



# SWITCH

GRANT MCKENZIE

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

# About the Book

## **Would you kill to save them?**

When **Sam White** returns home from work one evening he finds his house a burnt-out shell with the bodies of his wife and daughter inside.

Then he receives a phone call from a man who claims his family are alive and that Sam can still save them.

But first, he must complete a few simple tasks.

Sam joins forces with **Zack Parker** whose life has also been ripped apart by the same sadistic kidnapper. Together they race against time to uncover the identity of the captor. But can they reach their families before it's too late?

# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Prologue

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24

Chapter 25  
Chapter 26  
Chapter 27  
Chapter 28  
Chapter 29  
Chapter 30  
Chapter 31  
Chapter 32  
Chapter 33  
Chapter 34  
Chapter 35  
Chapter 36  
Chapter 37  
Chapter 38  
Chapter 39  
Chapter 40  
Chapter 41  
Chapter 42  
Chapter 43  
Chapter 44  
Chapter 45  
Chapter 46  
Chapter 47  
Chapter 48  
Chapter 49  
Chapter 50  
Chapter 51  
Chapter 52  
Chapter 53  
Chapter 54  
Chapter 55  
Chapter 56  
Chapter 57  
Chapter 58  
Chapter 59  
Chapter 60

Chapter 61  
Chapter 62  
Chapter 63  
Chapter 64  
Chapter 65  
Chapter 66  
Chapter 67  
Chapter 68  
Chapter 69  
Chapter 70  
Chapter 71  
Chapter 72  
Chapter 73  
Chapter 74  
Chapter 75  
Chapter 76  
Chapter 77  
Chapter 78  
Chapter 79  
Chapter 80  
Chapter 81  
Chapter 82  
Chapter 83  
Chapter 84  
Chapter 85  
Chapter 86  
Chapter 87  
Chapter 88  
Chapter 89  
Chapter 90  
Chapter 91  
Chapter 92  
Chapter 93  
Chapter 94  
Chapter 95  
Chapter 96

Chapter 97  
Chapter 98  
Chapter 99  
Chapter 100  
Chapter 101  
Chapter 102  
Chapter 103  
Chapter 104  
Chapter 105  
Chapter 106  
Chapter 107  
Chapter 108  
Chapter 109  
Chapter 110  
Chapter 111  
Chapter 112  
Chapter 113  
Chapter 114  
Chapter 115  
Chapter 116  
Chapter 117  
Chapter 118  
Chapter 119  
Chapter 120  
Chapter 121  
Chapter 122

Acknowledgements  
About the Author  
Copyright

# SWITCH

Grant McKenzie

To Kailey — Who will always know that dreams can come  
true.

To Karen — Who already knew.



## Prologue

Rick Ironwood staggered back from the blow, his trick knee giving out with a pop as his feet twisted sideways in a puddle of grimy engine oil.

Twin jolts of pain took his breath away, the shock turning his scream into a pathetic squeak. His feet failed to find traction and slid out beneath him. For a moment he was airborne, his body twisting unnaturally until all 260 pounds came crashing down. He landed hard, sending a dozen flimsy oilcans clattering across the floor. The back of his skull struck the garage's concrete pad with a loud crack.

Rick groaned as every pain sensor in his body flashed red. His face was a mask of blood, his left cheek and upper lip gashed open, his twice-broken nose snapped once more from the unexpected assault.

He held up his hands.

'Take anything you want! Fuck! The car! Anything! Jesus! There's nothing here!'

The tall black man with the gun stared at him, his eyes so wide and pupils so small the whites were like soft-boiled eggs. He held his mouth half open as though struck dumb at how easily the larger man had gone down.

Lying on his back with torn skin and pulled muscles, Rick knew the years hadn't been kind: hard muscle of youth turned to blubber from years of sitting on his ass and guzzling too many beers; skin a sickly white from a lazy diet of high-fat convenience foods and a liver disease only

recently diagnosed. Even his shaved head, spotted with two days of growth, was a poor attempt to hide a hairline that had begun to recede before he was even out of his twenties.

Despite those flaws, he hadn't been prepared to be knocked flat by a skinny-assed spook in a business suit who looked too weak to part his own hair. Sure, the attack was a complete fucking surprise, but still, it wasn't so long ago that he'd had a reputation for kicking serious ass.

Gagging on blood, the broken nose making it difficult to breathe, Rick couldn't fathom why *anyone* would break into his garage. The only thing of value was his black-and-Bondo '79 Trans Am Firebird with the silver screaming eagle logo on the hood. But since it was sitting on cement blocks, it wasn't worth more than a couple hundred. He had been meaning to restore it, like that *Pimp My Ride* show on MTV, but money didn't grow on trees, at least not in his neighbourhood.

His attacker, a lanky, smoke-steel silhouette, pointed a tiny, blood-flecked pistol at Rick's face. The Detonics Pocket Nine still looked comical, its three-inch barrel no larger than the man's coal-black fingers. Rick had almost laughed when the well-dressed stranger pulled it out of his pocket, but that was before the barrel had gashed open his face and sent him sprawling.

The man finally spoke, his voice low.

'I had almost forgotten you.'

'For ... gotten?' Rick's broken mouth was having trouble forming words as bubbles of crimson foam popped on his lips. 'I don't know ... who the fuck ... you are!'

'Yes,' the man said quietly. 'Yes, you do,' he paused before adding, 'Ironman.'

Rick's eyes narrowed in puzzlement, the nickname sparking cherished - *hell, sacred* - memories.

'And for what it's worth,' the man continued, 'I am sorry.'

‘Wha—’

Rick’s face imploded as the ball-bearing-sized bullet punched through his nose to become an explosive pinball. Ricocheting off bone, the bullet ripped tissue and muscle with abandon before finding the soft palate for a destructive exit.

Remarkably, even with the lower half of his face unhinged and his brain on fire from the shock, Rick stayed alive. He tried to speak, to reason with the man, but his tongue was no longer whole. He felt cold concrete against his cheek and found he could no longer lift his head.

Rick struggled to find a reason for his attack. His gaze came to rest on a wooden bench containing an unfinished birdhouse and an old metal tool-case that had once belonged to his father.

The tool-case, rusted and worn like everything else in his life, had been his favourite hiding spot at a time when he still had a wife to hide things from. The case held a half-dozen dog-eared *Hustler* magazines, a small metal pipe a buddy who joined the army had made from brass bullet casings, and a glass vial containing two tiny rocks of yellowed crystal meth. The grand worth of his secret stash was about ten bucks and change.

The gunman stepped closer. His polished black shoes acted as twin mirrors to reflect the horror of Rick’s face. Rick whimpered then, his mind finally unravelling as he felt the hot gun barrel touch his temple with a brief sizzle.

Rick’s eyes flicked skyward and suddenly, with the man’s dark, unsmiling face filling his vision, he remembered him.

It was the last thought he ever had.

# 1

THE THIN MAN felt as fragile as glass.

With shaking hands, he dropped the warm gun into the pocket of his suit jacket and removed a folded triangle of white cotton. After wiping the sweat from his face, he noticed the handkerchief had become spotted with blood - Ironwood's blood.

*Christ, he thought. What have I become?*

His cellphone chirped and the unexpected sound was almost enough to make him drop to his knees and stick the damn gun in his own mouth. But he hadn't come this far to fall apart now.

He answered the phone.

'It's done.'

'I know,' said a voice scrambled by cheap electronics to flatten its pitch and cadence.

'You're watching?'

'You made quite the mess, Dr Parker.'

Zack Parker scanned the rafters of the garage for the camera. It didn't surprise him that he couldn't see one. When today's engineers made cameras so small they could swim in your bloodstream and identify plaque in the vessels of a beating heart, any object in any room could hide a thousand of them.

The scrambled voice laughed.

'Would you like me to send you a copy of the footage?'

Zack closed his eyes, struggling to hold back the madness that would send him so far into the abyss, return

would never be an option.

‘I’ve done everything you asked.’

‘Perhaps,’ said the voice.

Zack waited, not noticing he was holding his breath until his lungs began to burn.

‘They’re waiting,’ said the voice. ‘Here’s what I need you to do.’

INSIDE THE HOUSE, mother and child began their nightly ritual.

It was like watching a soap opera on a rabbit-eared TV set. When they crossed a window, he could see their features as clearly as if he were in the same room, but then they would fade out of sight behind a wall and he would need to use his imagination to fill in the gaps. But that was OK, he had developed a good imagination, and he could hear their voices.

The familial sounds emanating from the speakers floated around him, surprisingly static-free considering the cheap wireless microphones he had planted inside the house. He had considered planting cameras, too, but the idea of spying so intimately on the child had bothered him.

Better simply to listen.

'Are you wearing your retainer, MaryAnn?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Are you sure?'

'Uh-huh.'

'If I come up there—'

'OK, Mom. Geez. I'll get it.'

'MaryAnn! Do you know how much money your father and I have spent on your teeth?'

'OK, you don't have to yell. I was gonna do it.'

'And floss, too.'

'Yes, Mom.'

In the darkness of his lair, the watcher played with a disposable lighter. Its dyed plastic skin gradated from red to orange to yellow, the colours any amateur artist would use to depict flame. It took a true *auteur* to see the full spectrum of a fire: the blood reds and puss yellows, crisp blacks and molten ginger, and the deep, deep violet that told you it was a living thing.

Fire lulled you into the belief that it could be tamed, controlled, like a performing white tiger in a Vegas magic act. But all it took was a flick of thumb to release its true nature, and if you listened closely enough, to release its true voice: not unlike a human scream.

‘No more Facebook, MaryAnn. It’s time to sleep.’

‘But, Mom—’

‘No buts, it’s late. Switch off your computer and get to bed.’

‘Yes, Mom.’

Once the child had retreated under the bedcovers, the house grew silent.

The watcher leaned forward, closing his eyes and listening intently to the gentle padding of feet as the woman poured herself a glass of chilled Chardonnay (she preferred the vineyards of Southern Australia) and settled in her favourite armchair.

The bookshelves in the cozy den that overlooked a well-tended garden were lined with paperback thrillers. There was also a short shelf of plays and bound TV scripts with small speaking roles highlighted in yellow. But all those books belonged to her husband.

In these quiet hours, the watcher knew that Hannah would dig deep into the side pocket of her recliner and pull out one of the Victorian romances that she bought by the sackful from a used bookstore in Burnside. She liked her bodice-rippers full of old-fashioned romance and British accents, plus teary middles, tender-hearted rogues and, most of all, happy endings.

The faint crinkle of thin foil signalled that she had also dug out her other favourite indulgence, a Terry's Chocolate Orange in dark rather than milk chocolate. The watcher admired her discipline. She ate only two or three segments a night, which made the treat last a whole week.

Satisfied that both woman and child were settled for the evening, the watcher lifted a tiny remote control with two buttons: one blue and one red. The remote was unremarkable in design or function and, like the lighter, it was inexpensive and easily disposable.

He pressed the blue button.

From his vantage point inside an olive-green van parked a short distance away, nothing seemed to happen. But inside the house, in a dark corner of the neglected basement, a perfect hole was punched in the natural gas line that led into the furnace.

Within forty minutes, enough deadly gas would escape to pack the furnace cavities and begin creeping upstairs to the main floors. By the time the rotten-egg odour became noticeable, both woman and child would be in a deep slumber.

Within seventy minutes, the slightest spark would be enough to turn the quaint two-storey, lemon yellow and white trim home into a blazing pyre. For each additional minute, the gas would build until the entire block was in danger of being reduced to an impressive crater.

The watcher looked once again at the plastic lighter in his hand. The continual motion of his thumb had worn away a patch of orange paint. Like all the others he had handled in his time, the colour underneath was a pale, almost translucent white.

With a sad smile, the watcher eased back into his chair, rolled the metal thumbwheel against the flint and watched as a tiny flame leapt from its plastic womb. In the silent darkness, he could hear the creature begin to scream.



### 3

DR ZACK PARKER pulled his silver, four-door Mercedes E320 sedan to the kerb, his heart pumping so hard he could hear the blood rushing through his veins.

He wiped the back of his hands across his dripping forehead, and glanced out of the window at the cheerful yellow house across the street.

As he blinked away more nervous sweat, he saw a brief flicker of life from the upstairs bedroom. It could have been the shadow of a lace curtain fluttering in the night breeze, but Zack was sure he had seen the soft, dark skin of his daughter framing the prettiest little mouth he had ever kissed.

The lips were turned up in a smile.

As Zack threw open the car door, his cellphone rang.

*No. Please, no,* he whispered to himself.

The phone continued to ring as he stood frozen in the middle of the road, eyes locked on the bedroom window and the unmoving darkness beyond.

With building dread, he flipped open the phone and lifted it to his ear.

'Change of plans,' said the distorted voice.

'Nooooooooo!'

Zack's protest became an agonized wail as he began to run, leather soles slapping tarmac, hands outstretched. The names of the two people he loved most in the world erupted from his throat.

His eyes were blurred with tears when the force of the blast hit him like a locomotive.

Zack was lifted off his feet and tossed back the way he had come. His limbs flailed and his lungs screamed from sudden decompression. He felt his feet skim the top of his sedan before his body arced down, feet lifting higher, his head and shoulders dipping towards the ground.

His solid German-made car rocked against the blast, but its heavy chassis kept its wheels firmly on the ground. The calm pocket of dead air behind the Mercedes lacked the force to hold Zack aloft and he crumpled onto a green lawn, as all around him car alarms began to howl.

Where the yellow house had stood, a column of flame licked the sky.

Lying on his back, winded, bloody and bruised, Zack watched as a giant cloud of fiery debris began to fall like hell's own rain.

*Let it come*, Zack thought as his mind retreated into a silent darkness so deep that he prayed to stay there. *Let it come.*

## 4

CRUNCH!

Sam White bit down on a tuna and potato-chip sandwich and admired the sixty-inch, high-definition, widescreen plasma television in the window of the Sony store. The television wasn't switched on as the store was closed and the mall long emptied of its customers.

Even switched off, the screen was impressive: thin, sleek and with a sticker price greater than anything Sam could take home in a month. Hell, two months with no overtime.

Sam finished his sandwich and licked his fingers before topping up his plastic mug with coffee from a new red thermos emblazoned with the winking mascot of the Portland Beavers. With a smile, he dug back into his brown paper lunch bag and produced a large, misshaped oatmeal cookie. Baked by his daughter, the cookie was overloaded with chunks of chopped Mars Bar. It was a recipe he had taught her when she first started taking an interest in the kitchen.

Sam dunked the cookie in his coffee and sucked the melting mess into his mouth just as his two-way radio squawked to life.

'Come in, Sam. You there? Over.'

Sam rolled his eyes at the sound of Kenneth Baker's tremulous voice. The twenty-two-year-old was studying to be a criminal psychologist at the local university, but Sam had serious doubts he would ever make it to graduation.

Sam unclipped the radio from his belt, held it to the side of his mouth while he finished chewing, then pressed the transmit button.

'What's up, Ken?'

'Uh, nothing much. What you doing? Over.'

Sam chuckled.

'Just having a bite to eat and admiring this TV I'll never afford.'

'Cool. Hey, I saw your commercial this afternoon on the sports channel. You were great. Over.'

Sam groaned.

'I transform into a giant rodent, Ken. Not exactly Oscar-winning material.'

'Uh, no, but ... uh, I thought you were very convincing. Over.'

'Thanks, Ken, I appreciate it. Gotta keep my hand in, you know?'

'Sure, sure. Lots of actors get discovered doing commercials, don't they? Over.'

'Yeah,' Sam said. 'Me and Jodie Foster, kid.'

'Jodie Foster did commercials? Over.'

'When she was two she starred in a spot for Coppertone. Eleven years later she was nominated for an Oscar.'

'Oh, wow. Uh, I didn't know that. Over.'

'Yep.' Sam laughed. 'But then, she's Jodie Foster and I'm playing the freakin' Portland Beaver.'

'Uh, but you did it well, Sam. You had me laughing, anyway. Oh, and I burned it on disc for you. I'll give it to you later, OK. Might be good for your résumé. Show you in action, you know? Over.'

Sam paused, touched by the support of his co-worker and embarrassed by his own ingratitude.

'That's really thoughtful, Ken. I don't think my daughter has seen it yet. That'll be nice to show her.'

'No problem. I just thought it was so cool seeing you on TV. I showed my mom, too, and she was thrilled. I heard her

bragging to the neighbours that I was working with a famous actor. Over.'

Sam laughed again. 'Why don't you do your rounds, Ken? Check all the doors. We'll meet up later for coffee.'

'Yeah, OK, sure. Over.'

Sam swallowed the last mouthful of coffee and screwed the plastic cup on top of his thermos. As he walked to the trashcan to dump his empty sandwich bags, he caught himself reflected in the dark store windows.

The security guard's uniform - crisp black trousers, light blue shirt with darker blue accents on the pocket flaps and shoulder epaulettes, rugged black belt and holster with gun, flashlight, aerosol mace and expandable baton - was designed to mirror the Portland City police. That illusion was intended to instil fear in shoplifters and respect in the regular shoppers.

In theory, anyway.

Over the last few years, the daytime security guards' role had changed from a babysitting service for the stores' merchandise to the more pro-active chore of making sure the customers felt safe. That meant working in tandem with local authorities to crack down on drug dealers, pimps out to recruit naive schoolgirls, hopped-up muggers in need of a quick fix, plus patrolling the parking lot for opportunistic car thieves.

The overnight shift, however, was still just glorified babysitting. And that's exactly the way Sam liked it. As a mall sitter, he didn't have to think too much, and more importantly, he didn't have to care.

As he walked the long, lonely halls, checking doors and sipping coffee, he could allow his mind to ponder the screenplay he was going to write one day. He often imagined himself pulling a Stallone and telling the major studios they could only produce the movie if he got to star.

Unlike *Rocky*, however, Sam still hadn't come up with a sure-fire plot that would make moneylenders salivate.

His two-way radio crackled again.

'Uh, Sam, you there? Over.'

'Yeah, Ken. What's up?'

'I heard something. Over.'

Sam sighed. The kid was so nervous, he would jump a mile at the sound of a mouse fart. And everyone knew vermin in the Pacific North-west were never that rude. This wasn't L.A., after all.

'What did you hear?'

'Err, voices, I think, and a muffled bang on the side door behind the jeweller's. Over.'

'Did you check it out?'

'Yeah, the door wasn't locked. I must have missed it on my first pass. I think someone's inside. Over.'

Sam dropped his trash in the circular bin and brushed the cookie and potato-chip crumbs off his shirt.

'Stay where you are, Ken. I'll be right there.'

He walked at a steady pace across the mall, past the food court and down the frozen steel teeth of the sleeping escalator. On the ground floor, he headed up the hallway towards the public washrooms and through the *Authorized Personnel Only* doors to the labyrinth of corridors and storage bays beyond.

He found Ken biting his nails beside a set of double doors that led out to the rear parking lot. Even in his blue-and-black uniform, Ken looked exactly like what he was: a geeky, knob-kneed kid who had just enough upper-body strength to wrestle an eight-year-old girl to the ground. If she happened to be on Ritalin, so much the better.

Ken had also been cursed with a bout of late-blooming acne that, despite a vigorous cleansing routine, turned his cheeks, forehead and chin into a lunar landscape of shiny pink pits. When you combined this with his general geekiness, Sam was amazed at how the kid still managed such a positive outlook on life.

He knew the credit must belong with Ken's loving mother who always put sweet little notes (which Ken was never embarrassed about reading aloud) in his bagged lunches. She was so thoughtful it wasn't unusual for her to send along extra treats for Sam.

As he approached his partner, Sam was relieved to see that Ken hadn't unclipped his company-issued revolver from its holster on his hip.

'I stayed where I was, Sam.'

'Just like we practised.'

Ken's smile grew wider. 'That's right.'

'So what's next?' Sam encouraged. He knew that if Ken could concentrate on all the things they had taught him, he was less likely to collapse to the floor and curl into a foetal position.

'We confirm there's an intruder, secure the area, and then call the police.'

'Excellent. Now, where did you hear the voices?'

Ken pointed down the short, dimly lit corridor that turned sharply behind the jewellery store.

'I'll take point,' said Sam. 'Stay close behind, and keep your weapon holstered. Do you understand?'

Ken nodded and gulped.

Sam moved quickly and quietly down the corridor, stopping at the corner to regulate his breathing before darting his head out to take a quick peek beyond. The next corridor was empty, too, but Sam caught a ripple of sound that didn't belong.

'There's someone here,' Sam whispered. 'But we need to make sure it's not one of the store owners. Someone might have forgotten to tell us they planned a late-night stock-take.'

Ken reached for his weapon.

'Leave it,' Sam said sharply. 'I don't care what kind of training the company gave you, this isn't the shooting range. We don't use our weapons, OK?'

‘But the manual says—’

‘Fuck the manual, Ken. We’re not paid nearly enough to put our lives on the line for some over-priced junk. If the intruder has a weapon, we back away and let the cops handle it. OK?’

Ken nodded, but still looked unsure.

Sam grabbed him by the shoulders.

‘You have to be with me on this one. More security guards lose their lives from friendly fire than anything else. That’s because we don’t have the practical training to really know what the fuck we’re doing. We get paid shit wages because our job is to eat sandwiches, drink coffee and stop the bums from sneaking in and using the storage closets as personal drug dens and toilets. So keep it holstered or go home right now.’

Ken sighed his agreement.

‘Good. Now wait here while I check the situation.’

Leaving Ken at the corner, Sam moved cautiously down the hallway, past the undisturbed rear entrance to the jewellery store, and stopped outside the sliding door that led to *The Candy Factory*. The latch on the door was broken.

Sam pressed his ear to the door and heard soft grunting noises beyond. Nervous sweat began to bead on his forehead as he unsnapped his baton and slid open the door.

In the darkness, the store’s gaily coloured tubes of bulk candy – jawbreakers, boiled sweets, Licorice Allsorts, gummy soothers and jelly beans in 1,001 flavours – looked sadly plain. The grinning plastic clowns and cuddly bear masks that protruded from the ceiling and walls had a creepy, haunted-house quality.

Sam moved slowly and carefully to the cash register and looked around. The register hadn’t been disturbed. He stood listening, his right hand gripping the metal baton by his side.



A rustle of plastic wrap whispered from beyond a large metal rack filled with brightly coloured gumballs.

Sam crept to the far side of the rack. The rustling had turned to wet slurping and Sam suddenly wondered if, instead of a burglar, he was about to catch some creepy store manager giving a naive new employee the unauthorized after-hours tour.

*Click!*

Sam froze at the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

Then the candy rack exploded – packets of gumballs, Pez dispensers and gummy spiders flew around him like sugared shrapnel.

Startled, Sam stumbled backwards, stepped on a runaway cluster of jawbreakers and lost his balance. As he crashed into the overstocked candy shelves, two teenagers launched themselves through the cloud of confusion, their pockets and cheeks stuffed with sweets. Grinning, teeth coated a raspberry red, one of the boys turned, his hands clutching a highly sophisticated gun.

Sam recognized the weapon's silhouette as a variant of the Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine-gun. With a retractable stock and its barrel threaded for a silencer, it was the type of gun favoured by the US Navy and anyone else who needed to fire 800 lethal rounds per minute. To enhance its accuracy, the teen had attached a sophisticated laser sight.

Sam saw the sight's red laser cut through the darkness and candied flotsam. Then the boy found his target and squeezed the trigger.

Sam grunted as he was punched twice in the belly, the impacts buckling his knees and sending him sliding on to his ass.

Gasping for breath on the floor, his heart thundering in his chest, Sam reached for the wound in his belly and felt a warm, sticky mess oozing over his shirt. When he lifted his

hand, his fingers were covered in bright Day-Glo yellow paint.

*Shit*, he thought as he tried to calm himself, *a bloody paint gun*.

Then a second, more alarming thought: *Ken!*

He scrambled to his feet and rushed out of the store, screaming at the top of his lungs to warn his partner the intruders were only kids. His warnings were lost in metallic thunder as something meaty slammed into the exterior exit doors.

When Sam breathlessly reached Ken, the guard was standing rock still, his hands raised in surrender, five bright-yellow splotches of paint decorating his uniform from crotch to chin. His face was streaked with tears.

'I-I thought I was a goner, Sam,' he said shakily. 'I didn't know what to do.'

Sam smiled, relieved he wasn't the only useless member of mall security working tonight. He patted the young man's shoulder.

'You did exactly the right thing, Ken. You didn't panic, and more importantly, you didn't put a bullet into two stupid kids. Hell, you're practically a hero.'

Ken smiled weakly. 'Really?'

'Why not? If you had pulled your gun, we both would have lost our jobs and those kids' parents would have sued our asses off. And I, personally, have precious little ass left to sue.'

Ken pondered this information for a moment before adding, 'I think I peed myself.'

Sam snorted with laughter and slapped him on the shoulder again. 'You know something, I think I did, too.'

AT THE END of his shift, Sam unloaded and secured his gun inside its locked case, which he kept inside his locker, and hung up his heavy holster and belt.

He slipped out of thick-soled work shoes and changed his uniform for street clothes: comfortable, over-washed GWG jeans, plain black T-shirt that he bought in packs of three at Wal-Mart, a pair of black Reebok sneakers and an insulated, sleeveless Eddie Bauer vest to keep off the pre-summer chill.

Once dressed, he bundled his soiled uniform in a plastic shopping bag for the dry cleaner's.

Before leaving the converted broom closet, shared by the six full-time and two part-time guards, Sam looked at himself in the full-length mirror and sucked in his stomach.

The face reflected back at him was still handsome. Not soap-star pretty, granted: more Clive Owen with a fuller face, slightly sharper nose, Paul Newman eyes and thick black, close-cropped hair that could stand up to a tornado and barely move.

His mother once told him the hair, and his bone stubbornness, came from his great grandmother, the first black Mrs White. That mixing of the gene pools had also miraculously kept away the inevitable grey from his temples, at least for the moment. The same couldn't be said of his beard, which he now preferred to keep clean-shaven.

At forty-two, he was too damn young to display grey hair.

Sam had moved his family to Portland from L.A. nearly ten months earlier on the promise of a steady acting gig on a new weekly TV series. As it turned out, the show, like so many others, didn't get picked up beyond its pilot. When the series went under, his wife of fifteen years gave him an ultimatum: get a real job or leave your family behind.

Sam surprised himself by how quickly he agreed not to return to the lights of L.A., and instead settle down in his original home town. His wife had been good about it, too. She didn't complain about the lousy wage his lack of useful skills earned, and she still encouraged him to audition for the occasional commercial, voice-over or small-budget movie that came to town.

His last gig had been just three weeks earlier: a thirty-second TV spot to kick-start excitement for the Beavers' new season of Triple-A ball. The two-day shoot, in which he played a face-painting fan magically transformed into the team's furry mascot, gave him a newfound appreciation for the Sci-fi actors who had to wear elaborate masks every working day. It had taken him almost a week to remove all traces of the beaver make-up, rubber, clay and glue from his ears, nostrils and other crevices.

Sam couldn't say he was happy with his new life, his failure to realize his acting dream still made him feel less than whole. But by removing himself from the constant rejection of L.A., he had to admit he felt closer to its embrace.

He exhaled and watched his stomach roll out into the formative stages of a middle-age paunch. He needed to get back to the gym. After all, he told himself, one of these days, Hollywood might finally come callin'.

The door to the cramped locker room opened and Ken walked in. He had already changed out of his uniform. The kid was too shy to change in front of other people, and often disappeared at the end of the shift to some other

closet somewhere. Sam never questioned him about it. He had his own quirks.

'You left this upstairs.' Ken handed Sam his red thermos.

'Thanks. I must have put it on the bench when you called about those intruders.'

Ken opened his locker and grabbed an ugly orange and black-striped leather jacket off the hook. He dug in the inside pocket. His hand reappeared with a DVD, complete with a custom-made label that showed Sam as the winking mascot. He handed it over.

Sam accepted it graciously, making sure he took a moment to look at the label.

'Nice work. You do that?'

Ken beamed. 'Yeah, on the computer. I like teaching myself new things, you know?'

There was a knock on the door and a gruff voice called out: 'Are you night turds done in there? We gotta get changed.'

Sam slipped the disc and thermos into the plastic bag beside his uniform before opening the door. Two day-shift guards stood in the hallway, arms folded to pretend fat was muscle, with shit-eating grins creasing their ugly mugs.

'We're just leaving, ladies, keep your knickers on.'

Sam glanced over his shoulder. He didn't like leaving Ken alone with the day-shifters. Too many people joined security as a way to flex their muscles without the restrictions of the police force. And no matter how much he may be part of the mall squad, Ken would always be easy prey for the bullies in their midst.

'You ready?'

Ken snatched up his motorcycle helmet and followed Sam out.

## 6

IN THE MALL parking lot, Sam climbed into the black vinyl and duct-taped driver's seat of his navy blue '81 Jeep CJ5 and started the engine. The lack of doors and flimsy soft-top made him glad for his insulated vest. Cold air blasted over his legs as the engine coughed into life and the Jeep began to purr.

Sam switched off the heater fan and reached into the pocket of his vest to dig out a tin pack of small Dominican Republic cigars. From the same pocket, he produced a gunmetal Zippo lighter adorned with The Who's red, white and blue Mod target logo. After licking the chocolate-brown outer leaf to slow its burn, Sam stuck the cigar in the corner of his mouth and touched it to flame.

As he exhaled the sweet, pungent smoke, he turned the fan back on low. Mild warmth began to fill the open interior of the rugged two-seater. If he restored it to its prime, Sam knew it could easily fetch several thousand dollars on the collectors' market. The catch, of course, being that he would first need several thousand dollars to fix it up.

As he put the Jeep in gear, Ken buzzed by on his orange and black Vespa scooter with matching bee-shaped helmet.

Chuckling, Sam took off across the deserted parking lot to wind his way home. The one benefit he found in his job - hell, the only benefit - was how quiet and peaceful the streets were at 6 a.m.