the insidious laughter ringing in her ears. The men jostled her back and forth, slapping her, pulling at her clothing, spinning her dizzily. Until the red shirt announced: "Right. Time for the show."

The men retreated to loll against the front of the truck and suck beer, abandoning her to waver drunkenly, still in the circle of light. Time for the show. She sensed their eyes on her body even though she could not see clearly in the glare. Bev was disheveled- battered and bruised. And her mind was screaming: This can't be happening to me! There has to be someone who can help me!

"Okay, baby. Your clothes... take 'em off. Get yourself naked."

The finality of his words took her breath and seemed to freeze her lungs. They wanted her to undress. And then what?

She willed herself to reach behind. Take hold of the zipper. But she stalled. Couldn't do it. Instead Bev spun and bolted for the trees.

Her eyes were dazzled. But still she ran, her legs pumping hard. Bushes were tugging at her dress, scratching her bare skin, she couldn't see but it didn't stop her. There was a downed tree limb and Bev stumbled over it, took three halting strides, caught herself, and kept going. A pine bough caught her in the face. She spun to one side and ran harder.

There has to be a way out of this canyon, she prayed, then lost her footing in the loose shale at the bottom a dried up creek bed. Down she went, hard. Bev tried not to cry out, not wanting to give herself away. Straining her ears, she expected the sound of footfalls closing in, hands reaching, but there were only the night peepers singing in the trees.

The moon had lifted above the desert, casting a chalky light among the pines. She could just make out a gap in the trees. A path, maybe, and she scrambled to her feet. If only she could find a path, she would climb up to the ridge and make her way out. Would go straight to the police.

A beam of light hit her in the face and she panicked. Bev wheeled back. Another powerful beam of light and her heart

sank- along with her hopes and prayers. She dropped to her knees in the dirt and started to cry. She had come so close.

Bev was pulled to her feet, a man with a flashlight each side. She stumbled, lost one of her shoes and was half dragged, half carried back to the truck.

Red shirt was waiting for them. Bev was hauled up in front of him. He gave her a cheery smile and punched her in the stomach. The men caught her before she hit the ground.

"I'm not asking again," the red shirt was still smiling "Take all of your clothes off," he said, asking as casual as if asking for the time-of-day.

There was the pang of denial and she looked away.

"You hear me?"

"Yes," she mumbled and lowered her eyes. The men stepped back to watch.

Feeling nauseated and hopelessly defeated, she reached behind and dragged the zipper down. The front of her dress sagged into the crooks of her arms. She hesitated a moment, staring into the glare of the headlights.

Bev was little but had nice legs and the dress was short and sexy. It had always been a favorite but now she could never wear it again; not without remembering the night she had been forced to take it off in front of strangers. She would never wear it again. She would burn it.

"C'mon baby," someone said, "don't keep us waiting. Show us those titties."

Bev nodded weakly, straightened her arms and the tiny dress tumbled down about her ankles.

She didn't have much on underneath. Only her bra and pants set. Her pale body looked stark in the light from the truck and the white lace glowed.

She ignored the dirty chuckle and, forging a breath, Bev twisted the clasp at the front of her half-bra. The small cups jumped, spilling her tiny mounds free into the cool air.

"Sweet," someone said at the sight of her raspberry nipples. She brushed the straps from her shoulders, letting

the slip of lace fall to the pine needles and she stood before the men clad only in her panties.

Her legs gave out. "Please... oh please," she cried, swooping to her knees. "You have to let me go. My mom is waiting."

The men pounced.

Bounding from the front of the truck, they surrounded her. They reached down and lifted Bev bodily into the air. Two of them held her writhing torso shoulder-high while the third pulled her underpants from thrashing legs. She screamed but there was only the impenetrable pine forest to hear her futile struggles. They bent her face-down over the trestle with her bum in the air and secured her arms with the leather straps. Her legs were forced apart and her ankles fastened to the wooden stakes they had beaten into the earth.

Once they had her, they stood back to admire her ass; their staggered breathing punctuating the night-air. "Let's draw for her," she heard one man say. "Short straw gets her in the mouth. Long straw gets her in the ass. Last straw gets what's left."

Bev fought a well of dread. The realization was numbing: They were selecting who would do what to her, where. Not only would she be vaginally raped, but also forced to perform oral, and be brutally sodomized.

A man stepped up behind and he swiped the tip of his penis along the cleft between her legs. She tried to release the strain from her muscles. Bev felt him adjust his position, swatting slightly at the knees, and then the thrust. The burning rip into the deepest part of her groin was like a knife going in and she ground her teeth until the jawbone popped.

He drove forward, lifting her heels. Her flesh opened, expanding to the point of tearing and she cried out bitterly. He was a big man and she was small and dry down there. Her lungs expelled in a rush: "Oh God. Oh God."

He ripped out of her and, adjusting his feet for better traction, plowed into her body a second time, distorting her insides and crushing her cervix. He thrust and pulled back, settling-in, pumping her hard, turning her insides out. She managed to grasp at a breath, huffing in time to his thrusting. Bev drove her fingernails into the palms of her hands and prayed he would cum. But he kept moving inside her, the vaginal walls straining, then letting go. In- out. Expanding and relinquishing. Over and over. Leaving her grasping for the remains of her sanity. And finally, with her tissues abraded and raw, he abruptly heaved and his spasm erupted. Bev slumped forward, felt the pulsing of his penis. And after, once he had emptied into her and pulled back, she shuddered at the feeling of his slime draining away. Felt the cold trail on the inside of a thigh.

“God. She’s a tight little bitch.” And the man laughed. He zipped up his jeans. “I think I popped her cherry.”

“You mean...”

“Yeah. The big Vee. She’s a virgin. Or was,” he chuckled.

“You shittin’ me. She’s a looker for christ-sake and has to be old enough.”

“I’m just telling you, man.”

Bev started to cry. Is... was... it was all meaningless now, the thought coldly echoed in her mind. She would never be a virgin again.

Bev had always been a careful lover; choosing the partners that she allowed into her bed with great care. And both of those lovers had been thoughtful and careful with her feelings and her body. Now this: She had never given oral to a man, never been entered from the rear. Tonight, she was losing all of it.

A second man stepped around the end of the trestle. One of them grabbed a fistful of her hair and jerked her face up. She watched with wild eyes; the man undoing his pants.

He thrust a drooling cock into her face and Bev took him into her mouth. Her hair was pulled harder, lifting her chin,

making the angle right for him to enter her throat. He forced himself into the cavity; deep into the larynx. She retched terribly, choking on the obstruction. Bev couldn't breathe.

He thrust deeply three times and Bev heard something crack in her neck; like the sound of a twisted chicken leg. There was the dull ache of drawn muscle that extended clear into her chest and when he pulled back, she found she couldn't swallow right. But Bev had little time to consider what he had done to her. The strain on her hair increased and her throat bulged. He face-fucked her hard, ramming his hips forward and crushing her nose with his pubis bone.

When he relaxed his hold on her a second time, she managed to turn her face to the side and she emptied her stomach onto the ground. Bev dry heaved before he pulled her around and entered her once more.

When he finally came, he pulled back slightly and gave her room. He filled her mouth but held her head so tightly, she had no chance to turn away. She waited a moment, considering, holding it on her tongue, and then forced herself to swallow. Her broken throat rebelled but after three tries, she managed to work the gluttonous mass into her stomach. It was like swallowing wallpaper paste.

He stepped back and the man behind released her hair. She fell forward but managed to lift her chin in time. She tasted his filth on her tongue. Her stomach was in full revolt and she threw-up again, ridding herself of spent semen and stomach bile.

Bev hung in her restraints, heaving and wallowing in self-pity. Thumbs were separating her buttocks and her heart froze. This is what she feared most.

When he entered her, her head flew up and Bev heard her spine crack. The burn extended up her backbone and caused a star-flash behind clenched eyelids. She suddenly realized she was screaming, a bloodless, bone-chilling cry that rebounded against the distant rocks of the canyon wall. "Oh don't... don't," she sobbed as he renewed his efforts.

“Your shit’s on my dick, sweetie,” he laughed as he lunged forward again. “Soon it will be blood.”

He thrust forward again and again.

Bev offered him money, her car, anything to make him stop. And in the end, she offered him oral, but he was having too much fun. By the time he was finished with her, he had torn her anus and blood was smeared across her buttocks. He strained to contain the flow from his penis and pulled out.

He came around to the front of the trestle and pushed the tip of his cock between her lips. “Take all of it, bitch. And if you throw it up, I swear I’ll make you get down on your knees and lick it up off the dirt.”

She tasted excrement and blood. And then she tasted his semen. Bev sucked and swallowed and prayed she could keep it down. And when she was finished, they untied the straps and pulled what was left of her shattered body into the center of the clearing.

“Know what this is?” The man held a circle of steel, shining in his hand.

Bev eyed it dully. “A fishing hook?” She fought to comprehend his meaning.

“A shark-hook, sweetie.”

She heard the sound of a rope being thrown. A not unfamiliar sound to a woman who had spent her life around horses. “No,” she hissed as she began to comprehend. “I’ve done everything you asked. It’s not fair.”

Two of the men came to stand either side of her shoulders. They bent Bev forward and held her steady as the third stepped behind. He fumbled low down and, pushing her buttocks aside, he fingered her ass. Bev felt the cold steel slide into her anus and pull up tight in her rectum. “Oh God! No!” She was lifted onto her tippy-toes.

“No,” she cried again when he brought out the razor. Bev tried, but couldn’t turn away. He slashed at her belly, from side to side and sawed from bottom to top. She looked down

in horror and disbelief; she saw her own purplish entrails bulge through the opening in her gut.

The pressure build from behind and Bev screamed as she fell forward, her arms waving frantically to break her fall. There was a bright point of pain in her rectum. The tissues expanding and bursting. The skin just to the left of her spine stretched and finally ruptured. The hook slipped around and seated, her pelvic bone taking the weight. As she swung, head down, she realized she had lost one of her shoes- just before she was hoisted high into the pine boughs overhead and earning herself the dubious distinction of becoming Victim No.7 in Boyko's murder book.

Chapter Three:

The desert called to her.

Tzivia Azaria sat cross-legged on the hood of her Crown Victoria and watched the arid sun waver above the horizon. She was thinking of home: Israel. It was the endless desert speaking to her.

The face of the desert was searing naked, pocked here and there by black clumps of thorny bush. A desolate landscape, as empty as a whore's heart, that inspired a disconsolate feeling of one's own insignificance.

You had to look hard to find the beauty in it. But it was there, if you took the time, in the layers of rust and pink that were embedded in the sandstone. In the craggy canyons and the pilaster-shaped buttes rising purple in the distance. The wind blew as steady as any sea-breeze and propelled the cloud-shadows across the barren landscape like sailing ships.

It gave no consolation, and Taz loved the desert for that fact alone. It was proof that for all of man's accomplishments, and all of his tragic defeats, man had not the slightest effect on the order of the universe. A coyote cried and Taz shuddered. There was no more pitiful sound on earth than the howl from those wild dogs who would devour the rotting flesh of man.

And then, conjured up out of the wide Arizona sky, there was suddenly an image of Marie. Lovely Marie: The only soft spot in Taz's solid stony heart.

Taz ran a hand across her face. It had been almost eight years since her friend had been shot and killed. But the pain in her chest was still as acute as a scorpion's sting. The two of them had trained together in the Metzah, the Investigation Division of the Israeli Military Police and been assigned to a border town not two miles from the fighting. She and Marie were returning to the barracks from the military command post when they were abducted and

forced out onto the desert. A desert not unlike the one that now surrounded Taz, bounded by horizon on every side.

Marie was the pretty one. And the men opted for her, first. Taz watched as they brutalized Marie and then mutilated her sex with a burning surgeon's scalpel. But what had made the assault unbearable and had changed Taz for life, was the fact that the rape had not been carried out by the enemy. It had been fellow officers who had tortured and killed Marie.

Taz survived that night in the desert but had never forgiven herself for being the lucky one. She had been awarded a Citation of Merit for her bravery, but was considered an embarrassment and the top brass worried she may talk. They plotted her demise, but someone with influence recognized the injustice of it and had contacted the Americans: The CIA.

Within days, Taz found herself on a military transport bound for New York City. She had a new passport and a job with the New York City Police Department. And she hadn't any idea who to thank for it.

A special assignment for the CIA took her back to Europe and a chance to return home to Israel. But after much soul searching, Taz returned to the States. She chose Arizona because of the desert and the job offered was as far away from Washington as she could possibly get.

She slid from the hood of the plain white Crown Victoria, only recognizable as a police vehicle by the push bars protecting the front grill and the innocuous antenna sprouting from the trunk lid. Taz ran a hand along a tight jaw. She wasn't an attractive woman; a narrow face with eyes close-set. And her long nose had been broken and never set right. Her mousy brown hair, which she cut with kitchen shears, hung in her eyes and was shoulder length, but kept tied back with butcher's twine. Taz didn't own a lipstick tube nor an eyeliner.

No one had ever described Taz as a rare beauty, but plenty of men found her compelling just the same. There was something animalistic about her sex appeal. She stood close to six-feet, had a lithe body like a coil of steel, and for reasons she could never fully understand, men seemed determined to physically possess her- hold her down and take her. But it did them little good. Taz looked after herself. And she hated men, and she barely tolerated women.

“Taz. What’s your twenty?”

Taz cocked an ear to the police radio. Reaching through the driver’s side-window she lifted the mike from the dash. “Dispatch. Mile marker eighteen, Old State Road. I am on the side of the road, a couple miles past the Tugg’s ranch.”

“That about halfway to Monastery Peak?”

“Looks like.” Taz squinted at the buttress on the horizon and confirmed her location. “Alice. What do you have?”

“I got a call from a woman hiking in the area of the Peak. She was up one of the canyons and reported the smell of something rotten. Very rotten.”

“Carcass rot? Decomp?”

“That’s what she called it, yes. She seemed pretty upset and I said I’d send someone to have a look.”

“Dead cow, horse maybe,” Taz said flatly. “Ranchers shoot the sick ones; leave ‘em to rot.”

“Well that was my first thought. But here’s the thing, Taz: This woman is down visiting from Chicago. She works in the Medical Examiner’s office up there. She said she recognized the smell. So she took it upon herself to have a poke around. And Taz, she found a woman’s high-heel shoe.”

“Damn.” The desert air rose with a sudden chill, an unforgiving cold that frosted lungs. Taz lifted her eyes to the monolithic rock that dominated the far horizon. “Take me fifteen or twenty.” Taz tossed the radio mike and reached for her duty-belt that lay on the seat. After buckling up, she pulled her Glock 14 and exchanged it for the Jericho 941 she kept hidden beneath the driver’s seat. She worked the slide,

jacking a shell into the chamber, then popped the magazine and added an extra nine millimeter cartridge. Fully loaded, she placed the gun in her holster, dropped behind the wheel of the car and hit the lights. When she was up to speed she called back to dispatch. "Alice. A location?"

"Yes. We got lucky there, Taz. The woman had to leave the area for her cell phone to work but she had one of those hand held GPS things the hikers use. The coordinates will take you right to the spot. It's a clearing in the woods."

"Right," Taz keyed her mike while jotting down the numbers. "Report back, when I am there."

Taz drove a steady eighty with an eye on her dashboard GPS as it counted down the miles.

The Old State Road, known locally as the Tijuana Trail because it was the quickest route to the best brothels and strip joints in Mexico, ran straight to Monastery Peak before turning south to follow the perimeter of the escarpment. The directional pointer on her GPS slowly moved from west to north and when the pointer lined up with due north, Taz looked for someplace to pull over. Ahead she saw a culvert in the ditch and slowed to investigate. It looked like an access road to a ranger station, but there was no ranger station up on the Peak. Taz pushed the car through a tight U-turn, parked on the opposite side of the road, put her shoulder to the door and planted heavy soled boots onto the pavement.

Across the road there was a dirt track leading back into the pines. She moved carefully, not wanting to disturb the dust. Taz saw tire tracks. They were wide with deep treads. Had to be a truck, she concluded; followed by a car. Taz stepped to one side and moved forward between the trees. Unless her GPS was off, she figured she would find the clearing less than a mile in.

But the smell struck her long before that. A smell like rotting potatoes.

It was the putrid smell of dead meat; meat that had ripened in the sun before swelling and bloating open to spill out bodily fluids. Taz had encountered that smell before; on the battlefield.

She started searching the underbrush as she moved forward. The reek clung in the air, clung to her clothes, her hair, her skin. Clung to the inside of her lungs. Taz broke into a small clearing and saw where the truck had parked; the tire marks distinct where they had sunk into the pine needles. There were the remains of a campfire and she saw the trestle where hunters had hung their deer for gutting and butchering.

Taz saw the misplaced shape of a high-heel shoe.

It sat on top of the trestle, looking sadly foreign and left where the hiker from Chicago knew it couldn't be missed. Taz pulled a pencil from the sleeve pocket of her uniform shirt and lifted the shoe. It was black patent leather with a four inch heel; size four. An expensive shoe, not the type of footwear favored by female hikers. Taz leaned closer and inhaled. She could smell the fear.

Taz replaced the shoe and moved cautiously to the edge of the clearing, mindful of trampling evidence under her police boots. She searched the perimeter, sweeping aside the bushes and keeping an eye for mounds or depressions in the soil that might indicate a shallow grave. When she came up empty, Taz expanded her search area, moving ten feet deeper into the woods and once again, walked a search pattern around the edge of the clearing.

She found nothing and expanded her area of exploration yet again. Taz kept at it when, eighty yards out, she noticed the smell wasn't as strong. She had missed something.

Taz was close by the top edge of the ravine and saw that the sun had descended to the distant mountaintops. Shadows were long and the light had begun to fade. She would have to give it up soon. She decided to return to her car for the evidence kit she carried in the trunk and go back

for the shoe. It was the only piece of hard evidence so far and Taz didn't want some raccoon eating it. After, she could call Phoenix where the K-9 division was stationed. They would send an officer out the next morning and let a cadaver dog do a sweep of the area.

Taz hiked up to the edge of the ravine where she found a trail that would lead back out to the road. Her muscles were stiff and she took a moment to stretch. She looked back down into the ravine and saw her. Taz felt the willingness slide from her limbs. The woman was hanging naked and lifeless, twenty-feet above the forest floor. She appeared to be hanging by her waist, her swan-like arms dangling down, long hands floated by her tiny feet; her blond hair, falling forward, wavered on the light evening breeze.

The woman looked to be a shapely, silky cocoon, hanging from a pine bough and as Taz expanded her field of view, she gasped. She counted six more bodies, all twisting gently at the end of a rope. She was aware of her guts working.

"Dispatch. Taz... You read Alice?"

"I got you," Alice replied, "You at the scene?"

"Alice. I got bodies. Seven I can see."

"Oh, sweet Jesus."

"Alice. I need the number of the detective in Scottsdale. The one who is working the case. Those missing women..."

"Taz, you can't possibly think all those women were killed here, in our jurisdiction?"

"I do not know what I think, Alice, but I need a Medical Examiner, search party, dogs, trucks, and body bags, seven of 'em. The guy's number, Alice. What is the guy's number?"

He picked up on the second ring. "Detective Boyko... Homicide."

Taz had crossed paths with Boyko several times before and didn't like the man. He was pushing retirement, overweight, over-bearing, and drank enough bourbon in a day to affect any small amount of good judgment that he might

still possess. “Boyko. Taz Azaria... Avondale Sheriff’s Department.”

“Taz, baby. Yuh in town, here? Why not drop by the Station and do some stretching exercises for us? I’ll find you a nice pair of tight leotards.”

“You are a fuck, Boyko. Now shut up. Those missing women you have been chasing. What is the last count?”

“As of yesterday, seven. What’cha wanna know fer?”

“Seven. Boyko, I have seven females, hanging in the trees down here. I think they are yours.”

There was a long pause. “Oh for shit-sake, Azaria. It’s after fuckin’ five o’clock. Couldn’t this have waited ‘til the morning?”

Taz disconnected. Boyko could get his directions from Alice. She reached into the trunk of her car for the yellow crime scene tape. Taz strung it around the entrance to the lane-way. She figured no one would be driving up into the forest at night but she didn’t want some grade ten flunky dragging the heels of his police boots through the tire tracks. Taz pulled latex gloves and a plastic bag from the evidence kit then hooked a flashlight to her duty belt. She went back for the shoe.

Keeping well to the side of the lane, Taz swept the area with her light in the hopes of uncovering something of interest. She was looking for clothing, undergarments, used condoms; anything. But the scene was clean except for the shoe. Taz bagged and sealed it, wrote down the date and signed her name. There was nothing further to be done but wait for Boyko and his troops.

The first to show were two Scottsdale PD cruisers. The watchdogs had arrived. A couple of young uniforms got out, and full of self-importance, they scanned the area. One shot Taz a cheeky smirk from across the State Road and flicked his finger at her. It’s okay, sweetie, the men have arrived. Taz didn’t acknowledge the boy, much to his disappointment, and watched the two of them move to the