

# GET BLANK

JUSTIN  
ROBINSON



# I REALLY NEED A BETTER CAREER PLAN...

...That's when the screaming started.

I will admit to a certain amount of *schadenfreude* there, as much as I was capable of while still chained to an altar. But watching a bunch of people who until five seconds before had thought of themselves as the black-clad army of the apocalypse start screaming like terrified kids and flinging themselves under pews to hide is *hilarious*.



## PRAISE FOR MR BLANK

“To read Justin Robinson’s *Mr Blank* is like following some self-deprecating, white rabbit into a sprawling, L.A. noir wonderland on a 100-MPH, nerd culture-fueled rollick.”

—*Fanboy Comics*

**FILL IN THE \_\_\_\_\_:**

*Mr. Blank*

*Get Blank*

**OTHER CANDLEMARK & GLEAM BOOKS  
BY JUSTIN ROBINSON:**

*City of Devils*

# **GET BLANK**

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**



Candlemark & Gleam

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*For Lauri,  
you are pot roast*





## **I'M RETIRED.**

Not sure how many times I have to say that. And it's not like I'm saying it to anyone else. Who would even believe me? At my age, there's no way I'm rich enough to retire unless I'm some kind of internet billionaire. I'm not. I've checked. And there's the fact that I still have a job, actually, just not the completely insane plethora of jobs I used to have. Only a few people know about that, and they know all about the retirement thing, too. So really, I shouldn't have to keep saying it. But there it is, all part of the internal monologue, delivered in a weary fisherman's cadence like so much Morgan Freeman narration. It plays in my mind every time something weird comes a-knocking at my door.

So, pretty much every other day.

I always thought my old life was all my fault. Like if I'd never answered that ad on Craigslist asking for security guards, I might have a normal life. I wouldn't know all the things I know or have seen all the things I've seen. I'd live one of those lives of quiet desperation I've heard such good things about. I'd be married to a hot woman who hated me,



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I'd have two kids who hated me, and I'd have a dog who... well, he wouldn't hate me, but he'd suspect, somewhere in the back of his canine cranium, that he could do a little better. I'd work in an office, I'd have high cholesterol, and I could die in a workplace shooting. You know, the American Dream.

Nope. Turns out I have a giant "kick me" sign on my back only legible to the homicidal, desperate, and whatever Cosmic Tricksters are manifesting themselves these days as digital deities. They can read it—hell, they can sniff it out for miles and miles—and they come to me like I'm the only Maglite blazing in an endless field of moths.

Oh, god. Why did I have to say moths? Okay, I'll get to that, too.

I left town. Took to the roads. Pulled up stakes and cut all ties. I got the fuck out while the getting was more or less good. And it hasn't helped. It's like anyone who has an insurance scam on their minds, lost a piece of Templar treasure, or just had a good old-fashioned dimensional rift manifest in their backyard somehow finds me and wants to hire me to be a fall guy/track down the gold falcon/ask those tentacled abominations to keep it down because some people have work in the morning. It's like the Collective Unconscious knows—and yeah, not only is that a real thing, it's one of the more powerful Communist groups out there—where I am, what I'm doing, and I'm the only one who can help.

When I made a break for it, I thought the groups I'd stabbed in the back most dramatically would come looking for some payback. I could at least plan for a revenge scenario. I knew my Rogue's Gallery. I had their numbers. I was more or less ready for one of them to say howdy. But no, it couldn't possibly be something that straightforward. There were entirely new faces trying to draw me into some byzantine plot that no one really understands.

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But it's like I said. I'm retired.

You misplaced the Koh-i-Noor Diamond? That's your problem, and I will not find it for ten percent of the market price or its equivalent in lead. You need someone to ambush your husband on his way home from work and make it look like an accident? I don't care how that anklet looks on you, find a different patsy. Oh, your insurance pays double if you get eaten by an orca while on fire? I will not help you make that happen. You got a rogue Merovingian who needs drying out? I've got an ass that needs kissing.

It's like I'm the Make a Wish Foundation for sociopaths.

That's why I moved away, goddamn it. That's my I left my city behind. Get a little peace and quiet. Stop dealing with the insanity of the true masters of the world. Unplug from the Information Underground. Stop with the errands, stop being an accessory to terrible things, stop helping horrible people run the world from the shadows. Live a life I could live with.

I tried. I really did. But the universe wasn't done with me. Take last Tuesday. Please. (Sorry, but Tuesday really was a lousy day.) The funny—not funny ha ha, more funny uh oh, as the man said—thing about it, was I could pick almost any day. Every other day I was getting propositioned. I was like a hooker whose only clientele consisted of the criminally insane. I was at the local train station—all right, yeah, first mistake, you don't hang out in a train station unless you want to get involved in a shootout, a fatal misunderstanding, or some light espionage. But there's this taco stand right outside, and they do their carne asada Baja style, by which I mean it tastes like everything has been soaked in lime, and if I don't eat there once a week, I begin to question the entire purpose of my existence. So I'm sitting on one of the benches in this tiled Spanish station, eating tacos, and listening to the tap-tap-tapping of the juice falling into the butcher paper on my lap and

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thinking that this was the sort of situation when someone would proclaim, “This is the life.”

Which, of course, is right when the man with the drooping eye and slouching fedora slid onto the bench next to me. He was dressed like a colorized photo of Jay Gatsby’s creepy uncle. The pencil-thin mustache alone would have prevented him from coming within a hundred yards of a school. The suit looked brand new, even though it hadn’t been in style since booze was illegal. He dropped a broken-in paper sack, really more wrinkle than bag at that point, the kind that has never once contained something wholesome, onto the bench beside us.

“Deliver it to the Pea Soup Anderson’s in Solvang. Payment is...”

“Nope,” I said.

“Huh?”

“You clearly think I’m going to take that bag to someone. Why? Did you hear that your contact would be wearing black Chuck Taylors and dripping taco juice all over the place?”

“Um... well...”

“Yeah, right. Not me. Now fuck off.”

“Look here, friend, I’ve...”

“...got a gun? That’s adorable. I’m betting whoever needs what’s in that bag—and notice how I’ve not asked what’s in there, thus demonstrating the depths of my not-giving-a-fuck?—really wants it. Enough to hire a guy who looks like he molested Al Capone to deliver it to a train station on the last stop before the Central Coast. Well, if you give it to me, I’m caught in a whole mistaken identity plot, I’ll find your body with a bullet to the head right at the end of the second act—you know, to show me how deep I’m in it—and I’ll have to come up with some kind of eleventh-hour save that puts the bad guys in prison and keeps my blood on the inside of my skin. Well, I’m

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not interested. Sounds like fun and all, but no thanks. I'm going to eat my taco, and then I'm getting back to work."

"Are you..."

"Yeah, I'm sure." I took a bite of taco. "Also, there's a guy at the other side of the terminal who kind of looks like me if you squint really hard and maybe suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome. And he's waving at you."

I pointed. The other guy held out his arms with a semi-panicked, "What the hell, man?" look on his face. The guy with the mustache picked up the bag.

"If you tell anyone about this..."

"You think I want it getting out that I look like that guy?"

Pencil-Thin Mustache left me alone after that, and I went back to work, and tried not to think about whatever illicit rendezvous had gone down at lunch.

Or take the very next day when I was trying close up shop, when a woman—the kind who might as well be wearing a t-shirt proclaiming GENTLEMEN LOCK UP YOUR PENISES—slithered into my store with the kind of skill it usually takes several years of training in a monastery with a ninja master to accomplish. I swear to god, she got through a closed door. She was some kind of rockabilly goddess, with a halter top showing off an uneasy detente between cleavage and tattoos. She smelled like cinnamon, and wanted me to be damn sure of that fact as she leaned to tickle my ears with her breath.

"Do you know about the Hentai Am?" she whispered.

Of course I did. The pornographic anime in which the chief animator supposedly attained perfect enlightenment halfway through and now had the habit of reducing unsuspecting masturbators to gibbering madness.

"Never heard of it."

"It's in town... and all I need is... help obtaining it." She somehow discovered a way to close even more distance with

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me. If she got any closer, we were going to discover some new kind of fusion bomb fueled entirely by hormonal flesh and whispered entendres.

“You’ve got the wrong guy, lady. I’m closed.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that, and the last person who touched me like that was testing for a hernia.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Shop’s closed, sister. Now get the hell out before I have you busted for trespassing.”

She slapped me, but I don’t think her heart was really in it.

Two days later, right before the Cosmic Trickster decided to really wind up and punt my crotch into orbit, I had another one. It was a Friday evening and I was getting ready for my girlfriend to arrive. I was at the local market trying to decide on wines, which mostly consisted of me squinting at the labels and pretending I knew what they meant. “The Safety Dance” echoed over the PA while outside the rain clattered off cars and pavement. Now, I’ve got nothing against Men Without Hats and I’ve worked for their one-world agenda in the past, but it did cut into the ambience of the rainstorm.

Anyway, I reached into a gap between bottles, positive I was going to bring out something with a label that said, “Perfect Romantic Wine; Not Too Heavy or Pretentious; And Tell Me All About Your Day.” Instead I got a dusty bottle in one of those woven casks with a melted candle cork. It looked like the kind of thing Kiefer Sutherland would have given me to drink in an abandoned hotel while mulleted vampires girlishly skipped around me. While I was staring at it and wondering how the thing had found its way into a Vons, a grinding sound came from the shelves and they retracted to reveal a staircase down.

The aisle was empty. Just this yawning darkness, barely

lit with guttering candles. Chanting sounds snaked up to me. The smells were just as culty, and I swear I could see cloaked and hooded figures moving through the firelight.

I put the wine back and picked up a local merlot.

Like I said, retired. I wasn't going to get involved in a god-damn thing, no matter how much the universe seemed to want me to. I was going to hunker down and live a life I could describe to someone without a security clearance. But no. The Cosmic Trickster had other ideas.

God, he's a dick.

It started the very next Tuesday, right as I was in the middle delivering of a civics lecture.

"There are actually four branches of government," I said from my position on the step stool where I was alphabetizing the witchcraft section of my bookstore. "The executive, the legislative, the judicial, and the prejudicial."

"Are you certain?" Khaali asked, her Somali accent making her sound so earnest.

"Only four they're going to test you on," I said. "The legislative makes the laws, the executive enacts the laws, the judicial interprets the laws, and the prejudicial ignores the laws. It's a delicate system." I peered at the shelf. "Are we out of the *De Vermis Mysteriis* again?"

Khaali leafed through her textbook. "I sold one to a man the other day."

Couldn't keep that one on the shelves. If I didn't know better, I'd think there was a whole coven of witches in the area, but that was silly. They were out near Bakersfield. Good thing, too, since my store had the largest occult, history, and occult history section in the continental United States, not including Alaska (thanks a lot, Books, Sects, and Secret Masters of Anchorage).

"Prejudicial?" she asked again.

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“Arguably the most important branch.”

Khaali looked up from her citizenship exam like I was the crazy one here. “I don’t think that’s right,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no mention of a prejudicial branch anywhere.” She paged through her book as though to check one last time, just to be certain.

“They’re not going to come right out and say it. Defeats the whole purpose.”

She shook her head. “All right. What does the Constitution do?”

“Uh... let’s see. Defines the government and our basic rights as Americans. Provides loopholes for the Secret Masters. Oh, and determines hit point bonus per level.”

“That can’t be right.”

“Trust me. Come on, give me another.”

“How many Constitutional amendments are there?”

“Sixty-five.”

“It says twenty-seven here.”

I laughed. It came out a little nasally what with the bandage over my nose. Don’t worry—I had been beaten up by a book. “Right. Pull the other one.”

“Do you know *anything* about your country, Mr. Blank?”

That’s what she thought my name was. Robert Blank. It might as well be, legally speaking. I have a driver’s license under that name. A birth certificate and a library card, too. A membership to the local Elk’s Lodge and a card that says if I eat three more subs at Gaetano’s, I get the next one free. Amazon, Netflix, and Hotmail all know me by that name. Yeah, I even have an email that goes right to me, and it’s pretty easy to guess the username once you realize that I’d have to add numbers to the back half since just about everything is taken at this point. Besides, if I didn’t have one, how would I know about all

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these exciting new ways to increase my sexual potency?

Is it the name I was born with? Oh, hell no. I can barely remember that, and it's not like anyone else is using it. My mother doesn't talk so well anymore and who the hell knows where my father is. But for all intents and purposes it's mine, and it's the only name I use these days. And honestly, the only thing that made it truly part of me was having someone important to call me by it.

I used to have more names than anyone really needs. So many I lost track of them. Ask a Freemason and he'll tell you I'm Colin Reznick. One of the ladies of V.E.N.U.S. would say Jonah Bailey. A Satanist would call me Sam Smiley, unless he's the other kind of Satanist, in which case I'm Eli Simms. The ascetorexics over at the Anamadim Temple think I'm Ivan Cohen, and the Illuminati call me Daniel Isringhausen. They're all real in that they each correspond to a flesh-and-blood person with a digital footprint and a paper spine. Each name has favorite haunts and Facebook accounts and a favorite video on YouTube of a puppy. They each have acquaintances, cronies, well-wishers, and contemporaries. They were as real as anyone else is in this world, and about a year ago they all died.

It was an unceremonious death, and there were no bodies. They joined that terrifyingly large number of people in the world who just up and vanish. Probably around six months ago, people who knew them began to realize the poor bastards weren't coming back.

I left Los Angeles a year ago, leaving the names in a shallow grave. A figurative one, mind; the IDs were still as valid as they ever were. I didn't update their various social networking pages, I stopped using their phones and their credit cards, and I abandoned the champion bar trivia team Hyperactive Crime Scene. I introduced myself as "Call me Bob," and I cultivated a handshake that would make Roger Sterling proud.



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I stepped down from the ladder. “Way too goddamn much, Miss Barre.”

Khaali Barre was a pleasant woman, and had been in the country for a little over five years. She didn’t opt for the easy green card marriage, which I admired. Instead, she decided to do things the hard way, by navigating American bureaucracy, which I didn’t admire. She was a good employee, though, and had driven me to the hospital when the *Necronomicon* decided to get revenge for all those midnight screenings of *Army of Darkness* I’d gone to. Had I known the actual hardcover book was directed by Sam Raimi, I might not have stocked it. I certainly wouldn’t have put it on the top shelf.

Mina had seen the falling book’s handiwork late Friday night when she finally got here. The actual accident had happened Thursday morning when some asshole from UCSB wanted to have a look at the thing. He must have gotten to the Lovecraft section in his 20th Century Lit class or, more likely, someone was running a *Cthulhu* LARP on campus and they’d heard about the local occult bookstore and its cranky proprietor.

The nice part of having a girlfriend—okay, not *the* nice part, because there are a ton of nice parts, and I’m enough of a grownup not to make a smutty joke here—is that when you hurt yourself, you get the sympathy affection. And Mina, even though she had just suffered through literally hours of bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 101, made the ouchy face and gave me a hug that turned into a kiss. And believe me, that was worth her hitting the bandage accidentally.

So yeah, a year later and Mina Duplessis and I are together. I’m still puzzling over that one. I’ve pointed out that she can do better, but she never takes me seriously. There’s the obvious: she’s a beautiful woman, and I mean professionally so. She’s a model, a plus-sized one, who generally gets the

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call whenever a designer wants a classic old-Hollywood look. More importantly, she's smart as a whip and funny as hell when she wants to be. I'm just in the business of making sure that whatever reasons she had for hooking up with me remain true. She tells me I have nothing to worry about, but I didn't spend a decade being paranoid for nothing. No thanks, I'll keep making date night something fun.

Granted, there have been a few changes here and there, and if you ask me, for the better. Mina has me dressing a little better. The woman knows clothes. She knows a lot of things in point of fact, but like I said, she's a model, so the clothes part makes sense. And because she's a plus-sized model, she's also used to working with what someone's got rather than trying to simulate something they don't. She's got me in guayaberas and the occasional bowling shirt. Slacks, too, although she's nice enough to get me the ones that don't need to be ironed. She briefly tried to get me in something other than my Chuck Taylors, but I put the brakes on that right quick. Still, she says it gives me a laid-back island look. I have to be attractive to exactly one person in the world, so as long as Mina likes it, so do I.

The biggest hit to my identity, the part separating He-of-a-Thousand-Names and Robert Blank of the California central coast, was when she made me cut the Reagan hair. The haircut that had been my unofficial trademark, the 'do that ushered me into countless ultra-right wing hearts is gone. It's not like I need it anymore. I don't need to get the masters of the world to trust me, so there's no real point in looking like a repurposed Big Boy anymore. Occasionally I miss it, since there really was an art to getting the swirl exactly right, and doing so was the closest I ever got to meditation. But truth be told, I look better now.

The giant duckbilled bandage on my face wasn't part of the fashion makeover, but it'd be gone in a little bit and

I could go back to smelling something that wasn't my own dried blood. Kind of funny that I'd made it through an entire noir murder mystery with my sniffer intact, only to take a book to the face during my premature retirement. Somewhere, the Cosmic Trickster is laughing.

"I don't want to offend you," Khaali said from her place behind the counter, civics book in her lap, "but I think I should probably study on my own."

I shrugged. "If you want. I think we have a couple good civics texts in the back."

"In the Conspiracies section?"

"Yep, those are them."

She chewed her lip. "I think I'll keep with the one Immigration recommended."

"Your lo—" My ringtone cut me off. It was the riff from Boston's "Peace of Mind," the only Boston I was getting these days. I checked it. Mina Duplessis calling.

I answered it. "Sheinhardt Wig Comp—"

"Rabbit." That was Mina's nickname for me, something she picked even before I had a "real" name. "I need your help." Her voice was tense, scared. Normally it's incongruously soft, probably something she affected around the time genetics turned her into the avalanche of beauty she had become. Now, the blade in her words cut through any joke I might have made.

"What's going on?"

"I've been arrested. They say I killed somebody!"

Goddamn it. I guess I'm not retired after all.



**TOOK ME A SECOND TO RECOVER MY POWER OF** speech. Mina was no shrinking violet and, sure, she'd been known to counter even casual sexism with a bit of light crotch soccer, but she'd never kill anyone.

“What?”

“The cops. They have evidence. They didn't even bother to question me, not really. They just arrested me as soon as I got home from your place. They're holding me without bail, they said.”

“Don't worry, Mina. I'll be right there.”

“What should I do? I've never been arrested before.”

“Just sit tight and don't say anything. I'll get you a lawyer. He's a little weird, but trust me, he's gotten me out of some shit before.”

I could tell she was trying not to cry, and I really wished there was some hugging technology I could deploy through the phone that wouldn't be terrifying. “I don't know what's happening. I don't even know this guy, and they're saying we

were sleeping together.”

“I know. It’s probably just a misunderstanding,” I said, trying to speak in the soothing tones of late night call-in radio. I was really thinking that this sounded like a frame job, but I wasn’t going to say that. Not making Mina cry was one of my primary purposes on this earth. “Did they give you a name? The guy they think you killed?”

“Um... Neil Greene, I think? I’ve never heard of him before.”

I had. Neil Greene was a Seventeenth Degree Freemason, a government bureaucrat for the city of Los Angeles who controlled roughly 1/17th of the flow of paperwork that kept the city running, and through that, about the same fraction of the city itself. Plus he was a member in good standing of the First Reformed Church of the Antichrist. He was also a friend of mine, or as close to those as I got. Literally the last thing I had ever seen him do was attempt to save my life. In my head, I briefly went over the pros and cons of telling Mina.

“I know him,” I said. “Knew him, I mean. Look, this changes nothing. *You* didn’t know him and you sure as hell didn’t kill him. I’m driving down now, all right? We’ll have this all straightened out before dinner.”

She exhaled and I pictured her gathering herself. She was a strong person, and like most strong people, she was not a fan of being in situations that were out of control. “Okay,” she said, then repeated it. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

I was on the road pretty much immediately. I told Khaali that I had to go, glossing over exactly why, and asked her to close. She wanted to know what was wrong, but it would probably take too long to explain. I almost headed out with nothing but the shirt on my back, but something made me hold off. A little voice whispering that maybe, just maybe, this was a little more sinister than it appeared—and it already looked sinister enough to be twirling a mustache while

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it tied Mina to some train tracks. That I should be prepared for another bout of insanity courtesy of my long association with the Information Underground.

I was retired, right, but I could unretire for a day. This could be like Michael Jordan with the Wizards, if Michael Jordan had never been very good at basketball. No, no problem, this was even less than that. I wasn't deluding myself. I wasn't trying to come back for good. I was going to do one thing and get out before anyone knew I was there. Get back to the City of Angels, Casablanca for the Secret Masters of the world, the city where shit gets done, where shadow governments can meet and hash out their differences over sushi and cocaine. And here comes Peter Lorre, the Boy Friday for every last one of these groups.

But Peter Lorre wasn't looking to get any of his timecards stamped.

This wasn't a job. Not a breach of the retirement thing. This was personal. One of my contacts, a contact I later found had himself been double-dipping, had showed up dead and my girlfriend was being framed for it. It didn't just stink; it reeked like a whorehouse after fleet week. And that internal monologue—you know, the one trying to soothe me with Morgan Freeman's stentorian tones—was telling me, "Make sure you have your operative kit. Get busy livin', or get busy dyin'. We will prevail and the world is a fine place and worth fighting for."

My internal monologue doesn't always differentiate between Freeman movies very well.

So I stopped by the homestead. Mina had been here the day before, leaving early Monday morning, and I swear I could still smell her. Evidence of our weekend was still around. Her bathing suit hung in the bathroom. There were Thai takeout leftovers in the fridge, the two DVDs we compro-

mised on still sitting on the coffee table (*The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Music and Lyrics*, for any who care). The empty bottle of merlot, which had turned out to be a good choice.

Bathroom first. I tried not to focus too hard on her things in there, the various lotions, cleansers, unguents, and oils scattered around that I'd never heard of in my single days. Her toothbrush, her makeup, the bandanna she used to keep her hair out of her eyes when she washed her face. I kept my attention on what I was there to do, grabbing my scant handful of toiletries (with a few additions from Mina. Who knew what a difference moisturizer makes?) and shoving them into a didi bag. Then the good stuff.

I opened up my closet. Lockpicks, because you never know when a little light breaking and entering will help out. My case of fake IDs. With no recent credit card purchases to establish them as real, eating, sleeping, cable-watching humans, they wouldn't past close inspection like they used to. They'd do, though. My police badge, and yes, it's real, though Detective Saroyan, who had the name associated with it, had vanished into the Bermuda Triangle for all anyone knew.

Those were easy. The last thing I wasn't so sure about. I stared at my aquarium for a good five minutes or so, weighing my options.

I have a rectangular seventy-gallon tank in my living room about three-quarters full of water. There are a few fish squirming around in the depths, a couple catfish and algae-eaters employed to keep the whole thing relatively clean. The marquee inhabitants are my three axolotls—salamanders to you and me—two of which were resting lightly on the gravel floor while one had crawled partway out to sun himself on a smooth section of lava rock. I've kept three of them as pets since the old days, Normally neotenic—that is, they stay in an aquatic larval form into adulthood—mine had metamor-

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phosed in a misguided bid for symbolic relevance. Now they looked like grumpy pink tiger salamanders.

I wasn't looking at them, but rather the largest rock in the tank, nestled in the corner, and contemplating whether it was coming with me. Taking it was an admission that this was probably going to be pretty bad. Not taking it could be the last mistake I ever made.

To the untrained eye, it looked like a faintly glowing gray rock, pitted and rough. A rusted and sooty chain was bolted into the side, making it look like an artist's conception of Lemmy's sperm. The area of the tank where it sat was crusted in more of the same glowing rock, heaviest in the places where the stone sat and stretching outward like silicon algae. Only the chain was completely clean, though with the fire damage, it looked like something from a shipwreck. The axolotls often crawled on the rock, and though I might have been imagining it, I think they had started glowing slightly.

To an illuminated eye, it was blasphemy. The rock was the Genesis Stone, coming straight from the moon to my aquarium. It was one of the more powerful objects in existence, and responsible for at least one apocalypse back in '69. It had been bolted to the Chain of the Heretic Martyr, the same thing that had bound Joan of Arc, Maid of Orleans, schizophrenic and saint, to the stake. Sticking these objects together was pretty much sacrilege to any number of mystery cults. Since it had been done as a deliberate act of heresy by the head of a Discordian splinter sect, it sort of fit.

To my eye, it was the thing I had attempted suicide with. Of course, I couldn't even do *that* in a relatively normal way. The most insulting part was that I never even left a note, not that I had anyone who would've read it back then. I did now, and she was scared and in jail. And she needed me.

I could do this for her. One last thing.



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I grabbed the chain and hauled the Genesis Flail (as the unrepentant D&D player in me had named it) out, mopping up the stinking salamander water with a towel. The axolotls watched me with Permian hunger. The stone was lighter than it should have been, something to do with the moon's gravity, but then it was pretty much all magic at that point and could be safely ignored. Sticking all my supplies in the trunk and resigning myself to having some moon rock start growing back there, I got behind the wheel and drove down Pacific Coast Highway toward Los Angeles.

On the stereo: "Local Boy" by the Rifles.

I should probably explain. If you know me, you know I can't stand most music because it's pretty much just occult viewpoints with guitar solos. The only band this isn't true for is Boston, because Boston's music somehow manages to be shallower than one of those plastic wading pools with Spongebob on it. The problem is, music is one of those things Mina knows about. A *lot* about. And she's a total snob to boot. Can't stand Boston for the exact reason I like them so much. So every time she comes up to see me or I go down to see her, she filches my iPod and packs it full of what she calls good music.

Only I can't turn off my brain, even when I'm supposed to be retired. So I'm trying to listen to this stuff and all I can think is, "Oh, these guys are just mouthpieces for the Flat Earth Society, or the Merovingians, or the Ordo Templi Orientis." So where she listens to "Local Boy" and hears a poppy punky tune about a veteran returning home and finding it's not the same place he left, I hear a song about the hashish trade as related to the Assassins, a thousand-year-old Islamic death cult. It's exhausting.

I'd go point by point on the lyrics, but I can't, since the record companies will sue at even the slightest hint of unfair use. I'd probably be in the clear if not for *Geffen v. Spade*,

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where a guy was actually sued over his internal monologue. And the record company won! Garnished his dreams for the rest of his life.

The Rifles are all about the Assassins and once you know that, their song “Peace and Quiet” becomes downright threatening.

So there I was on PCH, which, at the risk of hyperbole, is the most beautiful stretch of anything in the galaxy. To the east, you have the greens and golds of the California coast. As you go north, you start with Southwestern desert, which fades into something almost Mediterranean, going up into full *Twin Peaks* pine forest. To the west you have the endless blue of the Pacific, with alternating sandy beaches and rocky cliffs. Because of the storm on Friday California was still in the middle of a rain hangover, which is the exact opposite of what it sounds like. Meant the sky had been scrubbed and the cool wind blowing inland kept the shine.

Meant that when PCH turned into the 101 and I pulled into Los Angeles, the skyscrapers downtown were glittering in the sun and the snowcapped peaks of the San Gabriels made the whole thing look like a tourism ad. Made me wonder why I had ever left.

Oh, right. All those really dangerous people I stabbed in the back for about ten years while I was making a living. Thanks for the reminder, Morgan Freeman. “You’re welcome, and I hope I can see my friend and shake his hand.”

I took the 134 over into Glendale, a neighborhood chiefly known for having a mall, which I’ll probably have to explain to children someday as being a lot like the internet, but minus the porn and cat pictures. I wasn’t after the mall, mostly because I knew about the internet. I’m savvy that way. No, my destination was a little restaurant on a quiet street several blocks north. Glendale was mostly a grid, but lots of trees

were planted around to make it feel like Mayberry or something. Now they were rattling in the wind.

The restaurant was nothing special from the outside. The sign said Sevan, and most people would have thought that was a typo; it was actually the name of a lake in the old Armenian Empire, back when that was more than a cruel joke at a Kardashians's expense. I headed inside, passing the mixture of balding Armenian men and younger hipsters there for lunch. The dining room was wide and pleasant, carpeted in blue with tables lined up in a grid pattern just like the streets outside. I went to the register, where a bored and impeccably groomed teenager was sullenly waiting. Two older men chatted over the grill, searing a variety of garlicky meats.

"What can I get you?" she asked me, barely looking up.

I felt like an asshole. I always did. "I have a problem with the Reptilians."

She jumped, focusing her big brown eyes on me with a mixture of pity and wonder. "What?"

"I need to see Dan. That's the code, right? It hasn't changed?"

The two older men had turned from the grill and one was staring at me. They were familiar, and were probably trying to place me. Problem was, I was in a big duckbill bandage and the Reagan hair was gone. I looked like any other schmuck. Well, not *any* other schmuck, but I didn't look like me, or the me they knew.

One of them said something in Armenian to the girl. She nodded, still nervous, and said, "Come with me."

I went around the side of the counter, past the grill, and followed the girl. The door was nearly hidden by a pantry of ingredients and a bulletin board covered in flyers and pushpins. She opened it to reveal an office that was almost big enough for half of me.

The impressive thing was that it held a man who was eas-

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ily three of me, all crammed behind his desk. I never figured out how he managed to get in and out of that office. I imagined it had something to do with wormholes.

Dan Onanian was my lawyer. He had been since my first arrest about seven years back on a B&E gone wrong. I don't think it helped that the whole operation was an attempt to give all the chimpanzees at the LA Zoo Brazilian waxes. The Knights of the Sacred Chao can be a little odd. Anyway, I was the one in charge of actually breaking the locks on the side entrance and the cages. I was also the one left holding the bag when that little errand predictably went down the tubes. I mean, who could have foreseen that attempting to conduct painful grooming procedures on murder machines with seven times the strength of your average high school linebacker would be a terrible idea?

I got his name from another contact. Dan came down to the lockup and had me out on bail in two hours. Made sure everyone knew it was my first offense, and I was out with a small fine and time served.

Granted, our second meeting was a little awkward, since I got caught with stolen goods under a different identity. It was just a shipment of Hello Kitty heads I was delivering to the Order of the Morning Star, but that meant that this time I was arrested as Eli Simms. Dan blinked a couple times when he saw me, then rolled with it, introducing himself and pulling my ass out of trouble yet again.

Dan wasn't exactly clued-in. He knew there was something big out there—well, bigger than him, anyway—and he was friendly to folks like me. He was discreet, affordable, and best of all, good at what he did—so pretty much the perfect lawyer for my purposes.

He did have some weird beliefs, though.

Dan's face split into a huge grin when I came through the

door. "Mike! Or is it Ivan this time?"

"It's Bob now, actually," I said, reaching across his desk and shaking his pillow-like hand as I got hit in the face with a solid wall of cologne. "Bob all the time."

"Bob. I like it. What happened to your face?"

I touched the bandage like I had to be reminded it was there. "Prizefighting."

"Sure, sure it was. You look thin. Much too thin. I'll get you some chicken."

Before I could stop him, he shouted something in Armenian through the closed door. Oh well. I was a little hungry anyway. I sat down in a slumping wooden chair across from his cluttered desk.

Dan rubbed his bristly goatee. "What can I do for you today, Bob? You're not calling me from the county jail, so you're better off than you are normally."

I tried to focus. Behind Dan was an impressive psycho wall setup. Pictures of people, some connected to one conspiracy or another, some just weirdos he was fixated on, were linked with lines of colored string and annotated with brightly colored sticky notes and articles from various news sources, some clipped from the paper, others printed out from one of his wingnut websites. Some of which, to my embarrassment, I'd made up.

"I'm retired."

"Are you an internet billionaire? Did you make an app?"

"No, I'm just not doing... what I used to do."

"That's good, because that was crazy. Really crazy. What are you doing here? Seems like it's not just to catch up?"

"A friend of mine was arrested."

"Breaking and entering? Malicious mischief? I love the cases you used to bring me, Bob. Always so interesting."

"Murder."

Dan's jaw dropped, making his jowls wobble. The door opened and the girl who had led me back leaned in with a styrofoam plate covered with rice, several generous chunks of chicken breast, a little hummus, pita, and tabbouleh. I thanked her and tore into it. "You going to say anything else there, Dan? Or just stare at me?"

"I'm sorry, it's just... murder. That's more than you usually come in here with."

"Yes, but you *are* a criminal defense attorney. You've dealt with that kind of thing."

"Of course." He watched me eat, making up his mind up. "Who killed who?"

"Not who they're saying. They arrested my girlfriend."

Dan laughed. "You have a girlfriend? Come on, Bob. You don't have to front here."

"I have a girlfriend." I thought some detail might help convince him, but didn't think about how it would sound until it was too late. "She's a model."

Dan laughed louder. "It's all right. You like her. I get it. You know, you should date my cousin. She's about your age. Very pretty. She has never killed anyone, and has never even been arrested. Are you Armenian? Doesn't matter, you can fake it well enough to fool my grandmother."

"Dan, seriously. My girlfriend, who is a breathing carbon-based lifeform, was arrested for a murder she—and I cannot possibly stress this enough—did not commit."

He stopped laughing, which was good because his chins were wiggling around in a very distressing way. The twinkle in his eye said he didn't believe me entirely, but did believe there was a living woman arrested for a murder she might not have done. "All right. What happened? Do you know the specifics?"

"I know a little. The victim's name is Neil Greene, who

she doesn't know, but I do. Did." I tried to explain Neil as best I could in between minty bites of tabbouleh. Just the highlights: powerful bureaucrat, religious Satanist, high-ranking Freemason.

"I see."

The gears were whirring behind his shiny forehead. I knew what he was going to ask before he said it, so I figured I'd just cut it off at the pass. "The Reptilians are not involved."

"You're certain?"

"Well, no. Not a hundred percent. But I'd look at a lot of other groups before them."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Those masks are very convincing."

"And there's that."

Dan was obsessed with Reptilians, and had been since before I had met him. It's probably not the most normal thing to be obsessed with, but then, my frame of reference is a little off. Reptilians, for those who might have slept through that portion of the crazy homeless subway guy's rant, are a kind of alien. Well, they might actually be highly evolved dinosaurs, but that hypothesis was advanced before we knew that *T. rex* basically looked like a giant angry chicken. So they're featherless, but hey, maybe they shave all over. You don't know.

They were first sighted during alien abductions. While the little Grays—the ones you're familiar with, who've been guest-starring in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *X-Files*, and those talking-baby commercials—are working the anal probe like Daniel Plainview in a virgin field, the Reptilians are standing in back observing and issuing the occasional order. I always wondered what the hell they could be saying back there. "He's not really wincing enough. Did you use too much lube?" or "Jesus, Gary, turn left at the colon or you're going to rupture something!"

After these initial sightings (which someone noticed

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looked a lot like hypothetical models of a humanoid dinosaur descendent, again, minus the feathers which we now know would probably be there like New Wave body hair), the Reptilians developed a life of their own. They branched out from merely being the shadowy overlords of the Grays to appearing in conspiracies in their own right. It was like a paranormal bar mitzvah, minus the awkward reading of the Torah and the terrible DJ. Pretty soon they had basically become the bad guys in *V*, wearing human masks and infiltrating various world governments for nefarious-yet-murky purposes.

And yes, I know dinosaurs were not reptiles, but that's what they're called and it's a little late to go back now. So until they appear on the scene and tell us what their equivalent of "Native American" is, they're going to be called Reptilians. They're distinct from the lizard people who supposedly live under Fort Moore Hill downtown. Probably. I don't know. I've never seen a family tree.

The point of all this is that Dan Onanian firmly believes in Reptilians, blaming them for everything from the tax code to the time he left the driver's side window of his BMW down before LA's one rainstorm of the year. He was monitoring several people in the city he was convinced were wearing high-quality latex masks. He was correct in several instances, although two of them were wearing masks for totally unrelated reasons.

Dan probably would have been horrified to learn that I had worked for three different Reptilian splinter groups in addition to the Little Green Men, who had been Reptilian-free since 2003 (slogan pending). I never brought it up and lied whenever he asked me point blank. Dan was too good a lawyer to lose over something as silly as totally justified feelings of betrayal.

"All right. You know my usual retainer," he said.



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I already had his money stuffed in an envelope and put that on the desk.

“I have to ask the obvious question here. You’re certain that she didn’t know this man?”

“She said the cops claimed to have evidence that they knew each other. That they were sleeping together.”

“Were they?”

“Of course not.”

“You’re certain?”

“I know her.”

“You can know someone and not know someone. You of all people should know that.”

“Believe me, I can spot a phony from a mile off. Mina is exactly what she appears to be. Once you meet her, you’ll understand.”

He took the envelope off the desk and put it in the top drawer. He didn’t bother counting it, such was the trust between us. “On that subject, I should go meet my new client. You included money for her bail?”

“There’s no bail. I guess because it’s a murder.”

Dan shook his head. “It might be high, but there should still be a number. Is this her first offense?”

I nodded. “I mean, it wouldn’t shock me if there was something on her record, like getting arrested at a demonstration or something.”

He waved that off. “She’s never been arrested for any felonies?”

She could still vote. Somewhere else that might have meant no felonies, but in California, as long as you weren’t actually in prison or on parole, you were good to go. Since most politicians are criminals, it cuts down a bit on the hypocrisy of the whole affair. I knew she could vote because she treated it like an important thing and had been horrified

when she found out I didn't. I tried to tell her that it didn't matter who was actually in office, since it wasn't like there were term limits for Secret Masters. She made certain to note that men who didn't vote had much less sex than men who did, and after that I boldly cast a write-in vote for C. Montgomery Burns in the next election. I figured if I was going to be ruled by a terrifying plutocrat, it might as well be the most terrifying one of all.

She probably would have mentioned if she had been arrested for any felonies. Or had a parole officer. Or time spent in the joint. She didn't have any tattoos, let alone a badass spiderweb on her elbow. Mina wasn't the felonious type. "Never."

"That is a little odd. You're certain she hasn't angered the Reptilians?"

The Guardian Servitors of the Anorectic Praxis, sure. Possibly the Kosher Nostra, Freemasons, and the Knights Templar, but... "Nope."

Dan began the geologic process of getting to his feet.

"Wait, Dan. I want to see her first, and it's probably best if we go separately, you know? Can you give me like an hour's head start here?"

"Certainly. I should look into things a bit before I head over anyway."

I stood up, still holding my plate, which, by now, was as clean as I was going to make it. "Thanks." I took his hand, and knew I would be smelling his cologne on it for the rest of the day.

He smiled at me. "Don't worry. I've gotten guilty men out of murder raps. An innocent woman should be cake."

"Famous last words, Danny. Thanks for the chicken."

I went out the door, where the teenaged girl was staring at me in concern. "You're not his cousin, are you?" I asked her.

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She jumped a little. “Uh, no. Niece.”

“Okay, good. Stay in school.”

The two men at the grill ignored me. They were probably used to the drill, knowing the kinds of people Dan brought into the restaurant. Kind of made me proud, that I was the riffraff here. I almost wished one of them would adopt a '50s Dad voice and tell me to “Get out of here, you hooligan.” That’s right. I’m teaching your town to dance, old man, and I’m romancing your daughter while I’m at it. And we’re going to save the community center, defeat the bullies, and help that friendly alien make it home.

I got back in my car and drove down to the county jail, a building just as squat and ugly as it sounds. I didn’t know much about women’s incarceration, apart from what I had learned in academic treatises like *Caged Heat*. I was fairly certain that the pillow fights would be kept to the bare minimum and the showers were probably not as soft-focusy. I didn’t want to think about what jail was really like, so I had to try to drown out the worry for Mina. I’d get her out of there. Fast as I could.

On the stereo: “What’s My Scene” by the Hoodoo Gurus.

A little on the nose, if you ask me, since it was the lament of a double agent working for the Office of Naval Intelligence. Sorry, ONI, no one is buying what you’re selling.

Bordered by the 101 freeway to the south and railroad tracks to the east, the county lockup was the kind of place where hope was shot in the back of the head and buried in an unmarked grave. It almost could have been an office park, if not for the larger, intimidating structure with barred windows growing behind it, like the big scary goon looming behind the little mastermind. I parked a block away, because I’m not a total idiot. No reason to lock your car behind another layer of security when you can just have it on the street.

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I popped the trunk and opened up my bag, sifting through the IDs. Who was I today? I squinted over at the jail like it would tell me something. Who ran the jails these days? It was one of those institutions that passed through a lot of hands because there was a lot of really obvious power in controlling how people were incarcerated. Before I left, LA's jails were squarely in New Camelot hands, but I'd been gone for a year. No telling who ran the place now, or how happy they'd be to find an errand boy suddenly back from the dead.

I decided to play it more or less safe and grabbed my LAPD ID, slipping it into my wallet and putting the badge wallet in my other pocket. I approached the jail confidently. A lot can be said for simple confidence, and I'd gotten into a ton of places just by playing it Bogart. Most people don't want trouble, and if you look like you belong, they're not going to challenge you.

The front of the jail was almost the exact foyer you'd see in an office. Floor-to-ceiling windows with some stencils on the glass. But just inside, instead of a pretty receptionist, there was a metal detector and large men with guns on their hips. The glass was probably bulletproof, but that wasn't something I planned on testing. I went up to the detector, emptied my pockets into the plastic tray, and went right through.

It's times like this I'm glad I don't have a plate in my head or an adamantium-laced skeleton. The guard gave me a look, but I could tell he couldn't see much past the white duckbill on my face.

"Boating accident," I said to him.

"Uh-huh."

As I gathered my stuff up from the tray and put it back in my pockets, I glanced around and met the eyes of another guard. She was staring at me hard and speaking into a walkie-talkie. Probably a coincidence. Could have been talking about

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anything, right? I gave her a thin smile and started down the hallway, fighting the urge to walk too fast.

The hallway took a turn up ahead. I figured I could get my bearings in a little while. My steps echoed off the sterile walls and floors and I tried to pretend that this was just another day in my life as an LAPD officer. I had been here lots of times before, and not as a prisoner. I fit in here. I belong here, on this side of the cage.

Two guards came around the corner ahead of me, looking like they were trying to stare me down into the floor. One said something into his radio, but all I could hear was a mutter and a click. Maybe I should leave talking to Mina to her lawyer and get the hell out. I turned, only to find two more of the guards from the security checkpoint coming up quick, blocking the path to the exit. I was trapped in the hall. There were a few doors around, but it wasn't like they wouldn't see me go in one of them.

"Nicholas Zorotovich?" one of the guards said, using the name I employed in my association with the Russian Mob.

And that's when my reflexes screwed me over. "Huh?" I answered.