

CRACKERVILLE

John Boston

Being a cop is not glamorous. It's not a job for glamorous people. It's a job for people that can tolerate a small mountain of bullshit and find a way to climb over it to get to the other side. Detective Mike McKenna didn't trust the other officers in his department. Most of them he didn't really like. They just tolerated him and vice versa. He had been with the department for over fourteen years. Retirement was just around the corner. The Covid-19 virus had devastated his city and budget cuts were all but certain at this point. All he had to do was make it for another six months. Rumor was the city was going to offer buyouts to everyone with fifteen years or more of service. Sure, he would take a hit, but that meant he wouldn't have to be here anymore, dealing with dirty cops and dirty criminals.

Officially, he was a detective with the rank of sergeant. None of that mattered, because a year ago, the police chief and two captains were indicted on racketeering and federal corruption charges. They all took plea deals and are serving their sentences in some un-named federal prison. No one is sure who blew the whistle, but whoever it was, it was somebody with an inside knowledge of what was going on in the precinct. There were whispers, nothing more. Since they all took plea deals, the informant never had to testify in court. The DA refused to talk.

His boss was one of those indicted. He got immunity in exchange for testimony. Mike was reassigned to a suburban department. He knew none of these people. They knew he was one of "those" guys from the bad precinct.

The precinct captain didn't want him there, that much was made clear on his first day. That sentiment seemed to echo right on down the ladder. Mike had even been shot in the line of duty, but none of that mattered right now. He was a secretary for the Captain. That was fine with him, it all paid the same. He was just waiting to get his money and get the hell out of there.

He answered the phone a lot. Did quite a bit of talking and not much else. He had been on the Emergency Services Unit in his last precinct and now, he was preparing slides for classes and filling in at the county jail. Not exactly how he thought his career would pan out. He was going nowhere quickly.

She came in on a Tuesday. Her name was Molly Simmons. Well dressed, well spoken, like many of the ladies in this bedroom community. She was maybe mid-forties, right about the time of their first plastic surgery. She asked to speak to a detective and Mike was the only one around. He shook her hand and invited her into the office he was using.

"Have a seat, what can I do for you?"

"Detective, I'll get right to the point. My daughter is Jasmine Simmons. Age 24. Bright girl with a bright future, until she started using heroin. Flushed her entire life right down the toilet. That's not why I'm here, though, just some backstory. See, no matter how strung out she gets, she always stays in touch. Sometimes it's two weeks or more, but that's it. She knows she's killing us and in her own way is trying to make amends. I don't even know why she calls, having a conversation with someone high on heroin is pointless. Problem is, it has been over three weeks since her last phone call. I heard from one of her friends that she is staying out at that homeless encampment underneath one of the highway overpasses. I was hoping you or someone could go out there and do a welfare check on her if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No, not at all. You understand if we find any drugs on her, we have to charge her. Is she under any court orders, or probation or anything?"

"No, no she isn't. I hope when you find her, well.....let's just say that some time in jail might not be the worst thing that's ever happened to her. I think that's the only way she might get clean."

"Where exactly is this place?"

"It's the first exit off the highway before you get into town. They even named it. They call it *Cracker Ville*.....can you believe that?"

"Really? Why?" asked Mike

"It's got a reputation. It's where all the white junkies hang out and shoot up."

"Sounds like fun."

"It's a shit hole. Filled with some very nasty people. We picked Jasmine up from there a few months back. It was so bad, even she had to bail."

"Well, either myself or someone in the department will go out there and check up on her. As soon as I hear anything, I'll be in touch." said Mike.

He took Molly's number and stuffed it in his pocket. He had to inform the captain what he was doing. Sometimes he didn't seem to care what Mike did, other times he scrutinized every little decision. You just never knew with him. He could be a gentle breeze or a hurricane.

He told the captain everything Molly told him.

"*Crackerville, huh?* We were out there a few weeks ago. There had to be fifty junkies and shitbags out there. Take Pollander and Fernandez with you. Be cool, you never what a junkie will do. Hopefully, you find her alive and not at room temperature." he said.

Mike radioed for the other officers to meet him. He called Pollander and filled him in. Fernandez was still a rookie, about to finish his first year of probation. He was still in the learning process. Pollander was a veteran. He and Mike hadn't really spoken much since he joined the department. Maybe that could change. He needed friends in this department, people he could rely on. He

knew he had to overcome his reputation. His captain was gradually beginning to give him more and more responsibility. Maybe once they saw that, they might open up to him.

They met at the highway exit. They decided not to have their bar lights on as they approached. Mike made it clear they were only there to find the girl. They had to expect the worst. Not all of the people in the homeless camp were psychotic or criminals. Some just fell on hard times. It was very easy to do these days.

"Only three of us? What happens if they decided to attack us?" asked Fernandez.

"You've got a gun. I don't think any of these people are going to be missed too much." said Officer Pollander.

"Damn....okay. I still think we need more backup."

"No, that's not what we want. Any more than just us three and they will think we are here to mess with them. We're on their turf. Once they see we're only here to find Jasmine, I have a feeling they'll be more than helpful." said Mike.

"Why would they do that?"

"Sooner we find her, the sooner we're gone and they can go back to doing whatever the hell it is homeless people do," said Pollander.

"Bingo," said Mike

The three of them took two cars off the road and into the hard dirt. They drove underneath the overpass and stopped at the first tent.

"Jesus, people actually live out here?" asked Fernandez

"That's how I lived for eighteen months in Iraq. Hell, most of them have it better than we did. Those summers in Baghdad can be brutal."

"So, where do they go to the bathroom?"

"The nearest bucket, I'd imagine," said Mike.

"Okay, let's go. Polite, but firm. No cowboy shit." said Mike as he parked the car and locked the doors.

"NORFOLK POLICE DEPARTMENT. WE ARE LOOKING FOR JASMINE SIMMONS," shouted Mike.

All he got in return was an almost eerie silence. The three of them stood together. Mike immediately knew something was wrong. The three of them stayed together. They searched one tent and makeshift shelter after another, but no one was home. They must have searched two dozen tents and shelters, but no one was inside.

"The hell did they go? All their stuff is inside. Even canned food. No way they would just leave that behind." said Fernandez.

As soon as Mike turned the corner, the smell hit him. It hit him hard. He instantly recognized it. Once you smell it, it stays with you forever. There was no mistaking it.

Mike was smelling decomposing human remains.

"You smell that?" he asked

"Yup. I hope that's not what I think it is," said Pollander.

It was about five hundred feet down the encampment, by the river, when they first saw it. Mike had to stop for a second. He was trying to process what was lying right in front of him. It was the most horrible sight he had ever seen.

In a trench, only about fifty feet from the river were dozens of bodies, lying in a perfectly straight row. Mike and the others ran down and stopped when the smell overcame them.

"Sweet Mary, mother of God.....are they all dead?" asked Fernandez.

Mike took out a handkerchief and put it over his mouth. The smell was so strong, that he was having to concentrate to not vomit. He was wearing rubber gloves when he touched the first victim. She was ice cold. He could see some had died of gunshots. He walked back over to Pollander and Fernandez.

"Go ahead and call this one in. This is a major crime scene, so we don't want to touch or disturb anything. Let forensics do that."

Pollander called it in. Mike was already on the phone with his captain, telling him what they had found. He said he would be out there as fast as he could.

All three men were trying to hold it together as best they could. Mike was no stranger to dead bodies, but even for a seasoned veteran like himself, this was more than he could bear.

Mike walked back over to the pile of dead bodies and tried to look for Jasmine. He counted thirty-eight victims, but not one of them was Jasmine, he was certain of that. He made an executive decision to call Molly before any of this hit the media. He assumed any normal parent would freak out when they heard of something like this and their first thought would be that one of the dead bodies was their daughter. He walked back up and down the line, several times. Her mother said she had a very recent tattoo of a dragon on her right forearm. None of the victims had a tattoo like that. He was 99 percent certain, that Jasmine was not one of the victims. They had only been dead for a few days.

Within the hour, there were dozens of officers and paramedics at the encampment. His captain arrived shortly thereafter. He froze when he saw the crime scene. Even for a seasoned officer who had seen it all, it still stopped him in his tracks.

"*Jesus Christ, what the fuck happened here?*" he said softly.

Mike managed to call Molly and told her what they had found. She began sobbing when he told her that as of right now, he did not see Jasmine among the victims.

"*What do you mean they're all dead? Did someone kill them?*" she asked

"I don't know how they died, that's up to the examiner. It's like they just lay down in the dirt and died. Strangest thing I've ever seen." said Mike

"I can be there in half an hour," she said and hung up.

"Well Mike, this is your baby. You were the first officer on the scene. This is officially your investigation. Don't screw it up." said the captain as he put his hand on Mike's back.

He had no idea where to start. He took as many photos as he could of the pile of bodies as well as their tents and makeshift cabins. He was going to need a lot of help.

Within a few hours, there were dozens of officers and investigators on the scene to assist. Some officers volunteered their time off the clock to try and piece together just what in the hell happened here.

He helped load dozens of bodies into bags. The state police had requested a special truck to haul the bodies away, called a *cadaver truck*. It was that bad. The chief did all the talking to the media, but many citizens were using their drones to photograph the area and put it online. There was just no way to prevent this from going live. Mike figured it was best to give the public everything they had, rather than let some blogger beat them to the punch.

He found Pollander a few hours later sitting in his car.

"Jesus, what a day."

"They're all dead?"

"All 38 of them. It's so weird to pick up a person and they're ice cold," said Mike.

"Where the hell do we even start?"

"I'm trying to find Jasmine. She's our only lead at this point. I didn't see her in the pile of bodies."

"Me either. I think she might have escaped this horror show," said Pollander.

"We can only hope."

"Where the hell do we even start?" he asked.

"The states are doing their own investigation. I doubt they'll be much help," said Mike

"They never are."

Over the course of the next week, a much clearer picture emerged of what went down that horrible day at the camp. All of the bodies were examined. Five of the victims had died from gunshots. Thirty-three others had died from cyanide poisoning. They had enough of it in their systems to kill an elephant.

"So, they all decided to just eat cyanide? Even for a junkie that doesn't make any sense. I can see one of them trying it to get high, but as soon as they stopped breathing, I would think the rest of them would have gotten the picture." he told the medical examiner.

"I have no idea what these people were thinking, I can only tell you what caused their death and it was definitely cyanide." the examiner said.

There were five detectives, as well as ten state policemen assigned to the case. Mike took dozens of calls from family members. Some were distraught and overcome with grief, others seemed almost glad their loved ones were gone and wherever they were, there was no heroin. He still had no real answers. He tried to piece together what had happened with the rest of his team, but no one had any answers either. For whatever reason, four days ago, thirty-eight people committed a mass suicide in broad daylight. Things got more complicated when Mike met with Molly. She checked with the phone company and she was certain that up until last week, Jasmine was living in that homeless camp. Her messages showed she used a cell tower that was only half a mile away. Two of her friends said she was living there as well. She was the missing piece of the puzzle to all of this. If he could find Jasmine, she might be able to clear up a lot.

"I have no idea where she is. If she's high and strung out, then she could be anywhere. She stayed with some grandpa for a week once cause he had some smack. It's no picnic being the parent of a junkie." Molly told him over the phone.

"I can only imagine. If you hear anything, please let me know, she's pretty much our only witness to this thing."

Their first break came two days later when a homeless man named "*Crackhead Ed*" called and said he stayed out at the camp about a month ago. Mike remembers him well. Last year, he was nearly shot by an officer for brandishing a chainsaw on the highway. He tripped and fell, nearly cutting off his foot. He was put in cuffs and hauled off to jail. He told Mike that was the first time he had been off drugs in more than three years. Mike had to interview him as a witness to another case shortly before he was released. He seemed like a completely different person, as most junkies do, once they stop using. Mike wasn't sure which Ed was going to show up. He asked that they meet in a storage unit off the highway. Mike asked Pollander if he wanted to join him.

"Sure why not, always a pleasure to talk to a crackhead."

The Drysdale Storage Complex was old and looked like it hadn't been renovated in years. They saw Ed standing against one of the units. Mike slowed down and rolled down the window.

"Morning Ed. How the hell are you?"

"Just fine. Did you bring the coffee and donuts?"

Mike handed him his coffee and donuts. Ed's face lit up.

"I hope this isn't a waste of our time Ed," said Mike

Mike and Pollander shouldn't have been surprised to discover that Ed was living in a 8x15 storage locker with no heat or running water. He invited the men in and they sat down at his makeshift table. Ed had already eaten one donut and was working on his second.

"Is it true? Are they all dead?" he asked

"Yes. Thirty-eight victims. I've got thirty-eight dead bodies. Officer Pollander and I were first on the scene. It's our investigation. Any information you have would be greatly appreciated."

"I was out there last month, right around Labor Day. Didn't like it, not my kind of people."

"What do you mean?"

"They was mostly rich white kids. I hate rich people. I mean, I'm white too, just not that kind of white."

"Go on."

"I was screwing this lady who got her junk from one of the guys in the camp. Some kid named Zach. What an asshole. You can just tell the people that ain't ever done a lick of work in their lives and never will because they're rich. That's what people like me are for. I shovel their shit so they don't have to."

"Ed, do you have any idea, what would have caused these people to commit mass suicide together?"

"I know that's what you need me to tell you, but I got nothing. I wish I did, honest to God, I would really help."

"Tell me about the camp. Who were the shot callers in the camp?" asked Pollander

"I mean there really wasn't one, except maybe this guy named Bennet. I couldn't tell you his last name. He brought us food and propane. I think it was his property that we was staying on."

"We've been trying to contact him since we found the bodies. Haven't had any luck."

"Why don't you just go to his house?"

"We would if we knew where it was."

"It's on the other side of the woods, across the street."

Both Mike and Pollander looked at one another. They were both confused.

"His house is across the street? I thought the property stopped at the edge of the highway." asked Mike.

"He owns more than one property. Yeah, I think they said he lived in some trailers on the other side of the woods. I never went there, but my girl did. She needed some medicine one night and he gave it to her."

"Nice to see there are still some decent people left in the world," said Mike.

"I'm sorry boys. I wish I could tell you more. All I did was just hang out, drink wine and shoot up once in a while. It was when my girl found out she had Hepatitis and HIV, that's when I knew I had to cut that shit out of my life. I've seen people die from AIDs.....man, it's a horrible way to go. We only had sex two times and I wore a condom both times. I got my results back last week. I was positive for Hep C, but negative for HIV, so I guess that's not all bad."

"Ed.....why did you call us out here? If you didn't have anything for us?" asked Mike.

"I was kind of hoping you could give me some information. My girl, Sharice.....is she one of the victims?" asked Mike.

He pulled out his folder and went through the names on the list.

"Sharice Wlkins, age 32. Died of cyanide poisoning," said Mike without looking up.

He put down his coffee and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry man. I just wish we had something, something to help us figure out what the hell happened out there."

"There were more than 38 people out there. Probably like double that number."

"We know. We've been trying to get in touch with some of them, but no one will come forward. As of right now, we have fifteen confirmed missing persons. The State Police are conducting their own investigation. Won't be much longer and the FBI will be doing there's. We'll be squeezed right out of our own investigation. We have a very narrow window of opportunity here to get some real leads. Please, Ed, anything. Just give us something."

"That bar down on Holt Street, I think it's called Iron Mike's. I recognized two of the girls at the camp. They hang out in the bar, run tricks, get high. I know one of their names was Rachel. Not sure about the other one. They were out at the camp. Saw them both one night. I think Rachel's brother is a major junkie. She checks up on him. That's all I got. I tried calling a few people, but no one picked up."

"Thanks, Ed. Keep the donuts."

"Mike.....when you find out what happened, will you call me? I don't want to have to read about it in the papers," said Ed.

"You were out there over a month ago and you didn't see anything, anything at all that would lead all of these people to kill themselves?"

"I saw a lot of fucked up things, but nothing that fucked up. Junkies all have a death wish, but they do it slowly, never all at once. Not like that. Whatever made those people do that, it had nothing to do with drugs." said Ed.

"Ok, Ed. I appreciate your help. We'll be in touch."

They left the storage units and headed back to headquarters. They stopped for lunch and were informed by their Lieutenant they had to deliver the bad news to two families that their loved ones had been positively identified. Everyone in the department had to do it. The names were divided up amongst the detectives. Each person had to do three or four.

"They're going to publish the names in the paper tomorrow morning."

"Well, let's get to it. The sooner it's over, the better," said Pollander.

They had gotten the names and addresses sent to their phones. The first family lived over an hour away. They parked their car in the driveway and knocked on the front door. The name of the family was Talon. Benjamin Talon was one of the victims. He was 23 years old.

A woman answered the phone. Her husband came to the door a minute later. Neither he nor Pollander had to say a word. They both knew.

They told the Talon family that once the department had collected and cataloged everything belonging, they could take it home. Mrs. Talon showed the officers some pictures of their son. It was moments like these that made the men hate their profession. They had to deliver the worst news imaginable to someone and keep their composure. They didn't want to ask any questions, not right now, it was not the time. They gave the parents both their business cards and left the house.

"Brother, we just do not get paid enough for this shit. Anyone who says cops are overpaid, just have them do that, just once," said Pollander.

"We still got one left," said Mike.

The other family was about forty minutes from their location. They found the house. There were two children playing out in the front yard. They stopped what they were doing once they saw the men approach the house.

"Are you guys cops?" asked one of the kids.

"No son, we're peace officers," said Mike.

They rang the doorbell. The victim was 34 years old, Andrew Sittler.

A lovely young woman opened the door. She instantly knew they were cops.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Detective McKenna, this is Detective Pollander. Is the family of Andrew Sittler?"

"Yes."

"Are your parents here?"

"My dad is a truck driver, he won't be back till next week. My mom gets off at five.

"Ma'am, I regret to inform you, that Andrew Sittler died four days ago. He has been positively identified."

She didn't say anything. She opened the door and motioned for them to come in. She sat down on the couch. No one said a word for nearly a minute.

"Andrew is my stepbrother. My mom had him when she was only 17. I haven't seen or spoken to him in five years. We kind of just assumed he was dead already."

"Five years?"

"He joined the Army right out of high school. Got sent to Iraq. He had major PTSD. He saw some pretty horrible things over there. He and my dad never really got along. He came home here after he got out. It was pretty bad. One night, he and my dad got in this big fight and they hit each other. My dad told him to get out. He said if his own family kicked him out, they would never see him again. We didn't think he was serious. Turns out he was. Not a call or text, or letter or anything. It really upsets my mom. This is going to kill her. Can you tell me how he died?"

"He injected cyanide. He was staying at the homeless camp on RT 80."

"The one in the news? He was there? Is it true? Did they all kill themselves?" she asked

"It would appear so."

"I don't really know much about my brother, mainly just what my parents tell me, but I am sure he would not have killed himself. No way, Andrew was too tough for that. He didn't fight all this time, just to give up like that."

"I just read the autopsy report. They ran it twice. Death by poisoning." said Mike.

"I just can't believe Andrew would do something like that. It seems so out of character for him."

"Do you want us to wait for your parents?"

"No, I have no idea when my mom will be home."

"Are you sure, we don't mind."

"My parents were talking about having him declared legally dead anyway. Not a word for over five years and the little bastard is only an hour away. My mom went to therapy because he wouldn't talk to her. I loved my brother, we all did, but we also hated him for what he had become. We were his family and he abandoned us."

Mike gave her his business card and told them they could call anytime. They walked past the kids playing out on the lawn. The girl got them back inside and closed the door.

"Jesus.....this mess just keeps getting worse. Turns out, they found letters and personal items belonging to a Beatriz Mendoza-Sittler. Turns out she was his wife. She is now missing. Great, one more to add to the pile." said Pollander looking at the messages on his phone.

"The chief is going to hold a press conference in the morning. We've been asked to attend," said Mike.

"Can't wait."

Mike dropped him off back at the station. He drove back out to the crime scene. There were dozens of officers and forensic specialists there, collecting samples and going through the tents. Mike had to do something. He put on his face shield and rubber gloves and started going through the belongings which were now on a very, very long table. They had found four guns and massive amounts of drugs, but still no answers. Mike spoke with the State Police Lieutenant, Paul Logan.

"I wish we had something for you Mike. All we have are dead ends. I think most of these people had already been written off some time ago. We've been able to verify that there are now sixteen missing people, with more to be discovered. How you doing?"

"Bout the same. No one gave a shit about these people, that's why they were living here. The only tip we got is that the owner of the property lives on the other side of the woods. Feel like taking a walk with me?"

"Why not? My boss is calling me by the hour wanting updates. So far, I don't have shit to tell him.

They got in Mike's car and drove down a dirt road to the edge of the highway. They found another dirt road and drove down until they saw some lights through the woods. They came to a clearing that had dozens of small buildings and trailers on the property. Mike parked the car and turned off the ignition.

"You think we should call for back up?"

"We don't want to spook him. I got a feeling we're being watched. You brought your gun right?" asked Mike

"Of course, didn't you bring yours?"

"Of course, never leave home without it."

"I hope we don't have to shoot anybody."

Paul's cell phone rang. He looked at the number. His mood changed suddenly.

"Shit....I got to take this. You go one. You can try, but no one's going to answer. Just wait and see. I'll hold the fort."

Mike got out of the car and walked up the steps to the house. He rang the doorbell to the old farmhouse. He was about to walk away when the door opened. Mike could not believe what he was seeing. The woman answering the door was beautiful, like stunningly beautiful. Straight out of a fairy tale. She was immaculately dressed. A man then came to the door. He looked well dressed as well.

"Can I help you?" he asked

"Detective Mike McKenna, Norfolk Police Department. I'd like to ask a few questions if you don't mind."

"No, please...come on in," he said.

"Is your name Bennet?"

"Yes, I'm Bennet Carlson. This is my friend, Abernathy."

"You guys live here?"

"Yes."

"Bennet, do you own that property across the street?"

"No, we just rent the house."

"Do you know where we can get in touch with the owner?"

"I believe the owner died. His daughter is managing all of his affairs. She collects our rent."

"Do you have her number?"

"Yes, somewhere, you'll have to give me a moment."

"No worries, just text it to me when you find it."

"Text?"

"Yes, on your phone to my phone," said Mike holding up his phone.

"Oh, right."

"So, do either of you have any idea why 38 people decided to kill themselves across the street?"

"Was it that many? My goodness, that's horrible."

"Yes, so any information would be a great help."

"I'm sorry detective, we didn't have much contact with them. Once in a while they would come over to the house and ask for food or something. We would try to help them out. It's the Christian thing to do."

"Bennet, they swallowed cyanide. Not one or two, but like 33 of them. It wasn't an accident, they all knew what they were doing. Do you have any idea why?"

"Perhaps this world and all of its misgivings were simply too much for them."

"Do you think someone might have helped them? Maybe they supplied the cyanide?"

"It's certainly possible."

"Guys, come on. Let's cut the bullshit. I know you more than you're telling me. We can do this here, or we can do it down at the station."

In an instant, Bennett's demeanor changed. He gave Mike an icy cold stare. Mike was caught a little off guard.

"You know detective, I am a teacher of sorts, that is my profession. I teach history as well. You remind me very much of someone I used to know, a great many years ago. I know the Civil War so well, that you could almost say I was actually there, in 1865, when the Union armies finally swept through the South. You see, there was a rich plantation owned by the same family for generations. The plantation owner was a rather cruel, heartless individual.

Almost took pleasure in the suffering of his slaves. So, one day, the Union marches through and tells everyone on the farm they are free to go, wherever they choose. They are no longer slaves. Now of course, the family had fled, leaving only one of their sons behind, but the fascinating thing, the thing that I remember, is that once the slaves were free, they didn't really do anything to the slave owner or his family. Strange, since he had mistreated them all these years and done some terrible things to them. See, the slave owner was smart, he had selected a few slaves to be in charge of the other slaves. They had the best cabins, got fed the best food, all they had to do was keep the other slaves in line. They were the cruelest of the bunch. They did whatever their master told them to do, no matter how cruel or unusual. They were the ones the slaves went after. Rounded them up and hung them from a tree. Cut them down and burned their bodies. They never went after any white people. Isn't that odd?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because detective, don't you see? You are the house nigger of the 21st century. You are the slave in charge of keeping the other slaves in line. That's what cops do. Only.....I must wonder what is going to happen to you when the slaves have their freedom once more. What will your future be?"

"I really don't know, Bennett. I help people, I don't make their lives any worse than they already are."

"So, I hear a word thrown around the camp. They used to call me the *Alpha Male* of the group. Do you know why?"

"The alpha is usually the biggest, strongest or loudest of the bunch," said Mike

"Oh no, I am none of those things. You see detective, the alpha male isn't the biggest or strongest or even the smartest, no, the alpha is the one who wins all the time. The alpha is going to win and everyone in the room knows it. You can best your life on it." Bennett said cracking a smile.

"If you have any information for me, please call," he said and handed Bennett one of his cards.

"I'll see myself out."

Mike got up and left the house without saying a word. He got back in the car. Paul put his phone down.

"How'd it go?"

"Complete waste of time. You want to get some food?"

"Sure, let's hit that diner at the truck stop. Waitress there that works overnight is pretty cute."

"I could use cute right now," said Mike as he pulled away from the house.

The next day Mike got a call from Pollander. He was going to check out Iron Mike's Bar and look for Rachel.

"Rachel quit two weeks ago and no one has seen her since. I have a feeling she might be one of the victims."

"Jesus, this thing just keeps getting worse and worse. I had to call three families this morning. If I'm not drinking by the end of today, I'll never start." said Mike.

"Rachel was a barfly who turned out tricks once in a while to make ends meet. Mike, that whole camp was one giant collection of shitbags. It's going to make it tough to get any real answers. I've called everybody I know on the street trying to get some answers. No one knows anything, or if they do, they aren't talking. By the way, you might want to read up on something that happened back in 1978. Creepiest fucking thing I've ever seen, *The Jonestown Massacre*. It's like a horror movie, except it actually happened."

"Jonestown? With that weird reverend guy?"

"Jim Jones. Got 912 people to drink cyanide laced kool aid. It was in some country called Guyana in South America. By the time the police found them, the whole village was dead. Kids, parents, everybody. They just drank poison, then sat around watching TV or doing the dishes until they died. A congressman from California went down there with a film crew to investigate.

He was shot dead by the cult, so they figured the game was up. They weren't crazy or stupid people either. Some of them had engineering degrees. Just doesn't make any sense."

"None of this does. I keep calling and talking, but all I get is silence. Somebody, somewhere knows exactly what happened, we just have to find them."

"You had any luck with that Simmons girl?"

"None, I suspect her mom knows a bit more than she's telling me."

"Most moms do."

"I may have to lay it on thick with her. So far as I can tell she was at that camp only a few days before the murders."

"She's our best lead then. I'm going to try and track down a few more leads, I'll call if I find something."

The press conference began promptly at 8:30AM. There were over a hundred people in the audience. The department spokesperson went over everything they had discovered thus far, including the names of all of the victims. They had tried to get in touch with the victim's families but were not successful in all of them. There were still three persons who remained unidentified, their pictures were shown on TV. It was a pretty gruesome way to do things, but they needed answers and simply were not getting them. Two DHS agents were also assigned to the case to *assist* in the investigation. Neither the department nor the state police trusted them one bit.

The investigation was still in its infancy. The questions came quickly, but there simply were no answers at this point. They made it quite clear, there were still over 15 people who were considered missing at this point. They were able to get photos for six of them. There were likely many more.

The case was now big news not just in America, but the rest of the world as well. Things like this were not supposed to happen here. They were supposed to happen in someone else's backyard. The parallels between here and the Jonestown Massacre in 1978 were eerily similar. Back then, authorities had some answers, here we had nothing. Calls and information were coming in by the hour, but it wasn't much help. There was no solid lead, nor reason why these people did what they did. Once the conference was over, he had a meeting with the chief and the captain. Not just a regular meeting, no, this was one of those *come to Jesus meetings*.

"Mike, this investigation is a top priority. I need answers from you. I've got the states doing their own investigation and now the feds are here. No one is talking to each other. Turn over rocks, do whatever the hell it is you have to do to get me some real answers here, am I clear?" said the chief as soon as he sat down.

"The priority has got to be finding the missing people right now. I'm not sure if they were kidnapped, or are so scared they don't want to come out of hiding. We know for a fact that the Simmons girl was at the camp about a week ago. I'm thinking her mom knows more than she's telling us. We got to lean on her. I'm going to need more help, I can't do this by myself."

"I know, you're going to get Cotton and Devries to help you. I wish I could give you more officers, but our budget is strained already. You've got the right idea, our priority right now is to find the missing persons."

"We've got cell numbers for five of them. Once we get the info back from the companies, we'll know roughly where they are. I wish we had someone full-time to man the phones and take calls."

"Two auxiliary officers are doing just that. They put in over fifteen hours a piece yesterday. They got a few decent leads, not much."

"This whole thing just doesn't feel right. Somebody knows something and they aren't talking."

"That's your job, Mike."

"What is?"

"Get them talking."

Mike drove back out to the scene of the murders. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, he just hoped he would find it once he was there. The area was still under police guard, with hundreds of people trying to visit the site. The state police had established checkpoints around the property. Mike showed his badge and pulled onto the property. He walked around for about half an hour, going inside tents and looking through the personal belongings of the victims.

There has to be a missing link in all this. 38 people just don't all decide to kill themselves at once for no reason.

He walked past the site where the bodies were all piled up. He found someone from the State Police's Forensics team and decided to hit them up.

"Do you guys have anything so far?"

"Be careful.....those drones can hear every word we're saying," he said pointing up to the sky.

They walked back to Mike's car and he started the engine.

"I've been a crime scene investigator for 13 years and I've never seen anything like this. It just doesn't add up."

"Yeah, no shit," said Mike.

"I mean they all, on their own decided to end their lives. The only reason the five victims shot themselves is because they ran out of cyanide."

"It's like a bad dream that just keeps getting worse. At this rate the bloggers are going to solve this before we do," said Mike

"Mike, I can tell you this: no one forced these people to do this. They did it all on their own."

"Why? Why would they do this? The hell were they hoping to gain by it?"

"I've been trying to answer that for the past week. So far, I've got nothing. Oh, there was one thing."

"What's that?"

"We found a copy of a satanic bible in some of their tents. Very old, looks like it was written over a hundred years ago. The publisher went out of business during the Great Depression."

"Satanic Bible? The plot thickens."

"They were into some very weird shit out here."

Mike was now in the news. He had given an interview to a local news channel. The internet had already solved the case, with everything from alien abductions to Bigfoot being responsible. He had done dozens of interviews. None of them went anywhere. Be it the transient nature of homelessness or the fact that none of them trusted the police, Mike certainly had his work cut out. He decided to stop by Molly Simmon's house since it was right on the way to the precinct. This was not going to be a nice, polite visit. He was going to have to get serious with her, very quickly.

He was going to have to talk to her like a Dutch Uncle as his grandfather used to say.

He rang the doorbell. A moment later, Molly answered the door.

"Detective, I was hoping you would stop by. Please, come in."

Mike sat down on her sofa.

"Would you care for a drink?"

"No thank you, I'll only be a minute. Molly, I must ask you again: do you have any idea where Jasmine might be?"

"I wish I did. I really do. I must have called and left over a hundred messages and texts, but nothing. She just vanished."

"Molly, you aren't trying to protect her, are you?"

"Maybe. Every mother wants to protect her children."

"She would be much safer with me. We aren't the only players in this game. Here are state police and even feds conducting their own investigation. If someone else were to find her first, I'm not sure you would ever hear from her again."

"Why do you say that? She hasn't done anything wrong."

"She and the others are loose ends. Whoever did this is, well, certainly not your run-of-the-mill criminal."

"That's for damn sure. Look, I really don't know where she is. If I knew, I would tell you."

"Molly, I'm going to get a warrant to impound your phone and all electronic devices in this house, including any work-related electronics. I don't want to, but you're not leaving me much of a choice," he said and headed towards the door.

"Mike.....I'm not lying to you. There are what, like a dozen other missing people from that camp? Why her?"

"She's our best lead. The others were there at some point. We don't know if they left on their own, or were forced to leave and are being held against their will."

"Go, get your warrant, you won't find anything, it's just a waste of time."

"Maybe, maybe not. I haven't been doing this for two weeks. I know when someone is lying to me and right now, we both know you're lying to me."

"Get out!" she said and opened the front door.

"We'll be in touch Molly," he said and heard the door slam shut on his way down the steps.

Mike went home that evening and watched an online documentary about the Jonestown Massacre. When he got done, he could only shake his head in disbelief. None of it made any sense.

Jim Jones was one scary dude. He was intelligent and psychotic at the same time. Paranoid and delusional. Unlike most whackos, Jones had this uncanny ability to draw perfectly logical, rational adults into his paranoid delusional fantasy where he was judge, jury and executioner. Congressman Leo Ryan's execution was caught on camera by the film crew. Watching the TV report showing the piles of dead bodies really struck a chord.

The video made a point to say that over 400 unclaimed bodies were buried in a makeshift cemetery in Oakland, California.

Four hundred victims that no one cared about. No one claimed them. That's a hell of a lot of lonely people.

It then occurred to him that Crackerville was pretty much the same. They still had about five unclaimed victims with no identification. Their faces had been on every channel all over the world and yet no one wanted to claim them. They were someone's son and daughter. A large collection of derelicts. Solving this case was going to be next to impossible without some serious help, let alone building a case against the perpetrators. Mike had the deck stacked against him.

The days turned into weeks. The once-promising leads went cold. He called and talked and drove thousands of miles to interview people, but nothing. Six months later, he still had nothing. His

investigation had been sidelined by the feds, who had recently announced six arrests in the murder-suicide.

It was all over the news and internet. An FBI spokesman said the suspects all belonged to a bizarre, satanic cult believed responsible for the murders and disappearances. Their photos were plastered all over the TV.

None of it made any sense. How six people were able to convince 38 others to take their own lives just didn't add up. Not that it mattered, the feds had the final say in just about anything and they said very loud and clear, that this case was now closed.

Mike walked into the captain's office. He looked up and motioned for Mike to close the door.

"I am up to my eyeballs in shit here Mike. You really dropped the ball on this one."

"Yeah, so I see."

"Well, don't feel too bad, the state police didn't come up with much either. Don't know where the feds got this info, but they got it before we did. Turns out three of the six suspects had been staying at the camp only a few days before. They made so many problems with their Satan worship, they were kicked out. It got pretty nasty. One of them drew a gun. They came back a few days later and apologized. Brought put a dozen pizzas, just to show there were no hard feelings. The pizza was laced with cyanide. The rest is history."

"That doesn't add up. What about the victims who shot themselves?"

"That's the black hole in this case. They definitely shot themselves, they had powder burns on their hands."

"So, they just decided to kill themselves after watching everybody else die? That doesn't make any sense."

"None of this does Mike, it never will. I have no idea why people do the stupid shit they do. Guess it just seemed like a good idea at the time."

"We've got fifteen missing people who are still missing, what about them?"

"Who knows? Most were just junkies and shit bags anyway, they were never going to help us with the case."

"We have an obligation to find them."

"Mike, this is the FBI's baby now. It's in their lap. They have massive resources we don't. I'm guessing in a few days, they will round up the rest of the cult. They will start leaning heavily on them. I'm sure it won't be too long before one of them cracks and spills the beans. I'm 99 percent sure, they are all dead anyway. It's not going to end well."

"So, I'm off the case?"

"Yes. It's closed as far as the chief and DA are concerned."

"All those people dead, right in our backyard and we just have to let it go? This is crazy!"

"No Mike, this is how the law works. I don't agree with it either, but I'm not in charge. Do me a favor, and get rid of those case files on your desks. They aren't doing you any good. You have to let it go. You win some, you lose some. The odds just weren't in our favor this time."

Mike knew exactly where this was going. He went back over to his office and began going through the small mountain of paperwork he had acquired over the last six months. What a giant, colossal, waste of time. He felt like he let down all of the victim's families, with Molly being the worst. He couldn't even locate one scared, stupid kid. If he had just been able to find her, he could have cracked the case wide open. He never did follow up on his warrant for Molly's phone, maybe he should have. He got several large trash barrels and just dumped the case files in. All of his work was on his computer anyway, he had dumped folder after folder of cold leads and wasted interviews. He got to the file that had the photos of the bodies taken at the crime scene that day. He will never forget that day. It's burned into his memory forever. He thumbed through the photos. Mostly men, but some women and even two children. He had let them down. He was so angry at himself. It was when he got to one of the last photos, that he nearly shit himself.

He immediately recognized the photo. It was Abernathy. The striking, young woman he had met that night at the farmhouse. He never forgot her face. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

He went through the rest of the photos and sure enough, there was Bennet. The same man he met in the farmhouse. Of course that raised a very unpleasant question:

Just how in the hell could he have spoken to them if they died five days earlier?

He remembered that Pollander took all of the photos. He called him and asked him to meet him at the precinct.

He showed up fifteen minutes later. Mike met him at the door.

"What's up, buddy?"

"Those photos of the bodies, when and where did you take them?"

"A couple of hours later, after we found them, why?"

Mike showed him the photos.

"You're positive you took these photos the same day? You didn't find these bodies later on and just added them to the list."

"No, look all of the photos are time stamped," he said and turned the photos over. Sure enough, they had the same date as all the other photos.

"Feel like taking a drive?"

"You want to tell me what's going on?" asked Pollander.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Half an hour later, they were in front of the farmhouse. The same one Mike had visited six months ago.

"The hell are we doing here?" asked Pollander

"Those people in the photos, the man and woman. Their names were Abernathy and Bennett. They never were identified, but it's them."

"How do you know that?"

"Cause I spoke to them, five days after these photos were taken. That girl. She was so beautiful, I never forgot her face. It's the same person."

"Mike, come on. They were dead. How could you have interviewed them if they died five days prior?"

"That's what we are going to find out," he said and got out of his car.

They walked up the steps and knocked on the front door. No lights were on, the house looked like it was abandoned. He knocked again, but no one answered.

"What are we going to do now?"

Mike turned and kicked in the front door. He drew his weapon.

"Um, Mike.....you know we can't do this, right?"

"38 people.....38 people we let down. I don't really give a shit at this point partner," he said and entered the house with his weapon drawn.

"NORFOLK POLICE DEPARTMENT!" he shouted as he stepped through the front door.

Pollander shook his head, drew his weapon, and followed him in.

"Even if we find something, it's useless without a warrant," said Pollander.

They carefully went room by room, finding nothing but old clothes and boxes. It appeared that no one had been living in the house for years. Everything was covered in a very thick layer of dust. They searched the upstairs bedrooms but found nothing. They sat back down at the kitchen table. They went through the drawers and opened the cupboards. The house was abandoned long ago.

"Seems pretty hard to believe there were people living in this shit hole only six months ago," said Pollander.

"They were here. They were right here in front of me. I should have known. Dammit, I wish I had done something."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was tired. I was pissed off. I was still in shock after finding 38 dead people. I don't know, man. I just know if I poked around some more, I might have solved this thing."

"You want to check out the basement?"

"Might as well, we've come this far," said Mike.

They opened the cellar door and turned on their flashlights. They crept down the stairs. Once they were at the bottom, Mike found a battery-operated lantern and turned it on. He had to take a step back at what he saw.

Ten feet in from of him, was a giant pentagram that appeared to be drawn in blood. There was an altar and some very bizarre writing on the wall. In the middle of the pentagram was a decomposing human skeleton.

"Oh shit," said Pollander

"I knew it," said Mike softly.

"The hell do we do now?"

"We start solving the case."

"Mike, this is just another dead person, how is this going to help us?"

"I have a feeling this dead person was important. They were killed down here, instead of with all of the others. Reminds me of a famous quote I heard."

"What's that?"

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men."

"Well, this is about as evil as evil gets. Jesus, what a mess. This thing is like a bad dream that just keeps getting worse and worse."

"There's a missing link to all of this and I think I spoke to the missing link that night in this house."

"Mike, he would have been deadlier than a doornail by then. There's no way you could have spoken to him. It had to be someone that resembled him. A dopple ganger maybe?"

"That woman. I could never forget her. Something about her. She had a beauty that was just.....overpowering. It was her, I'm sure of it."

"What the hell are we going to do about this mess?"

"I'm off the case. It's somebody else's problem now."

The CSI Team arrived at the house an hour or so later. Mike called the captain and filled him in. Mike made it seem like they were working on an unrelated case and just happened to stumble upon it. He had to be careful, he could never tell him why he was there.

"Captain, do you think what we found had anything to do with the murders at the camp?"

"Who knows? At this point, I'd believe almost anything," he said.

They discovered three more bodies at the farmhouse. One was positively identified. They left her wallet and state-issued id card next to her body.

"Beatriz Mendoza-Sittler." said one of the CSI.

"Are you sure she's in here?" asked Mike.

"One of the bodies is definitely female and this was in her jacket on the floor, so I'd say yes.

Mike stepped outside to find Pollander. He walked around the back of the farmhouse and found him on his phone. He was in a very heated conversation.

"I don't know how he found it, but he did."

Mike quickly stepped back, behind the house.

"I'm just calling you to let you know what we found. You guys better come through for me." he said and hung up his phone.

Wait a minute....wait just a goddamn minute! That's how the Feds were able to solve the case. My partner was feeding them all of our information!

Mike ran up to him and grabbed him by his shirt, slamming him against the farmhouse. Even though he was smaller, he was so angry, that his strength seemed to have been greatly amplified.

"Who were you talking to?"

"What? Nobody," said Pollander who seemed completely surprised.

"Bullshit, who the hell were they, and don't you lie to me!" said Mike angrily.

"None of your business."

Mike grabbed his phone and looked at the number.

"Area code 915. Figures. That's a Washington zip code, isn't it?"

"I really don't know. You want to get your hands off me."

Mike released him and threw his cell phone into the bushes.

"The pieces of this fucked up puzzle are beginning to come together. Why man? What the hell did I ever do to you?"

"You didn't do anything to me Mike. I'm sorry. It's just business, that's all. Just a simple business transaction."

Mike was floored. Mainly by the fact that he had so badly misjudged someone he thought he could trust.

"Find your own ride home, asshole," Mike said giving him the bird.

"Come on Mike.....you'd do the same if you were in my position!"

"No, I wouldn't have done the same thing you did. Don't ever forget that or try to rationalize it. You did this all by yourself. Hope you enjoy your money." said Mike as he stormed off.

He stopped by the captain's house and filled him in on how the feds were able to break the case.

"They broke it using my files, that's how they did it. That piece of shit Pollander fed it right to them."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm a thousand percent sure. He's the leak. I overheard him talking on his phone at the farmhouse."

"Okay. Understand, I will handle him. I want you out of the station for a few days, I don't care what you do, just don't be there when we confront him."

"The police union is going to say he did nothing illegal. The only thing he did wrong was not tell you. I'm sure he will be able to talk his way out of it. You won't be able to fire him."

"No, but I can make his life a living hell until he does quit. Mike, I was wrong about you. I'm not wrong about people very often, but in your case, I really got it wrong, I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you."

"You going to buy me lunch for the next month?"

"No, I've got something a little bit better. I actually thought about taking the job myself, but I want you to have it."

"Really? What is it?"

Mike was now the training NCO for the entire department. He did schedules, ran the ranges, and scheduled all of the meetings. He was still a cop, he just wasn't on the street anymore. It was a great job. He had to travel quite a bit, all of paid for courtesy of the department. He stopped in a coffee shop on his way back from the city one afternoon and then he saw her, making his espresso. He couldn't believe it. He thought maybe he was mistaken until he saw her name badge.

It read Jasmine.

He took his espresso and looked right at her. Cute girl, she had clearly stopped using.

"Jasmine Simmons?"

"That's me."

He took out his badge. Her smile quickly evaporated.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"Yeah, give me just a few minutes." she said.

"I'll be over there."

She came over a few minutes later and sat down next to him. He figured it would be best to do the talking.

"My mom didn't want me to say anything. She said if I talked, I would never be able to hide again."

"If you had talked, we might have found the people who did this?"

"No, you wouldn't have. It wouldn't have made any difference."

"How do you know?"

"Because what killed those people was too horrible to put into words. It scared me so bad, I quit using heroin cold turkey."

"It must have been pretty scary."

"Scariest fucking thing I've ever seen in my life," she said tearing up.

"Tell me about it. At this point, the case is closed. Feds charged and sentenced those cult members for the murders, despite having no evidence, they still somehow got a conviction. I just want to know, for my own peace of mind. It's not going to change anything at this point."

"So then, why tell you anything?"

"I was the one who found the bodies that day. Your mom sent us out there to look for you and instead, I find 38 dead people, that's why."

Jasmine couldn't believe her mom had somehow left out that little bit of crucial information. He seemed like a nice guy and he was kind of cute. She wasn't even sure where to begin.

"I was strung out bad. My boyfriend had gotten some industrial strength tar and we got so messed up I thought I might never come down. I was high for most of the week, so bear that in mind when I tell you this.

Those two showed up one day, Bennett and his girlfriend, Abernathy. We all thought they were cops, they just didn't act like junkies. Everyone had a crush on Abernathy, she was beautiful. I would have done her too. They lived in that house across the street. That old farmhouse. I only talked to them once. They seemed cool, but nobody understood why they were there. They just didn't fit in, like a fish out of water."

"They just showed up one day?" asked Mike

"Yup, they lived in their van for awhile. He seemed very intelligent, almost like a college professor or something. She was just along for the ride. I remember talking to her once, I wasn't too messed up. She didn't understand cell phones. I mean like she had never seen one before. All she did was talk about Rome. She described it so well, it was as if she had actually been there. She seemed very detached like she wasn't even there. Kind of like the person you meet in a dream, they're not real, and that's how she seemed to me. Bennett always had drugs and food, even some expensive wine. He never even asked for anything in return. We all liked them, but we didn't trust them at the same time."

"Why didn't you trust them?"

"I think it was the way he looked at us. He looked at us like we were garbage. You can tell by their look and his look said a lot. But, when you're homeless, you have to be very careful about burning bridges. We didn't want to piss him off, then the gravy train ends."

"How did Bennett convince all of those people to kill themselves?"

"He didn't, at least not really. He was kind of like the director of the show. It was the people he brought in, they were the ones who did it."

"What about the Satanism?"

"You know, sometimes when I'm like really, really high, I dream that I'm in outer space, standing on this ancient building with thousands of steps. I know that if I step off the building, I will never come back. I'll disappear into some kind of netherworld. I've gone so far as to go to the very last step. I could just never make myself do it. I used to think that being a junkie is the worst thing in the world. Now I know better. There is a whole other level one can sink to and that level is where the Satanists came from. They are the last rung on the ladder, the lowest level one can sink to. I know I will never get to that level. That's why I left. I knew I was better than they were. I could

see what was happening to the camp. We went from being junkies to something else entirely. Bennet had unleashed the devil on us."

"Bennett was the mastermind of the whole operation?"

"He ran the whole thing, from start to finish. He ran it with an iron fist. If you disobeyed him, the consequences could be brutal. Of course, he had Abernathy with him to help convince people. She must have fucked half the camp, men and women, didn't make any difference."

"What about the missing people? We think there's like 20 of them?"

"I don't know. If they're lucky, they're dead. My boyfriend is one of them. He wasn't one of the 38, but I know I'll never see him again."

"Go on, please."

"Benji and his chick started going over to their house to practice Satanism. He got others to join them. Pretty soon half the camp had pledged their souls to Satan. It was like some kind of contagious virus. Once it infects one person, everybody is screwed. I couldn't believe what was happening. I had so many friends at that camp. By the time I left, I didn't recognize any of them. They were still junkies, but their magic and light had disappeared from their eyes. One night, this girl came running back to the camp. She was screaming her head off about murdering people. She tried to warn us, but I was high, I didn't listen. I guess I got caught up in it too. I went to one of their meetings. It was the most incredible and horrible thing I have ever experienced. I watched a girl get murdered that night. They plunged this knife into her chest and killed her. I was high, but I remember that vividly. I'll never forget that right up until the moment I die. He said we were not worthy, that we were not like the others. We had to prove ourselves and to do this, we were going to need some help. The sacrifice was to bring one of his *buddies* back from the other side. Someone who could steer us in the right direction. I knew this was insane. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't care. His smack was so good, I couldn't say no. I only remember bits and pieces of the next few days. Glimpses and dreams, not sure if they were real or not. I remember seeing this beautiful little boy standing in the middle of the campground one morning. He was wearing clothes that, well they looked like clothes a boy would be wearing from two hundred years ago. He smiled at me and asked me my name. He asked me if we wanted to be friends. The next thing I know, my boyfriend is pulling me through the woods. He is yanking me as hard as he can and he tells me I have to get away from here as fast as I can, cause there's some real bad shit about to go down and he doesn't want me around. He gives me fifty dollars and tells me to go home. I don't know why, I don't remember much about it, but I remember something he said, I'm not sure if it matters. Maybe it does."

"What's that?"

"It was something Bennett said to us one evening. He wanted all of us to get to the last step of that building in space. He wanted us to step off. I remember exactly what he said."

"What did he say?"

"He said this party sucked and that it was nothing like Jonestown.....*that was the real deal*. I looked up Jonestown on my phone. It scared the shit out of me. I knew what was coming. They had this big party planned for that afternoon. I guess I just put two and two together and took my guy's advice and split. I'm glad I did. I guess I didn't really want to die after all. I just wanted to know how far I could tempt fate and still come back."

"Wait.....you're saying that Bennett was at the Jonestown Massacre? The one in South America in 1978?" asked Mike in disbelief.

"Yes, I believe so. Somehow, he was there. I assume Abernathy was also. He ordered us a bunch of pizzas. I guess they were all out of Kool Aide."

"So, who were those people the feds arrested and convicted?"

"Beats me, I've never seen them before in my life."

"How did he do it? How did he get all those people to kill themselves? What was his trick?"

"It was simple. They knew if they didn't do it, there would be consequences. He could be ruthless. He shot this woman one night because she called him out. See, once you give the devil an inch, he takes the whole mile. Whatever it was those people saw, it must have been horrible. It was the same thing they all saw in Jonestown in 1978. To them, death was the easier of the two."

"Jasmine, I don't believe in the devil. Everyone makes their own choices."

"Well, Mike.....if you had seen what I've seen, you might not be so skeptical."

"Maybe not. What about all the missing people, you don't have any idea where they went?"

"They aren't the same people I knew in the camp. They belong to *him* now."

"Him?.....you mean Bennett?"

"No.....I mean Satan. Bennett is just a go-between."

"Come on Jasmine."

"You asked me what happened and I'm telling you. The devil came to that little camp on the highway. He was right in front of us and we were too strung out to see him for what he is. That's the devil's greatest ability, to hide right in front of us in plain sight. We don't see him before it's too late."

"I appreciate your time Jasmine. Do me a favor.....stay off the heroin. It's not your friend." he said and left the coffee shop.

He fought the urge all week. He should have known better. One night he gave in and went online to look at the photos of the Jonestown victims. It took some time, but he finally found a website run by a family in French Guyana that had photos of all of the victims. History tells us that Jim Jones was shot caller at Jonestown, maybe he wasn't. Mike looked at all of the photos carefully.

At photo 232, he saw her. It was Abernathy. He found Bennett in photo 331. They were both there. There could be no mistaking it. Mike closed the browser. He had solved the case, but in doing so, he had opened Pandora's Box. He had seen things that were physically impossible to be seen. He had spoken to dead people. None of this made any sense.

Just like in Jonestown back on that sunny day in November when 912 Americans took their own lives. Did they really do it all on their own, or did they have a little help from their friends?

They have been there all along. Right beside us, only we never knew it. Satan hides in the light, where no one expects to see him.....and unfortunately no one ever does.....until it's too late.