

THE INSPECTOR

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Josh Burkett saw the jacket in a second-hand clothing store. It looked brand new. It was like a giant, neon billboard sign that lit up the sky. In an instant, the idea hit him, like a lightning bolt. USDA FOOD INSPECTOR. That was all it said. That was all it had to say. It looked exactly like something a real food inspector would wear. He bought it for three dollars. It fit like a glove. It wasn't just a random chance. He was meant to find it. He drove home and began to amuse himself with the thought of becoming a real food inspector. He spent two days online researching it. He quickly discovered that these government jobs were not all they were cracked up to be. Unless you were a permanent, full-time employee, you got no benefits at all and that could take years to achieve. The pay wasn't really all that great as well. In short, it was just a temporary job until a better government job came around.

He wasn't exactly sure when he decided to give it a go. Maybe, it was working at a dead-end job for so long, he figured he didn't have much to lose. His parents wanted him to go to college, but the cost and debt load scared him away. What other country on the planet would charge these ridiculous prices for education? Thirty thousand dollars a year? What could one learn in a year that could possibly be worth that kind of money? No, there would be no college for him. Josh wasn't a follower, he was a leader. He led the flock, he didn't follow. He wasn't going to spend tons of money on a useless education, he would simply create the documents he needed and forge them as any quick-thinking person would. College didn't give you any real-world skills you couldn't learn on your own, so he just didn't see the harm. He started reading and learning. He learned that the USDA really just cared about the plants and slaughterhouses where the animals are killed and packaged. What happens after that is not their concern. They left that part up to the states. Some were far more militant about code compliance than others. Here in Nevada, there were no health codes of any kind, except in the larger urban areas. In the backwater parts of the state, there was no code enforcement of any kind, as hard as it may seem to believe. You ate at your own risk.

He had several older printers and some brand new ones. If he needed a document, he would simply create it. He had a laminate press, a laminate printer, all kinds of unusual paper for various documents. He had even gotten a notary stamp online to give his documents a raised seal. All of this was very illegal, but driving people into debt to pay for education and health care was illegal as well, not to mention immoral. He wasn't hurting anyone but himself or some faceless state agency.

The only document he hadn't been able to perfect were the driver's licenses. That was going to be tough, with the holograms and seals. No one really ever looked hard at it anyway, but they were tough to reproduce with his primitive equipment.

Birth certificates were easy. Most were decades old and easy to forge. He had purchased several web addresses with fake businesses. He had a disposable cell phone handy in case anyone were to call his fake business. A few of them did. He would offer his services to recent grads, who needed fake work history to meet the minimum qualifications for the job. He had given fake references to truck drivers, ballerinas, cameramen. His fake company was called ADP ENTERPRISES. He had another one called.

SNOWFLAKE PRODUCTIONS. He had both the white-collar and blue-collar workers covered. He had written several fake letters of accommodation, as well as given several work references for prospective employers. It wasn't great money, but it went right in his pocket, without Uncle Sugar taking a cut.

It was ok money, but it was mainly word of mouth. Come graduation time, he was busy, but it quickly petered out after that. That's why he decided to take on another part-time job, being a fake USDA FOOD INSPECTOR.

He had to be careful. He couldn't get greedy. He had to give a very convincing performance if it were going to work.

The actual act of enforcing retail and commercial food distribution is not really in the domain of the USDA. In Nevada, it falls under the Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health. They have a main office in Carson City, as well as several smaller, satellite offices scattered throughout the state. They serve mainly as an information distribution and most are staffed by only one person. They only have a few persons who actually go out and enforce sanitation codes. Clark County has its own code compliance officers. He would have to stay away from Vegas. That was a no-go zone. He would concentrate on the smaller restaurants and stores in the rest of the state. Much to his dismay, he found the state handbook for sanitation procedures in retail establishments online. It covered everything he was supposed to look for and the punitive actions to be taken if standards are not met. He also had the USDA Food Code as a supplemental backup to the Nevada regulations. He made a very authentic-looking USDA FOOD INSPECTOR badge, with his photo on the front. He made a lanyard for it and wore it around his neck. On the surface, he looked to be very authentic. On the surface, he looked like someone who was employed by the United States Department of Agriculture. He looked the part, but could he pull it off?

He realized that if he were to try and get some money out of his victims, he would probably be caught and charged with God knows what. Of course, if he didn't actually take any money from them, would anyone even care? It was a big state with a lot of distance between the towns. He could always say that he was just trying to make certain that the places he hit were following the law. He was just a concerned citizen.

He always rented a car, not wanting to be seen in his vehicle. Someone could get the license plate, which is why he bought a US Government Plate for the rental. He made sure not to speed and that everything was working on the car. Most cops wouldn't even bother pulling over a government employee unless they were doing something stupid. Out here, he was home free. He even made a small ticket book with the USDA logo on the cover.

He knew from experience that small scams always lead to bigger scams. You just don't know where it will lead you until you are actually out there doing it. Part of the fun with this whole thing was to see just how far he could push these rednecks.

He would show up and say that he was following up on a complaint by a customer. He would read the complaint, then ask to see their kitchen and coolers. That's exactly how it went down at his first stop, the Dyer General Store. The woman working behind the counter was missing most of her teeth. She was covered in cheap tattoos and looked like something that just walked out of a woman's prison. This was going to be too easy. His fake inspector's name was "Josh Hardman."

"Hi, my name is Josh Hardman, I'm with the United States Department of Agriculture. I am following up on a complaint filed on the 31st of May. I'm going to have to see your backroom if you don't mind.

"Sure, it's back there," she said. The woman didn't even seem to care.

"What's your name dear?" he asked

"Stella."

"Stella, I have to take some bacteria samples and might have to move some things, is that ok?"

"Sure, just don't break nothing."

"Of course."

Josh had the trick down pat. He would just swab a few random things, then touch the Petri dish with the sample. After a few minutes, the dish will turn bright red. He had to play it cool here Stella. She was too dumb to realize just how much trouble they would be in if he was a real inspector.

"Stella, I'm afraid we have a problem here," he said, showing her the Petri dishes.

"What's wrong?"

"Stella, this is a field test for E COLI Bacteria. Nasty stuff. It's all over your kitchen. I can see clear evidence of rodent droppings in the pantry. Are you the owner of this establishment?"

"No, I just run it. The owners live in Los Angeles."

"Well, Stella, these are major health code violations. A woman had to be hospitalized after eating here. We may have to shut this place down."

"Shut it down? For what? We clean everything, floors, the hoods, the dishes. Show me where this rat shit is, I want to see it."

Josh had sprinkled a few droppings he had brought with him, just to seal the deal. He showed her right where they were.

"You're lucky this place isn't just ten miles down the road in California. You would be shut down for this."

Stella was now upset. She put her dentures in, so clearly she meant business.

"You ain't the same fella from Carson City that was out here last year?" she said with her dentures in her mouth.

"I am responding because their office doesn't have enough staff to answer customer complaints. Stella, this is serious business here. I have more than enough evidence right now to shut this place down. It's up to the Nevada Division of Health, but my guess is that they are going to have to close this place until you get it up to code."

"Look, I ain't stupid. I know you can get very sick from eating bad food. Lord knows I've eaten enough of it. We clean this place every week. I don't know, this just doesn't seem right."

"Stella, let's not lie to each other here, please. Look around this place. We both know this is a one-person operation and there's no way you are going to spend hours cleaning anything every night. I'm guessing you make your money off gas and booze, am I right?"

Stella turned away. He knew he had her. He walked over to a display of chips and pulled one-off.

"Stella, these chips expired two months ago. Do you want me to go and look through some more? I think we both know that won't end well for you."

"Alright, fine. It is just me and my son and he's about useless when it comes to cleaning. I do try and keep the place clean and make sure the chicken is properly cooked. I use a thermometer every time. I don't want to get no one sick. Please don't call the owner. He's an asshole. He'll fire me for sure."

"I know it's not easy to run a business, I do. I just don't know what I can do here. I can't lie for you." said Josh

"Look, just give us a few days, then come back. Can you do that please?" she begged

"I guess I could. I'm putting my career on the line here Stella, you better not screw me."

"I won't. Just give us three days. Come back Friday, then do your test. We'll be ready."

"Okay.....I won't go so easy on you next time. You better have this shit hole cleaned up."

"Yes sir, I will. Friday, we'll be ready."

"I'll see you then Stella," he said and walked out of the small diner. He had to work hard not to burst out laughing. Stella wouldn't work this hard since her wedding night.

He waited a week to try it again. It was getting expensive to pull off this stunt and it required quite a bit of driving. Nevada was a big, empty state. He had heard nothing about his trip to Dyer in the news. He sent Stella a very formal-looking letter on USDA Letterhead he made, warning

her of any more infractions. He was getting ready for the big score. He knew if he started asking for money, people might get suspicious. He figured right now, it was safer just to back them into a corner and let them think he was actually helping them.

His next stop was called the PONY EXPRESS RESTAURANT just outside of Fallon. He spent almost an hour watching customers go in and out. He waited until it was almost closing time and it was empty to make his move.

He stepped inside. As soon as the young waitress saw his USDA Jacket, she froze.

"Hi, could I speak to the owner?" asked Josh.

"Sure," she said and hurried in back.

A minute later, a rather salty-looking old man came out wearing a dirty apron. He stuck out his hand. Josh shook it, not wanting to be rude.

"Are you the owner of this establishment?"

"I pay the bills, so I guess I am."

"Great, can we talk in back?" asked Josh.

The two men walked in the back. The young waitress didn't follow but was still in earshot. She pretended to be cleaning, but Josh knew she wanted in on the action. That was fine, he didn't think she was a threat.

"What's your name, sir?"

"Mike Lawrence."

"Mike, I am responding to a complaint here from a customer who came in and ate here on June 12th of this month," said Josh and gave Mike a copy of the fake letter.

Mike's eyes grew wider and wider as he read it. He quickly handed it back to Josh.

"So how is the USDA involved? I thought you guys just checked out packing plants and stuff?" he asked

"The State Health Board is so understaffed, they've asked us to help out. I've come a long way from California. Look, I realize every restaurant has its bad days. But I am going to have to do a complete health and welfare check according to the FDA Food Code Act of 2009." said Josh as he handed the man a stack of very official-looking papers.

"Clearly, Mike was caught flatfooted. His fridges and coolers didn't even have temperature gauges on them; they were so old. He had a bathroom in the kitchen and food prep area which was a major no-no. Josh found traces of mold on a food prep table, as well as utensils that had not been properly sanitized. The dishwasher did not sanitize, it just cleaned. They had no plan or schedule for cleaning. The bathroom was clean, but a quick swab of Josh's fake bacteria

detectors caused the sample to turn bright red. After forty-five minutes, Mike had been reduced to a quivering mess.

Josh spent the next few minutes filling out paperwork. Mike looked nervously at him. Josh handed him back his sheet with a large D minus and a frowny face underneath.

"You passed, but barely. You've got a lot of work to do in here," said Josh.

"I know sir, I'm sorry. I knew we had to update, I just didn't have the money," said Mike nervously

"So then how are you going to get the money to pay for a lawyer when that customer decides to sue?"

"I don't know. I've worked behind the counter for years, I knew how important sanitation was. I should have done better."

"Mike, being safe and doing things the right way costs money, but being unsafe will cost you ten times more. Now, I can't help you with the customer, that's on you and your lawyer?"

"You really think she's going to sue?"

"The complaint says she was in the hospital for two days. That's going to be expensive, no matter how you cut it. It's not a big step from complaining to the state health dept to hiring a lawyer. That's not the kind of publicity you need. Now, I will be back here at some point to make certain you have made improvements.....and when I do come back, you better be wearing a hairnet." said Josh

"Yes sir. Thank you for your help. We will get better, I can assure you of that."

"I hope so Mike, I'd hate to have to shut this place down."

"Yes sir," he said.

Josh walked out the door and hopped in his car. This was almost too easy. If he had an accomplice, he could take these places for thousands. Offer them a cash deal to look the other way and pass them. They didn't even look at his credentials. Why would they? Who in their right mind would pretend to be a USDA Food Inspector?

The third stop was a taco shop near Gardnerville. He spoke Spanish, but found that when the gringos show up, suddenly everyone can speak English.

"Hola. This your place?" he asked, holding up his fake identification badge.

"My parents own it, they are not here." said the young lady in broken English.

"I'm responding to a customer complaint here. I'm going to have to see your kitchen," he said.

The young lady followed him back to the kitchen. The two Mexican kids preparing the food froze when they saw him. Josh wanted them scared, but not so scared that they did something stupid.

"I trust they can all prove they have the right to work in the United States?" he asked the lady.

One of the Mexican kids followed them around the restaurant. Turns out, most of what he saw, would have passed a sanitation check. They were doing so well until they got to the bathrooms. Nevada required bathrooms in their restaurants if they had indoor seating. The owners had simply installed a toilet over something, clearly not a sewer pipe. The toilet did not function. He was horrified to see sewage backing up into one of the drains in the back of the kitchen.

"Wow.....the fuck is this?" he asked in horror.

The three of them looked at one another and spoke in rapid Spanish.

"Hey.....*no soy un gringo tonto!*" he replied.

The three of them were clearly busted. One of the kids lost his temper.

"How many other restaurants did you check today? Why are you only checking on the one owned by Mexicans?" he said

"Your restaurant put one of your customers in the hospital, numbnuts, that's why. Here. Read it for yourself.....you can read English, right?" replied Josh.

The young lady read the complaint. She was clearly horrified at the letter.

"I am so sorry sir. We will fix the drain. It was supposed to be fixed last week."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, I am going to have to shut you down until it gets fixed. You're serving food back here for God's sake."

"Please, sir. I will call the plumber in the morning," she said with tears in her eyes.

"I want that toilet closed. That sink better be shut off as well. The hell's the matter with you people?"

"I bet he doesn't like Mexicans...do you like Mexicans sir?" asked the hot-headed kid.

"Well....I like Mexican girls." Josh replied and squeezed the girl's ass. She smiled and looked up at him.

"You guys better clean this crap hole up. I'll be back in a few days to check up on you.....you too sweetie," he said and blew her a kiss. She quickly blushed and looked away.

The two kids looked like they were going to say something, but the girl told them to keep their mouths shut in Spanish. Her parents were going to have a meltdown over this. This nice gringo had saved them from a total disaster.

Josh left the restaurant and got out of there. It had started as a joke, just wanting to see how far he could take it before someone called him on it.

This last stop had really put things into perspective. He was doing everyone a favor by calling these places out on their bullshit. A faulty sewer pipe? Poor refrigeration? No cleaning schedule? Ridiculous. It had started off as a joke, it was now becoming something far more serious. Fake or not, these places had to stop slowly poisoning their customers with their poor sanitation procedures. He really should start fining these places. If only he could get away with it. If he were caught, he would simply threaten to expose these places and their gross, unsanitary work environments. That ought to buy him a little leverage. One bad online review can sink a business. Imagine what a complete health and sanitation report could do.

He was only half-serious before, now he was going to have to give it his all.

His next stop was a small gas station with a deli, just outside of Gerlach. He pulled in and right away, he didn't like what he saw, namely, the building not being up to code, along with a cooler outside that was not working. If it was not working, what the hell was it doing out here. Many of these rural counties had no building codes of any kind. No permits, no inspections, no nothing. You bought at your own risk. There were vague health and sanitation codes in the Nevada Revised Statutes, but they were so poorly worded, they had almost no bite to them. There were federal guidelines for food sanitation, but it was up to the states to actually enforce them. Not that these folks would know the difference. By now, he had his routine down, he would sound very convincing. The last thing these places ever expected was a visit from the USDA. He had his USDA Jacket on, as well as his badge and clipboard. He looked and sounded like he was the real deal and that was all that really mattered.

"Hi, I'm Josh Hardman from the USDA. We're responding to a complaint filed with the Nevada Division of Public Health. Two months ago, a customer alleges they were sent to the hospital after eating in this establishment."

The kid working behind the counter was blown away. He thought he was in trouble.

"Can I read the complaint?" he asked.

Josh handed him the complaint. He read it and handed it back to him.

"That's interesting. We were closed that week cause we had no gas. One of the tanks had to be repaired and none of the drivers wanted to fill it until it was fixed."

"Was the deli open?"

"No, the whole store was closed. My uncle owns this place. He told me to take the week off. The deli doesn't do much business. Not much point in keeping the place open if we can't sell gas."

Josh had anticipated something like this and never made concrete dates in the complaint. He didn't want to get caught flat-footed. This kid was not going to be a pushover, he had to be careful.

"So, how can you prove that it was our place that made the customer sick?"

"The hospital pumped the contents of the customer's stomach and found traces of E COLI. She has the check she got from this place or receipt. It must have been enough to link the two, that's why I'm here. I have a worksheet we go off when investigating these types of incidents." he said and handed the kid a copy of the sheets he used to score the restaurant.

The kid must have known they were screwed. He did everything he could to prevent him from going into the backroom. Right away, he saw trouble. There were two exposed wires on the ceiling. Josh made it clear he was not a building inspector, but that was unsafe and he would have to include it in his report. Food was left out on the counter. Josh used his digital thermometer to check the temperature of the meat. It was warmer than it should have been. Dirty countertops, dirty utensils used to prepare food. The kicker was the fact that there was customer parking only five feet from the entrance to the kitchen. Josh had to wonder how this place ever passed its initial inspection in the first place. Josh made notes and told the kid exactly what they were doing wrong. He looked under one of the stoves and saw fresh signs of mouse droppings. He hadn't placed them there, like in the other places. These were from rodents in the building itself.

"That right there is reason enough to fail you and close this place. Come on kid, would you want to eat in a deli that had mice running around and crawling all over everything?" he said, shining his flashlight on the droppings.

"No, no I wouldn't," he said quietly

"I'm sorry kid, I can't possibly pass you. I don't have the authority to actually close the place, that's up to the state. I just pass my findings onto them."

"My uncle is going to kill me. He's going to say I should have called him before I let you back there."

"Wouldn't have made any difference. Now, you did cooperate with me here. I do appreciate that. I don't like to do this to people, but it's my job."

"I know, but is there some way we can take care of this? Some way to make all of this just disappear?"

"Son, are you trying to bribe me?"

"I guess."

"Wow.....you are either very smart or very stupid. I don't know which one. You probably want me to be seen taking money on those two little cameras you have hidden up there in the corners? Didn't think I noticed them huh?"

"What? No, that's not what I meant. My uncle put them in here after we had trouble with a motorcycle gang. We can go in the back, there aren't any cameras there."

"You want me to throw away my career for what, like the fifty bucks you have in the drawer?" asked Josh

"I have a lot more than that. I know it costs money to buy a fed. I may be young, I'm not stupid. How about a thousand in cash?" asked the kid.

"You keep that kind of money in this place? Seems like an awful lot of cash for a little out of the way place like this."

It then occurred to Josh, it wasn't the loss of business the kid was concerned with, he didn't want anyone snooping around here. Now why he didn't want anyone snooping around here was the question that begged to be answered.

"You could be shut down for half the reasons I listed. You have rat shit in your kitchen!"

"Fine, two thousand. That's my final offer. You better not fuck me on this one either." said the kid

"Let's see the money."

The kid took Josh back to the kitchen. He looked everywhere for a camera but didn't see one. The kid went into an office and came out a minute later with a roll of cash. Josh motioned for the kid to follow him into the pantry. Once he saw they were out of sight, he took the money. He gave the kid a blank form to sign in two places. Then he signed a copy and gave one to the kid.

"I'll take care of the rest. Clean this shit hole up. People eat here for God's sake." he said to the kid as he walked out of the kitchen.

He got in his car and took off down the road, back to Reno. Easy money. The kid didn't even flinch. What the hell was he hiding back there? How could a little place like that have all that cash on hand? Josh had to be careful. He stopped the car and pulled into a rest stop. The place was deserted. He put the money in a plastic bag and tucked it up into a small area behind one of the vending machines. He looked around and saw there was no one else inside. He would be back to get the money tomorrow or in a few days. He had this sinking feeling that the kid might try and do something crazy, like call the cops and say Josh robbed him. He would get caught red-handed with the cash and wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Either way, he was screwed if he got pulled over. In this line of work, you can never be too careful. That was just a little too easy for his liking. He had to be extra careful. No one even questioned his credentials because they all knew they were breaking the law by running their restaurants and delis in the manner they were. They knew they should never be serving food in the manner they were. They probably never ate their own food anyway. Josh couldn't believe he found rat droppings in that place. Just unbelievable. They knew they were guilty and guilty people, at first, don't put up much of a fight. He had dozens of pictures on his phone of what he had found. His phone took excellent photos. Some of them turned his stomach. The hell is wrong with these people? They would never want to be served food in a place like that?

Josh spent the next two hours driving. He stopped by a little gas station, just outside of Stead, that's when he saw it. He knew he should just leave it alone, but he couldn't. It was easy money. A gas station that served pizza. The gas station owned the building but rented out space to

whomever. In this case, it was a local who had big dreams of becoming the owner of the next big pizza chain. Josh figured the guy was probably squeezed so tight with rent and overhead, he wouldn't be able to resist. Josh would offer to make the whole thing go away, for just a little pocket change. He figured the owner would take it, rather than face what he thought were hefty fines. It certainly seemed like a good idea.

The place was called BIG MIKE'S PIZZA. Big Mike turned out to be a seventy-two-year-old woman named Francine. Josh explained to her why he was here and what needed to happen. She took him in the back and let him walk around. Unlike most of the rat traps he had visited, this one was actually pretty clean, in fact, it was very clean. He knew the old bird was watching every move he made, so he couldn't sprinkle any rat droppings. He spent fifteen minutes back there with her. In the end, he had to let her go with a warning. The only thing he could find wrong was that she didn't have her cleaning supplies in a separate holding area away from the rest of her cooking supplies.

"I've been making pizza since 1978 and never has anyone ever gotten sick from my pies. How does someone get sick from eating pizza?"

"I don't know ma'am, we just respond to the complaint."

"Isn't that the job of Washoe County? Not the USDA?" she asked

"Normally, yes, but they are so short-staffed with all the budget cuts the governor made last year, they don't have the staff to respond to complaints. Not for situations like these," Josh said.

"This whole thing seems a little ridiculous. Is there a number I can call?"

"Right on the citation there ma'am," he said and handed her a few pieces of paper, as well as a very official-looking written citation, like the police use.

She took the papers and looked at him like she had just lost a bet to him. He knew the old bird smelled something she didn't like. He had to make his escape and do it quickly.

He was almost out to his car when they stopped him. They quickly produced their badges and flashed them. Josh was screwed. He had to play it carefully.

"Can I help you?" he asked

"Do you have any identification sir?" one of them asked

Josh showed him the fake USDA Work Badge he had hanging around his neck.

"I mean a state-issued id, like a driver's license?" asked the other one.

Josh knew he was screwed. Still, he tried to play it cool.

"Can I ask what this is about? I'm a federal officer."

"Right....I just want to see your driver's license. See if that name matches up to the one on your badge and we'll let you go."

"You have no right to ask for anything. I was conducting an investigation on behalf of the Nevada Division of Public Health. I would like to finish it if you don't mind." he said and walked past the two officers.

One of the officers grabbed him and slammed him up against his car. Josh was surprised and knew he was screwed. The guy reached into his pocket and pulled out his driver's license.

"Josh Burkett.....so why does your badge say, Josh Hardman?"

"I changed my name. Hardman is my middle name you idiots," he said struggling to break free.

"Sure it is. How much were you going to take the old lady for?"

"Nothing, I am trying to do my job. You guys are in a whole shit load of trouble."

"Right. Josh, I bet you when we call the USDA, they're going to say they never heard of you, am I right?"

"Go ahead and call them. The number is right on the sheet," he said.

"Good scam you got going here. Hell, its' the best one I've ever seen. How much do you take from these places? Do you just have them empty the drawer, or do you want more?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We both know you don't work for the USDA. You want to quit bullshitting us?" said one of the men.

Josh turned around. He knew he was busted. He had to play his trump card.

"I just took a place for two grand. Two grand. You can have it if you let me go."

"Now we can add bribery to your charges. Check him out Bobby, I'm going to call this in." said one of the men. Josh saw him walk over to his car and search it. He came back a few minutes later.

"Josh, I sure as hell didn't find any two thousand dollars in there, where is it?"

"It's up the road in a rest stop. I hid it."

"Yeah, sure you did. Well, let's get you down to detention. I got a game to watch tonight. You better not make me late." said Bobby.

The other man reached out and grabbed a needle. He stuck it into Josh's arm.

"The hell are you doing?" he screamed

Whatever was in the drug, quickly took hold. Josh couldn't even see straight.

"What the hell did you just give me?" he asked

"Just a little something to calm you down. Don't worry. If you get tired, just go to sleep." said the other man as he got in the car.

Josh tried to scream, but he found he could barely speak. He couldn't even form coherent sentences. He had never been so sleepy in his life.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked as he was drooling.

The two men just looked at one another and laughed.

"We're cops.only we are special cops, Josh. We have a very special mission," said Cruise.

"Bullshit you are. You aren't cops at all," he said slurring his speech.

"No, we aren't Josh. You got us there. We just pretend to be. Flash the badge and the rest is history. I knew you were a bullshitter as soon as I saw you. We were just in there, having lunch. Takes a bull shitter to spot a bull shitter."

"Where are you taking me?"

"That's the best part, Josh. You are going to meet a whole lot of new people. They're just going to love you. You are going to make a ton of new friends."

"What are you talking about?"

"Josh, we bring people like you to them. Usually, it's just kids. Once and while we strike gold and get somebody like you."

"Huh?"

"Josh, I really hope you aren't shy," said Bobby.

Josh was fading in and out of consciousness. He had to fight hard to stay awake. He wanted desperately just to close his eyes and sleep for the next ten hours and wake up in his own bed, away from this nightmare. Away from the horrors that were in store for him. These guys scared the hell out of him. These were the types of people that belonged in prison, not guys like him just looking for an easy score. *These are the types of monsters you only find in the movies.*

Cruise made a call on his cell and arranged for the transfer.

"We got to do it in Reno. At a casino," he said.

"Cities make me nervous. We should just meet at the regular meeting place."

"I just do what I'm told. That's where they said to meet. On the top of the casino, next to the giant waterslide."

"Can we take a few days off, I have to go to LA to take care of something," said Bobby.

"Yeah, I could use a little break too. This job is a hell of a lot more work than I thought it would be."

Josh was making incoherent sounds. He did pass out for a while and came to in a parking garage. He still had the handcuffs on him. He was only half awake. The drug made him want to just close his eyes and drift back to sleep.

In his dream, he was really working for the USDA, as a Food Inspector. He had it all, a dream job, a pretty wife, and a house to call his own. Every day was like going to Disneyland. Every day was a dream come true. He told himself that he cannot let them take him away. Under no circumstances can he get into anyone else's vehicle. These people are real-life monsters. Sometimes, the scariest monsters in the world are people.

They were waiting for almost half an hour when the white van finally pulled up. Two large men got out and walked up to the fake cop car.

"That him?" asked one of the men.

"He's gorgeous. Good work boys. We'll pay you another ten percent."

"Can't argue with that. Come one sleeping beauty, time to go, your destiny awaits," said Cruise.

He opened the car door. As soon as he opened the door, Josh kned him in the groin and took off as fast as he could. He wasn't even fully aware of what he was doing, it was as if he were in a dream and he was just watching the entire episode from a distance away. Cruise was on the ground, the rest of the men took off after him. One of them ran around and was blocking his escape.

They have badges that look real. They looked real. Hell, they even fooled him. No one was going to help him.

Josh had only one chance. He made a snap decision. He would rather die than live through what the others had in store for him. Death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. Being held captive by these guys was worse than death. Josh jumped off the top of the casino. He was up really high. He landed on a small neon sign that broke his fall, then fell directly on top of a police car that was stopped at a red light.

The officer nearly had a heart attack. He and Josh just looked at one other for a second. He spoke while he was on the hood of the car.

"They're not cops.....whatever they say, remember they are just pretending to be cops," he said and passed out.

The officer quickly turned on his bar lights and began to call for other officers to assist. He looked up at the top of the garage and saw three men just staring down at him.

"Let's get out of here," said Bobby as the three of them took off in a desperate attempt to flee the casino before they were boxed in.

"Jesus man, just hang in there, help is on the way." said the officer.

Josh could hear the wail of the ambulance in the distance. He knew he was safe, at least for now.

"They weren't even cops.....weren't even fucking cops.....what kind of person does that? Pretending to be someone they're not?" Josh asked, trying hard not to choke on his own blood.

He was fighting for his life and wondering if the USDA was really hiring. He'd make a great addition to their team. Josh was a team player....and that's all anyone could ask for. Food safety is becoming life or death for certain people like Josh.