



## ***ROAD RASH***

By [Simon Janus](#)

The unmistakable sounds of buckling metal and shattering glass cut across the field from the road.

*Everyone's having car troubles today*, Straley thought.

He broke into a jog. His own transportation threw a rod five miles back. He'd managed to coax the Ford to a vacant lot and then left it there to die. Not that all his problems today were vehicle related. His crew lay dead. To be honest, he and his crew had screwed themselves. Bank robberies were never easy, silent fucking alarms. But hey, he'd gotten away with the haul.

Straley's jog quickly slacked off to a walking pace. The weight of close to four hundred grand in mixed bills stuffed into a duffel and slung over his back demanded that.

*How can paper weigh this much?*

He reached the shoulder and the carnage left him stunned. The head on took no prisoners. It was a battle between Detroit steel, old and new. A seventies Chevy Caprice took the honors from a late model Dodge Caravan. The Caravan was toast. Upside-down, it bled oil and antifreeze-tainted water. Steam wafted skyward from the engine and blown tires rotated lazily, still clinging to buckled rims. When the minivan landed on its roof, the impact blew out the front windshield, along with two of the side windows. On the other hand, the Caprice sported a buckled fender, busted headlight and a twisted bumper. Its engine ticked over unevenly, which seemed a product of poor maintenance rather than a direct result the accident. A spider web of cracks from the bloody impact of the driver's head crazed the windshield.

It was one of those accidents that never should have happened on a straight road with no distractions or blind spots. However, these things happened all the time. The only witness to the crash was a busty young model trying to sell lite beer on a billboard at the side of the road. She looked on, still smiling her lascivious smile.

Straley shrugged off the duffel and felt a hundred pounds lighter. So much so, he staggered for a moment before he got his legs under control and ran over to the inverted Caravan. He peered in to find the driver sagged against the seatbelt, her hands lying against the roof's lining. Blood streaked her blonde hair and puddled against the headliner. Straley didn't have to ask if she was okay or check her vital signs. The vacant stare on this soccer mom's face told him all he needed to know. He couldn't tell what caused her death. The seatbelt still restrained her and the air bag had done its job, but there wasn't much that could prevent severe, blunt trauma. This situation offered him nothing.

He scurried over to the Caprice and struggled to see inside the car. Months of road dirt

coated the outside and blood smeared the interior. Through the filthy windows, he saw a figure slumped across the front seats. It was impossible to tell the driver's condition. Straley jerked on the driver's door handle but the door remained jammed solid. It took both his hands and much of his strength to wrench it open.

What he found inside took his breath away. The man behind the wheel was old, but how old, Straley couldn't tell under the carnage. The driver was wearing his seatbelt, which had done little to protect him. It only prevented the man from pouring out onto the road. The Caprice Man looked raw. The impact must have somehow peeled the man's skin back, because it hung in palm-sized sheets from his face and bare arms.

"Jesus Christ," Straley murmured.

For the Caprice Man to be in this condition he had to have rolled the car a dozen times without the seatbelt fastened, but it was clear that hadn't happened. The Caprice was in way too good a shape, even if the Caprice Man wasn't.

He studied the bloody corpse belted into its steel coffin. The man wasn't just raw; he was melting. His flesh looked to have dissolved off his body. It was as if this guy was coming unglued one cell at a time. A glob of something ruby red ran down his cheek like a teardrop.

A jolt of fear pulled Straley up short. There was something seriously wrong with this guy. He bet the son of a bitch had been on the way to a hospital when he passed out at the wheel and slammed into the minivan. Straley hoped this shit wasn't contagious.

He knew he should walk away and leave this mess for someone else to find, but he desperately needed a ride. By now, the cops would be all over the freeways with an APB that matched his description. He couldn't turn down the opportunity. He had to take this car if he wanted to stay out of jail.

So what if this guy had something bad? The motherfucker was dead now. And who was to say it was contagious anyway? If he'd had the super monkey pox or other such shit, he wouldn't be allowed to walk the streets. The government would have him under glass in some lab. As long as Straley didn't touch this rabid freak's mangled flesh, he'd be cool. He was as sure as Hell keeping the windows down for the next hundred miles or so.

Straley eyed the road in both directions. He saw no vehicles, nor did he expect any. This was why he'd chosen to keep to county roads. No one would be combing the backwaters for him, at least not yet. He hoped to catch a ride from some yokel who'd take pity on a lonely hitchhiker and then he'd jack the ride from his Good Samaritan. He wouldn't have to do that now. Even though the Caprice was a piece of shit, it was running.

He eyed the road in both directions again. Still nothing. He reached across the man

and unbuckled the seatbelt. It whizzed back with pieces of the man's flesh embedded in the material.

Straley went to move the guy and hesitated. He didn't relish grabbing hold of an inside-out body. He swallowed hard. "Come on, James," he murmured to himself. "You can do this. It's either this or federal prison."

He filled his mind with the four hundred large, the chance to get away as planned and the opportunity not to have to walk any farther. With no more hesitation, he grabbed the Caprice Man by the tee shirt, avoiding his flesh, and yanked. The man's wasted frame came away easily. He weighed less than Straley expected. The single tug hoisted the man from behind the wheel, out the door and onto the blacktop. With momentum on Straley's side, he dragged the man over to the drainage ditch at the side of the road and rolled the body in.

The thing moaned when it struck the bottom. Hearing the dead man speak surprised the hell out of Straley. He lost his footing, tumbled into the ditch and didn't stop until he crashed into the body. Straley stared at the Caprice Man. He tried to ignore his condition, but couldn't. The man's chest rose and fell between shallow, awkward breaths. Blood leaked freely from his seemingly skinless body. Straley couldn't understand how the son of bitch was still alive.

The Caprice Man stirred and looked up. His thousand-yard stare locked onto Straley while his mouth opened and closed, the words never managing to pass those terrible lips. Straley sat transfixed by the ruined man's fight to survive. He jolted when the Caprice Man jerked out an arm in his direction in a plea that needed no translation. Straley shook his head. Disgust fueled his decision.

The Caprice Man's arm wavered before his strength left him and it hit the dirt. His fingers clawed the ground in an attempt to reach Straley. Then he dug with his legs and gained traction. Straley backed away, scrabbling on his butt, and the broken man gave up. He looked at Straley through bloodshot eyes and croaked, "Help me."

Straley shook his head again.

There was no helping this guy. If Straley tried to save him, he screwed himself. It wasn't an option. If he took the Caprice Man to the ER, the cops would take him down. Why the hell he was even thinking about hospitals? This guy was fucked. He was dissolving. No doctor on earth could save him. There was no point. This guy had minutes at most. He couldn't save the Caprice Man if he tried.

The Caprice Man repeated his plea.

The sound of the Chevy grew louder in Straley's head. The idling V8 missed a beat and

then recovered. Who was to say the engine wouldn't cut out all together? He jumped to his feet and clambered up the ditch.

A spurt of energy fed the Caprice Man's dying body and he lunged. He caught one of Straley's heels and Straley slid back down into the ditch. The Caprice Man slapped a raw and bloody hand on Straley's wrist.

"Help me," he demanded.

"I was going to get help," Straley lied. His gaze fell from the old man's battered face to the hand clamped to his wrist. Partially clotted, jellified blood leaked between the man's fingers and ran down Straley's wrist. *Shit. The son of bitch touched me.*

"Help me," the man repeated.

"I'm trying," Straley said, his words nearly strangled by disgust.

The Caprice Man's gaze bore deep into him. His eyes held the wisdom of the streets and they saw through Straley's bullshit.

Straley couldn't stop the lies. "I'll get help. Hang in there."

The Caprice Man's strength deserted him, and his hold on Straley withered to that of an infant's. Straley shook off the man's grasp and groped his way back up the bank before the man could regain strength.

Straley stopped at the top and stared down at the figure slumped below. "I'll send help."

The Caprice Man shifted.

Straley snatched up the duffel and ran over to the rumbling Caprice. He stopped when he reached the car. There was no way he was sitting in the thing with all that gore splattered everywhere. He tugged free the checkered shirt tied around his waist and wiped the steering wheel, seat and windshield as best he could. The shirt moved the gore around instead of cleaning it off.

He was wasting precious minutes. The road remained quiet. It needed to stay that way. He couldn't be found here, not under any circumstance and certainly not like this. He had to go, and now. The cleanup job was far from perfect, but it was passable. He bottled his disgust, used the shirt for a seat cover and slid behind the wheel. When he threw it in drive and hit the gas, the engine faltered. He thought it was going to die, as the Caprice Man surely would, but the Chevy began to roll and then rapidly picked up speed. Straley tried to put the man's ruined face out of his mind.

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When Straley had the sedan up to sixty and had racked up more than a handful of miles behind him, his tension eased. He let a hand slip from the wheel to drive one-handed. A

smile crossed his lips. He'd gotten away with it. His crew was dead and nothing had gone to plan, but he'd managed to make lemonade out of the lemons this shitty day had handed him. He wasn't stupid enough to think he was free and clear. At least, his luck had changed direction. Now that the needle was pointing in his favor, he hoped it would stick there until he got to his place in Oregon.

Oregon wasn't the original plan. He should have been on his way to the safe house in Nevada. Friends were waiting there to help him and his crew keep out of the public eye until the shitstorm blew over. All that was out of the question now. *Thanks, Kelso.*

Straley wondered how it would have gone if the teller hadn't tripped the silent alarm and the rent-a-cop hadn't shot O'Dell in the back with the .38 he had strapped to one ankle. *What the hell was a rent-a-cop doing with a throw down piece?* Maybe three people wouldn't have died in the bank, not that it would have changed what Kelso did, the backstabbing shit.

O'Dell was already dead when they reached the dumpsite to switch rides. Straley told Jacobi and Felix to hide the corpse. Kelso went with them to help strip the body of any ID.

Straley was packing the cash into his ride when two shots split the air. He was going for his 9mm on the front seat when Kelso appeared from behind him.

"I don't think so, James," Kelso said.

Bile burned in Straley's gut. On top of today's mess, he hadn't seen this shit coming. "A four-way split not good enough for you?"

"Never was. Now get away from the gun."

Straley edged away from the 9mm.

"I'll take the duffel now," Kelso said.

"Get it yourself." The son of a bitch was going to cap him. Straley didn't see why he should do any heavy lifting.

"No, I'd like you to do it."

Kelso thought he was hot shit. He was a moron. You don't play around. You stick to the plan.

"You're an asshole," Straley said, walking to the trunk.

"But I'm a rich asshole, James."

Straley jerked the duffel from the trunk.

"Bring it to me. No games."

Straley didn't have any games in mind, just solutions. He started towards Kelso.

"That's far enough. Now toss the duffel over here."

"Gladly."

Straley brought the duffel up and thrust it away two-handed as if he were passing a basketball. Kelso didn't have time to react. Four hundred grand in mixed bills hit him in the chest and toppled him.

Straley darted back for his gun and grabbed the nine off the seat. Kelso got off a shot. It went wild in his haste. Straley drew a steady bead on Kelso, fired and hit him high up on the right side of the chest. The .45 in Kelso's hand tumbled from his grasp.

Straley moved in. He stood on Kelso's gun hand to keep it pinned, not that Kelso had the strength to lunge for the gun. He didn't bother kicking the duffel off Kelso's chest. This was as close as Kelso was ever going to get to the money. He should let him enjoy the moment.

Kelso grinned. It was brave front, but Straley saw the panic in his eyes.

Straley wanted to put a bullet in every part of Kelso. He deserved to suffer for what he'd done. Unfortunately, there wasn't time for that.

"You don't fuck over your friends. It ain't cool, and it guarantees you won't last. Case in point."

Straley denied Kelso any last words and shot him in the face. The bullet drilled a hole in his cheek.

"You got off easy," Straley said to himself in the quiet of the Caprice.

All thoughts of Kelso disappeared when he noticed the greasy patch of crimson that encircled his wrist. The Caprice Man's blood was heavy on Straley's arm, weighing his limb down. When he examined his arm, there was more than just half-clotted blood. There were actual gobs of the Caprice Man's tissue. Revulsion rose to the back of his throat. He changed hands on the wheel and sneered as he rubbed the gore off on his tee shirt. He checked his arm out. Though it looked clean, the hairs on his wrist were still pressed down as if gelled. He rested his arm in his lap, palm up, so that he didn't have to see his wrist and rubbed it carefully against his jeans.

Straley joined Highway 20 to take him across the state. He wanted to hook up with 101 to get him into Oregon. His place was near the coast, and more importantly, the landmark highway wasn't that busy. Besides, he needed to dump the Caprice. Even ignoring the previous owner's blood, the mangled steel and split windshield drew too much attention. It would be dark soon, which would make the car less conspicuous, although that busted headlight would get him pulled over by the cops. He'd dump the thing somewhere quiet and torch it, after finding a replacement to get him the rest of the way.

A family stared at Straley openmouthed from inside their passing minivan. At first, he thought they were checking out the car, reminding him of how soon he needed to be rid of

the eyesore, then he realized the family's attention wasn't on the damaged Caprice. Their focus was on him. He glanced back from their shocked faces and caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. Blood streaked his face. He must have had blood on his hands and wiped his face without noticing it.

The blunder spooked him. He didn't waste any time. He stopped off at a rest stop, washed up in the restroom, then found the first town with a used car lot. He blew through the town and dumped the Caprice in a field off some county road. Leaving the money in the trunk, he hotfooted it back to town and bought a change of clothes to make himself respectable before buying the car. On the lot, the salesman gave him a hard time about the hurry and his lack of a trade-in. The questions ceased once he produced a fake ID and made a cash offer to buy the '92 Honda Civic sedan. The bills he used weren't from the bank haul. New bills pricked people's attention. Straley never went anywhere without carrying at least two grand of emergency money.

Driving back to the Caprice, his wrist and palm itched. He scratched them against the steering wheel and examined his palm. It looked blotchy, but otherwise fine. He hoped it was just adrenaline screwing with his body.

Pulling up alongside the Caprice, Straley was pleased to see that no one had gotten curious about the car. He retrieved the duffel and deposited it in the Honda's trunk.

It was a tough choice whether or not to torch the Caprice. Being so close to the backwater, a fire was likely to be the talk of the town. Sadly, that couldn't be helped. He couldn't leave it to be found with his fingerprints plastered all over it, not to mention the owner's blood. He uncapped two large bottles of lighter fluid he'd purchased in town and doused the interior of the car before splashing what remained over the exterior and his bloody shirt. He uncapped the gas tank and stuffed his shirt in the spout. He removed the license plates and VIN plates before lighting his raggedy shirt. The Caprice was ablaze when he re-joined the main highway.

Straley pointed the Honda west. He doubted he'd reach Highway 101 before sunset. His hand itched worse than before. In the failing light, he checked it out. His palm was red and hot to the touch, swelling now. He was having a reaction, but to what? He wasn't allergic to anything. He opened the window and stuck his arm out to numb his inflamed hand with the cool evening air. His shirtsleeve blew back from his wrist to reveal the source of his itching. A hand-shaped rash marked his wrist where the Caprice Man had grabbed him. Straley choked on his shock.

*Shit, I've got what he's got.* He pictured the Caprice Man in his mind's eye. He recalled the man's ruined flesh. He was going the same way.

Straley couldn't stem the fear that spread through him. Theory after theory filled his mind, each more alarmist than the next. A car horn woke him from his nightmare. He'd been staring at his inflamed wrist while the Honda wandered into oncoming traffic. He saw the car on a collision course and swerved just in time to prevent a repeat of the accident he'd stumbled on to only hours earlier. The passenger side wheels slipped off the road and onto the dirt shoulder. The car went into a skid. The back end snapped out and the car swapped ends, eventually coming to a stop on the shoulder, pointing the wrong direction. Deep wracking breaths entered and left his throat.

"Get a grip, James," he murmured to himself.

The near miss acted as a slap to the face and calmed him down. He was being ridiculous about this rash. He had to keep it in perspective. The Caprice Man had something wrong that was for sure. Whatever the guy had was in the advanced stage. It took time for that to happen. Weeks. Even months, maybe. He'd been exposed all of what—a few hours? That was nothing. He just needed a shot of something, a course of pills or some kind of salve to put him on the road to recovery. The Caprice Man was the one in trouble, not him. He just needed to get to a doctor.

Still, walking into some clinic wasn't an option. The cops knew O'Dell had been wounded and would need medical attention. They'd have a cop assigned to every hospital and clinic within a three hundred mile radius of the bank robbery. Okay, he didn't have a gunshot wound, but he stank like a cordite factory. Rash or no rash, he couldn't take the risk. He just needed to get home. In Oregon, he had connections to get this mess taken care of, no questions asked. He was looking at another seven hours on the road. *How bad could this shit get in seven hours? You're okay. Keep driving. That's the answer. Get home and get seen to. Stick to the plan. After today's fiasco, someone should.*

The tension bled out of him. He was James Straley, the iceman. He pulled a U-turn and rejoined the highway.

Straley wondered why he'd let the rash get to him. Okay, the Caprice Man was a mess and he couldn't deny that the thought of ending up the same way made his asshole pucker. In the big scheme of things, it wasn't that serious. How many times had some minimum wage earning rent-a-cop pulled a gun on him? Plenty. And when had that made him lose focus? Never. So why lose it in the face of a little hot spot on his wrist? He stalled for an answer. That troubled him. He hoped he'd have one once he'd taken some pills and they'd worked their medicinal magic.

The rash continued to itch as he cut across the state. He tried not to glance at the patch that grew angrier on his wrist, but couldn't help himself. The damn thing fascinated him

with the intensity of a train wreck.

His mood lightened when he joined 101 and reached the small town of Willits at dusk. He stopped at a small, non-chain drugstore. A buzzer went off when he stepped through the door. The pharmacist appeared from the rear of the store.

"Can I help you?" the bespectacled man asked.

Since Straley was the store's only client, he didn't mind airing his problem. He pulled back his sleeve to show the rash to the pharmacist. "Yeah, I've got this allergy or dermatitis thing."

"So, I see," the pharmacist said, pointing at Straley's face.

That stopped Straley in his tracks. He examined his face in a mirror on the counter near a cosmetics display. His forehead was inflamed with a corrosive looking burn that penetrated deeper than skin level. He raised a hand to touch it, then stopped, fearing he'd only spread the rash to other parts of his body.

"Yeah, I wouldn't touch that," the pharmacist suggested. "Have you been exposed to anything you know of?"

Straley remembered the Caprice Man's touch. "No."

"You sure? Not been out hiking? There's a lot of poison oak about."

"I'm sure." He continued to eye his reflection with growing despair.

The pharmacist came around the counter to examine Straley. He looked down his nose and through the bottom half of his bifocals at the rash. He took care not to touch the affected area, choosing instead to instruct Straley to turn his head this way and that.

"Any other affected areas?" he asked.

Straley showed the pharmacist his wrist and the hand-shaped print on it. The pharmacist couldn't fail to recognize the outline for what it was and gave Straley a disapproving look.

"Looks like someone's hand."

"Yeah, I know." Straley squeezed out a feeble laugh. "Funny that."

The pharmacist frowned. "Yes, very funny. Come along and I'll give you something for it."

The pharmacist plucked a number of medications from various shelves. The haul ranged from dermatological creams to antihistamines. He returned to the counter and bagged them, then rang up the total on the register.

"That's twenty-five seventy-nine including tax." The pharmacist handed the bag to Straley. "Follow the directions on the boxes."

"I will."

"Are you nearly home?"

"I've still got a ways to go," he said with a smile.

"I suggest you see a doctor as soon as you can. You don't want that turning nasty."

"No, I sure don't."

Straley held out twenty-six dollars. The pharmacist made no attempt to take the money. Straley put it on the counter after a brief standoff.

"Twenty-six there?" the pharmacist said.

"Yes."

The pharmacist rang up the amount, then scooped out and placed the twenty-one cents on the counter. Straley swiped up the change. The pharmacist closed the register, still making no move to pick up Straley's bills. Straley had the distinct feeling the guy was going to burn the money and douse the counter in disinfectant the moment he was out of sight.

"You take it easy now," the pharmacist said.

"I will."

Straley left the pharmacy feeling the bespectacled man's gaze burning into his back. He waited for the door to close behind him before cursing the old bastard for treating him like a leper.

He drove out of town to the seclusion of a rest stop before popping the pills and slathering the cream over his affected regions. In the dim glow of the Honda's dome light, he noticed that his lotion-slick hands were tinged red with blood. Whatever he'd caught from the Caprice Man wouldn't be cured with antihistamines and hydrocortisone ointment. He wiped the goop and blood off his hands, then hit the road heading north.

As night got its hooks into day, traffic on 101 dwindled. By ten, his was the only car to be seen. Although hunger told him to stop somewhere like Eureka for food, the increased itching breaking out over ever wider parts of his body argued that he better press on to avoid unwanted attention.

As he racked up the miles, the rash intensified. The nerve endings in his face lit up like flares then died and flared again as it spread. The ointment did little to relieve the pain or the itching and he constantly fought the urge to scratch. He'd soon have it taken care of. This latest pep talk wasn't as effective as the one before. He focused on the dark road ahead and counted the miles off in his head in an attempt to distract himself from the pain. He failed. All he could think about was the Caprice Man. He'd been wrong about his ravaged condition. It wasn't the product of weeks of neglect. It was days. If that. At some point Straley had begun to grind his teeth. He noticed only after his jaw muscles

ached from the intense pressure he'd exerted on them. He didn't stop. This new and different hurt diluted the pain from the breakouts.

His mind turned to Kelso. The motherfucker deserved more than a bullet in the face. How about a dose of what the Caprice Man had? Now that was retribution. The thought put a smile on his face. He would have enjoyed watching Kelso go the way of the Caprice Man. He pictured Kelso's flesh melting, skin peeling off his body in strips, forced to sit in a pool of his own jellied blood. If anything like justice still existed in this world, death by Caprice Man would have been a worthy punishment for Kelso.

"You don't screw over friends. Ever."

His malicious daydreams worked for a while, until he realized what he dreamt of for Kelso was instead waiting for him. He'd end up like the Caprice Man if he didn't get medical treatment soon. The cruel smile he'd developed while thinking about Kelso withered.

*Keep driving, James. You'll be alright if you keep driving.*

Not long after that thought, the itching won out. He'd gotten to a stage where he growled with frustration, and just wanted to rip his clothes off and claw himself all to pieces. In the end, it became too much for him and he jerked the car off the highway at the entrance to a state park.

He stopped the car when he reached the barrier at the front of the parking lot, grabbed the bag of medications and bolted for the restrooms. Both the men and women's bathrooms were locked until a well-placed boot heel changed that.

He fumbled in the dark for the light switch and found it. Inadequate florescent lighting blinked on. Even in the feeble light, he could see in the grimy mirrors above the sinks fresh damage wreaked by the rash. The reflection chilled him. Despite the increase in the burning and itching, he hadn't imagined how much worse he looked. The rash was expanding at an alarming rate. His cheeks were ruddy to the point of bleeding. The disease crept northwards into his hairline, leaving his hair loose. A gentle combing would bring the stuff out in clumps. The left side of his face was so puffed out that it pulled his ear out of place.

He moved closer to the sinks and examined his arm in the light. The crisp outline of the Caprice man's handprint was lost. Now it resembled something akin to a glove. The rash had eaten deep into the flesh of his wrist and was dissolving the surrounding skin.

"Christ," was all Straley could mutter before the trembling set in.

He was too far gone for a hospital. Running into an ER in this condition would get him quarantined. Questions would follow. So would the cops. He chose to look on the bright side, slender though it was. Sure, things were bad, but he was close to home. Once there,

he could find whatever he needed and buy the best treatment four hundred grand could afford. At least he had that going for him. For now, he just had to pile on the miles to get home.

He shook out the medications into the sink, then shot back too many antihistamines with a handful of water. He needed to clean his wounds before applying a new dose of ointment. The first strike of cold water to his wrist brought pain so intense it forced him to his knees. He clung to the sink and sobbed.

When the agony passed, he got to his feet and applied the salve over his water-soaked arm. He didn't dare to try drying it off with a paper towel out of fear of the damage it would do his skin. The salve turned rose-colored when it mixed with his blood. He managed to wrap gauze around his arm. The sticky ointment held it in place. He applied the ointment to his face and left the restroom.

As he hurried back to his car, the familiar strobe of red and blue lights slowed him. A CHP patrol car was parked at a skewed angle behind his Honda, boxing it in. An officer slid out from cruiser.

"Come over here please, sir."

"Is there a problem, officer?"

"Just come over here, sir."

"Sure."

It was a time for playing things cool. This was only a random stop. He presented no threat, not with a plastic bag in one hand. He looked like no one of interest, so he played the part. This was no time for gunplay considering that his 9mm still sat under the Honda's driver seat. The cop would have called his position in. Dispatch expected a response. If they didn't get one, more cops would be sent. At the moment, the manhunt was scattered. If he put the cop down, it brought the heat right to this spot and put them on a clear trail after him.

The patrolman picked Straley out in the darkness with the cruiser's spotlight. Straley put up a hand to keep the light out his eyes, then clambered over the barrier and approached the cop.

"You want to tell me what you're doing in the park after it's closed?"

"I needed to use a restroom. I figured the park must have one."

"What's in the bag?"

"Medications. Look, I know I shouldn't have used the facilities. I hadn't seen a gas station in a while and I needed somewhere to clean up."

The cop took the bag from Straley and emptied its contents onto the hood of his cruiser.

He examined them under the glare of a flashlight he took from his belt. He opened the boxes to make sure the contents matched.

"What's all this stuff for?"

Before Straley could answer, the cop lit up his face with his flashlight.

"Jesus, what's up with your face?"

"Poison oak. I was out hiking last weekend. It got me real good."

The cop examined him under the flashlight's glare. "Damn, it did get you good. What did you do, rub your face in the stuff?"

Straley shrugged in a 'what are you going to do' gesture. "You touch it, use your hand to wipe sweat from your face, and then you end up looking like this."

"Well, you're the poster boy for what not to do." The cop handed Straley his bag of useless medications. "Got any ID?"

"Yeah." Straley reached for the wallet in his back pocket. The cop didn't tense. As far as he was concerned, Straley was of no consequence. He produced the same fake ID he'd used to buy the Honda.

The cop took it, rounded his patrol car on the driver's side and dropped behind the wheel while Straley followed him. The dome light came on inside the cruiser, lighting up an expensive array of cop equipment and a single sheet of paper on the front passenger seat. Straley tensed the moment he looked at it. It was an advisory in connection with the robbery with his mug shot plastered over it. The damn cops had worked it all back to him, no doubt from the identities of his dead crew.

The cop punched Straley's license number into the onboard computer. He waited for the system to kick back any warrants.

The cop felt around the car's cockpit. He reached over and without looking, picked up the advisory that had Straley's face plastered on it. Straley wished he had his gun. He could take the cop without it, though a gun would make it easier. The cop examined the picture for a beat too long. One more and Straley was going to backhand him and make a grab for his weapon. The cop saved his life by putting the advisory down to grab the pen that he'd found beneath it.

Straley's ID came back clean, like he knew it would. The cop held the license out to him and eyed him. Straley waited for the cop to ID him. The guy had his damn mug shot right there on his passenger seat. Instead, he let Straley take his license back.

"Got far to go?" the cop asked.

"Nah. I'll be home in an hour."

"Take it easy," he said, "and get that face looked at. I'm no doctor, but it looks real

bad."

Straley smiled. "I will."

*The dumb son of a bitch doesn't even recognize me. What a prick.* He watched the cruiser turn around and drive away. As he clambered behind the Honda's wheel, he caught sight of his reflection in the rearview mirror and saw how little he looked like the person pictured on the advisory.

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