

No Middle Ground

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CHAPTER 1

FILE: George.DOC:

George Liddell squeezed his car keys tight enough to dig a perfect imprint into the palm and third finger of his right hand. The house key slit the skin to the bone, and if he felt it, it didn't show. Sweat beaded his upper lip. His hands trembled. His tie felt too tight.

In the back of the courtroom, George sat stunned, mouth open, air moving between his teeth in short bursts, inchoate words struggling to be heard above the buzz of criminal court proceedings. Probation requirements and community service volleyed back and forth between the prosecutor and the judge, the last official requirements before the release of the defendant.

George began to stand, wondering what the protocol was for an objection from the back where he was supposed to remain silent, and before he knew it, the words were out, "Wait, that's not what you told me."

The gavel hit the bench the moment he said the word "me," like a hard period at the end of the sentence, and had nothing to do with what he said, but was simply the final blow to the hearing.

Now he was standing, the tops of heads like a river before him, multicolor cotton and polyester strangers enlisted to critique and judge.

"Wait a minute!" He said it as if the whole proceeding would suddenly stop and ask for his opinion. It did nothing

more than annoy the people sitting close to him.

“You can’t do that!” he yelled pointing to the judge, blood staining the top of his shoes. “You call this justice? You sit there and turn ‘em out as if he’s done nothing wrong! You said he’d get time.” George stepped into the aisle focused on the bench, the bronze Florida state seal, the American flag, and the lie.

The bailiff was halfway to him when the gavel hit the bench, holding the top of his portable radio as if it might leap from his belt, and sizing George up for a fight.

The judge leaned across the bench, pointing his gavel, “Whoever you are sir, control yourself, or I’ll have you removed.”

George took three more steps down the aisle. “*Me* removed, you were supposed to have him removed!” George turned on the assistant state attorney, “This why you wouldn’t return my calls, because you made a damn *deal*?” The bailiff grabbed George by the hands and pulled them behind his back. “What? I don’t exist now?” George yelled again, “Are you *morons*?”

Assistant State Attorney Lucas gathered his papers, straightened his double-breasted jacket and flicked lint from the sleeve.

George stood in shock. He failed to understand the sentencing, where the accountability was paid, how he could be ignored despite his outbursts, how every promise shoved down his throat over the past year had suddenly vanished. At that very moment it all came together, the war fought with Jerry, a little boy who had just run out of advocates. The last eight months swept through George’s memory, rewinding to the after-shocks of his son’s victimization.

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George couldn’t remember their faces, or any details the Wednesday afternoon local sex crime investigators stood in his kitchen to deliver the bad news. George thought there

were three of them, could have been only two, and the last real memory was the business card and case number he was handed. Case numbers were official, more than an inquiry or suspicion. He did remember being asked for a consent search of his home, Jerry's room specifically. Thirty minutes later he was given an inventory list of letters and several Polaroids of Jerry and Harley together, nude. Investigators finished it off, as best as he could recollect, with a summary of John Harley's crimes and the evidence, professionally recited details George didn't know, or want to know in the end.

Standing at the kitchen sink, he had noted the dishrag, the hand soap, the two white Corning wear plates in the drain board and the cartoon jelly jar. He tried to comprehend the picture they painted, tried not to. Gripping the cool porcelain at the edge of the sink, George stared through the window at the backyard, at the hidden graves of dead pets, and the rusted swing set. Waves hit, waves of information that infected his life to the very marrow of his bones.

George turned on the faucet, watched the water swirl down the drain, felt his soul pleading to go with it. He stuck his head under to allow it to wash over his ears, the sound muffling the voices behind him, dizzy from dish soap just drained from the sink.

The investigator watched George disconnect, watched him lose his sense of control, and watched him lose his son. Even though Jerry was alive and there was no physical injury, the investigator knew the depth of the loss, the hidden scars to come, the silences, and distances and avoided conversations. He recognized the signs when the denial lost its grip and was swept away by fear, witnessed the final break down when there was nothing left for George to hold on to.

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"Did you even read the case, or didn't that matter... to

any of you? What about Jerry, does he matter? Explain it Lucas. You were supposed to prosecute, be on our side!”

Lucas slipped documents in his leather brief, checked his watch, and shook his assistant’s hand.

The gavel hit the bench. “Bailiff, remove that man from my courtroom.”

George felt the bailiff pull him back, felt the eyes of the gallery visitors as he was dragged from the courtroom.

John Harley turned, threw his arms in the air, grinning a mouthful of teeth at the crowd, at George and his mealy objections. He wanted George to see the wink, the shit encrusted victory, and know he was going to walk. He had pissed on him with the court’s permission and in a room full of moral spectators, and most of all he wanted George to look him in the eye and know it was all true, how it satisfied and lingered on his lips. He wanted video fed through his eyes, every detail, so George could experience it the way he did.

George lunged, imagined his hands reaching for Harley’s throat, squeezing, crushing the life out of him. He fought against a bailiff who out weighed him by fifty pounds, whose hard hands made his wrists numb, and who practically pulled him off his feet as he was dragged through the door and shoved down the hall.

Still grinning, Harley watched George disappear through the doorway. He saluted the bailiff before turning to face the judge, peeling off the quiet, respectful demeanor, lightly drumming the defense table with his forefingers, a subtle shifting of the shoulders. Soon he would be listening to his music, turned up loud, deafening the world around him, the bass vibrating in his chest until he was out of breath from the air guitar. Center stage, all eyes on him, Harley knew his name was the last on their collective lips as gallery witnesses returned to their mundane lives. That he had made sure of.

He had managed to disarm their speculations despite the evidence and witness testimony against him, and even though his gentle façade failed to earn him an acquittal, it

appeared to work in the sentencing phase. His ultimate release caused a murmur within the courtroom loud enough so that the judge slammed the gavel to the bench several times to gain control. George's reaction was the ultimate spectator sport the fine folks in the gallery had come to see.

Harley held eye contact with the judge long enough that Lucas noticed it. Harley's public defender, standing to his left, sorted through a stack of pending cases in fat manila folders, uninterested in what his client had going on behind his back. Mildly distracted by the half eaten corn beef sandwich beckoning from inside his ratty nylon bag, he was a short six months from the massive coronary that would lay him out at the bottom of the courthouse stairs, those same manila folders spread throughout the stairwell.

"Is there a problem your Honor?" Lucas asked.

Ignoring the question, Judge Bridges gathered the skirt of his robe, tilted his chin at the court reporter, and headed for chambers.

Gallery patrons split apart and drifted away, neither horrified nor outraged, but sedated by apathy, fatigue, and hunger. They were tired of Harley now, the deed was done, and what remained of the details of the trial would evaporate from their minds by Monday. Harley knew it because of other sex offenders he had watched featured on TV in the county jail's day room, shared with small time drug offenders, drunk drivers, and petty thieves. No one remembered the name a week after incarceration or the haggard photo mug shot for the press release. He thought about the past year and his gradual absorption into the correctional system, and his relief to be equated to nothing more than his cell number and good behavior. That's where it ended, the music in his head forcing his eyes shut, head bouncing on his shoulders until the correctional officer took his arm to escort him for out-processing and a brand new life.

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Lucas, with his hand in his briefcase, noted the exchange between Harley and the judge, and although it piqued his curiosity, he was too lazy to ask the question that begged open comment. Maybe it was nothing more than an immunized conscience that appreciated smooth trials; either way, he was too weak to get involved with fighting a judge that could make or break his career. Screwing George over was just the cost of doing business. He was glad to be rid of the case, glad to wash off the scum it had become. It had invaded his sleep and left piles of guilt deposited in the aftermath of his dreams, left him with the sudden urge to hold his hands under scalding water until they turned red.

News reporters were perched outside the courtroom, vultures waiting for the prey to die, waiting for George Liddell. Microphones and camera lights surrounded him, seized his life digitally and stripped him to expose an explanation he didn't understand.

"Mr. Liddell, how do you feel about the outcome?"

Another reporter jumped in, "Do you feel you got justice, Mr. Liddell?"

George stopped abruptly, his hands still shaking. "Would you?" George glared. "You'd be satisfied if the state let the man walk that raped your kid? No, I'm not *satisfied*. Do they pay you to ask stupid questions, or did you think that one up on your own?" Fists clenched, he forced them to his side as if they might animate on their own and begin assaulting the crowd. George shoved through the pack of reporters, slid into the elevator, and three floors later, worked his way through the covered parking garage in a mental fog. He thought briefly of killing them all, erasing the last year from their collective memories. He was acutely aware of suffering through the roller coaster ride one more time, the slow ascent of a promised positive outcome, to the rapid descent of grief and anger, but this was the end, empty, unfulfilled, betrayed.

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How much will money buy? Hand that old judge a stack of bills like the politicians do, know the prick was buried, rotting forever in a concrete hell. How much just to have Harley whacked? How did someone like him go about arranging something like that? Savoring the fantasy, George made phone calls in his head, collected cash from a few anemic investments. Then what, cruise the Orange Blossom Trail until some cretin stepped up to the car with an offer? That never worked. People conspiring to commit murder were always caught with grainy video and poor audio inside a car while instructing details of exactly what they wanted done as if selecting from a menu. Beaten to death. Car accident. Shotgun blast to the head. That would be nice, he thought. George could picture it in his head, the shotgun blast, Harley headless.

He sat behind the wheel of his ten year old Chevy, amid decomposing seat filler and dirty floor mats as if waiting for someone to give him permission to turn the engine over, but the keys just rotated in his hand, grinding the flesh again. He jabbed the key in the ignition and suddenly pounded both fists on the steering wheel, "Lying bastards!" The words were screamed at the windshield, blood from his hand, and spit, clinging to the glass.

Dark shadows rubbed the side of his car as he drove through the garage under dull overhead lights, winding around, circling deeper, level by level to the exit. The ticket attendant took the bloody parking stub, asked for five dollars and waited. George fished a five from his rear pocket and handed it over. The attendant slid the five in the drawer, raised the barrier and told him to have a nice day.

Shadows from the parking garage converted to heavy overcast as George pulled onto Orange Ave. He savored the smell of rain and blacktop that slipped through the vents, thirsted for the rain, struggled to swallow, his thick, dry tongue dead between his teeth.

A gray drizzle sheeted the street like Vaseline, a collective mist that gathered and rolled across the glass. He

drove past old brick buildings and small antique shops with angle parking under moss trimmed Live Oaks, past Publix and the Winn Dixie. He drove past Lake Middle School where Jerry was struggling with bad grades and suspicious laughs from classmates, past new housing developments sequestered by brick retaining walls, and silent churches.

When phone calls weren't returned, nagging suspicions before sentencing had haunted him for well over a week. He picked through the details of conversations and pregnant silences, and realized he should have noticed the change. He considered it was his ignorance of legal protocol that led to the silence, but in the end, knew it didn't really matter what he thought. Inquiries always ended the same. That everything was fine. Fine for John Harley. Fine for the state attorney and the judge. Not for Jerry. They had promised to disinfect the last year, allow his family to heal, but Jerry remained stained and unclean.

The shakes began, modified pain that welled up in tidal waves until his upper shoulders ached. John Harley's face seemed to reflect between swipes of the windshield wipers.

George pulled the car over in front of the Ace Hardware on Magnolia Street and puked. His gut, wretched and squeezed until empty, left him panting with strings of saliva trailing from his lips, the back of his neck hot, blood pounding in his head.

She stopped directly in front of him. All he could make out were comfortable walking shoes with little blue anchors on top. He didn't think explanations would be necessary, waiting for the concerned question that came with the shoes. She stood with her arm pulled tightly around her purse, daring him to speak. Her short white hair flattened in the drizzle, wetting the little anchors on the pocket of her blouse.

He wasn't going to apologize and was annoyed she stood as if waiting for an explanation, one that he knew he wasn't about to deliver. Pursing her lips in disgust, she seemed unable to take her eyes off what she found repulsive.

He thought she was probably like that at car crashes too, slowing down to a crawl to inspect every gory detail, hungry for something to take back to friends over smoked salmon and cucumber sandwiches.

For a moment their eyes met and he craved to trade places with her, trade it all to erase that look on Jerry's face, and his own inadequacies. George grabbed the steering wheel and pulled himself back up, his mouth full of sour unsaid words. He watched her turn and disappear into the hardware store as waves of rain clouded the windshield. Eyes closed, he leaned back listening to a tempest, waiting for it to pass, hoping it might sweep him away.

FILE:Lucas.DOC:

As Lucas stepped out from the courtroom, the reporters surrounded him in a feeding frenzy, driven by George's blood in the water.

"Mr. Lucas, can you explain how two similar crimes could end up with such different outcomes?" someone barked.

"We go on the evidence to support the case. Please excuse me," he said, burrowing through bodies, lights and cameras.

"Isn't it true you allowed him to plead to lesser charges?"

Lucas stopped, tilted his head to the right so the cameras shot his best side. "Plea bargaining is part of the process. We don't think it's fair for the taxpayer to shoulder more cost than is necessary. This was a first time offence here and the community is better served by not having to pay to keep Mr. Harley confined when he can give back to the community. His probation of three years will be monitored. That's not exactly real freedom," he smiled.

"But in the Randalff case in the 5th Judicial Circuit, the sentence was five years of jail time. Here in the 9th Judicial Circuit, there's no jail time. How do you explain that?" another reporter joined in.

"Excuse me. I'm late." Lucas, hiding from the lie, slid

in to the same elevator George had found as an escape.

“Tommy, get the camera over here. How do I look?” Kelly Marks fluffed her long auburn hair and pressed her lips together to spread the lipstick, her dark Hispanic features pulling the camera to her eyes. She had been elected one of the public’s most popular field reporters from the expression in those eyes, the way they drew you in and made you care. The cameraman counted down on his fingers and pointed.

“In a dramatic end to a local story we've been covering here for the last six months, Criminal Court Judge Victor Bridges sentenced convicted child molester John Harley to two hundred hours of community service and three years probation.

“The victims’ father, George Liddell, exploded in court a little while ago, demanding John Harley get mandatory jail time, but was removed from the courtroom by order of the judge. In an on camera interview, Mr. Liddell expressed anger at the injustice his son received. Witnesses in the courtroom stated he screamed at the judge and State Attorney Lucas about the sentencing, but his questions were ignored.

“ In an earlier case two weeks ago, in the 5th Judicial Circuit, Shawn Randalff, a convicted child molester was given the maximum sentence of five years incarceration and ten years probation for essentially the same crime. When we tried to interview Judge Bridges, he would only state that he was sentencing according to guidelines.

“Is this a case of unequal justice, or weak laws? We will look into this in our upcoming in depth investigation, Truth in Justice with Rob Carrin. I'm Kelly Marks, Channel 3 News.”

FILE:Carrin.DOC:

Kelly rode the elevator to the third floor of the Channel 3 News station, having dropped the camera crew off on two for editing. She passed desks clustered in the bullpen

and smacked Rob Carrin on the head with her field notes. “You going tonight?” she asked, spinning on her heel to face him.

Rob looked up from his keyboard, “With you, anywhere, anytime.”

“Not just with me, Rob. I’m meeting Mike and Tommy at Church Street if you’re not tied up. Come to think of it, you might not want to be seen with us lowly peons now that you’ve been promoted.”

“Jealous Kelly? I didn’t know you wanted the position.”

“I’m jealous of everyone, Rob. Coveting is one of the hobbies on my application. You in?”

He could smell her perfume and the rain that followed her in from the parking lot. He leaned over to touch her hand. “Wouldn’t want to break your heart if I didn’t show.” The comment was childish, clumsy middle school words, uncontrolled and stupid. She always made him feel that way. He pulled his hand back.

“Christmas is over Rob. It’s not a gift,” she said stepping back. “The promotion hasn’t humbled you. You’re still a jerk.”

“That’s nice Kelly. I was thinking nice thoughts about you,” he winked. “Like how nice you looked today.”

“Screw the work. It’s all about the looks, right?” Rob was always a step ahead of her, his mind more focused, able to read volumes between the lines of statements people made that she was only beginning to learn how to do.

Rob felt it coming, the competition, the need to be right. “Well, how about you edit out that nasty little tirade from the Liddell interview. Maybe delete the whole segment. Just cover the high points.”

“Delete the whole segment! It’s good video Rob, it may not be the best interview, but it was as good as it was going to get.”

“Then why piss him off? You shot the interview in the head and you didn’t learn it from me. Just stick to the warm and fuzzy community spots, Kelly.” Rob turned back to the

computer.

“That would be the reason you’re an ass, Rob. He wasn’t going to talk to *anyone*.”

Rob kept typing. “Sure he would, but to someone who actually knows how to conduct an interview. Didn’t read him when he came out and you hit him with the wrong question. ‘How do you feel about the outcome, Mr. Liddell?’ Did you really ask him that? How do you think the man felt? Not to mention you lost any opportunity for follow up. Can’t just be a mouthpiece sweetheart, but...that’s why I’m the investigative reporter with my own time slot and you’re not.”

Kelly stepped back again. “God, Rob, could you shove the knife in a little deeper, it hasn’t quite reached the other side.”

Rob turned, his right hand still claw like in the typing position. “You blew it. Women either don’t want to go for the throat, or they don’t think through the questions before they come out of their mouths.” He spoke slowly as if to be sure she understood him. “Too much impulse, not enough thought process, you know? Just trying to teach you something here. And I was there. Watching over the balcony, so I know you missed the bigger story. Don’t take it personal, you know I love you.” He turned back to the keyboard to avoid her reaction and the pain he inflicted to make him feel better.

“Why do you do that?” she said holding her field notes in the air as if trying to flag a cab. “You gut me then say you love me. And you wonder why we’re not together.” The field notes smacked her thigh.

“It’s business, Kelly!” he yelled at the keyboard. Colleagues in the room stopped and began to listen in. Rob calmed, realizing they were scoring the relationship, feeding the gossip in the hallways and bathrooms. “This has nothing to do with us.” He began typing again.

“We’ve been all through this and you agreed,” she said pointing at him.

Rob stopped and looked over her shoulder. They were making mental notes and picking sides. One of those reality

shows right here at work. "Did I? I seem to remember you agreed for the both of us. Where was my input?"

Kelly looked around the room at the audience that began to collect in the aisle. "I think we're done here. I delivered the invitation. Do what you want. You always do." She turned her back and started to walk away.

"I won't guarantee I'll make it," she heard Rob say.

Kelly stopped, considered what he really meant, threw her hands up and walked out.

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Within two hours, Rob was forming an angle to pull together a story that might jump the competition, leaving the bones and bloody pieces exposed for the public to ingest at its leisure. Ratings were beginning to follow him to the top like a stray dog that had just found someone to feed it. The Liddell case made his gut twitch. Something had been missed. He could just *feel* it.

In his cubical, he began searching through the Liddell file, writing on a yellow note pad, switching from pen to keyboard as if he didn't trust either one. The hub of fresh news breaking around him was just out of hearing range, tuned out with the rest of the world as if inside a Jell-O mold.

On the screen was the Randalff case from the court of The Honorable Judge C. T. Moore. Rob compared Moore's case with Bridges, starting from the investigation through sentencing. The two cases were virtually identical except for the presiding judge. Why such different outcomes? He picked up the phone and dialed a local number.

"Hey Mitch, got a question. What's the mandatory sentencing for child exploitation?"

"It depends," said the voice on the other end, "It's broken down into categories and charges stem from that, and if the individual is found guilty, it's up to the judge, I guess. To be honest, I don't know a whole lot about it. Why do you ask?"

“Not sure yet. Thanks Mitch. Let’s grab lunch next week.” He hung up and dialed the courthouse. Entertained with musak and occasional breaks of what the court system offered those in need of guidance, Rob felt it took too long before the clerk got back to him, a sign he’d get the run around if he stayed on the line long. Okay, so he rubbed people the wrong way, but Rob knew his persistence usually won out in the end. With the investigations he brought to the public, they seemed to forgive anything if the sound bites were exciting enough. He doodled rectangles and triangles on the yellow notepad, over and over until they were dark and left an imprint on the next page. Kelly’s name surfaced on the page if it were held sideways and up to the light.

A stale response came over the line. “Judge Bridges will be in court all week and will be unavailable.” Rob understood. No interview. No surprise, but he had to give the guy a chance to be fair. He half grunted a thank you, annoyed at the brush off, and hung up. He tore the doodle sheet off the pad and threw it in the can.

A press release landed on his desk, a hollow smack, and no explanation. He instinctively began to read, followed each word to the next through the first paragraph. He stopped and looked around the room. Everyone appeared occupied with a deadline and there was no confirmation of who sent it.

An article from the Orlando Times centered on the arrest of a man at the airport who flew all the way from Delaware to meet a teenage boy he thought would accommodate his sexual needs while on a business trip to Florida. Rob learned Mr. Voss had contacted the boy via the Internet. A time and date was set to meet, but when Mr. Voss stepped off the plane, state authorities, not the thirteen year old, were waiting. His teenage contact turned out to be Special Agent Richard Cole of the Florida State Police.

According to the article Rob read, Agent Cole was making cases throughout the state with 13 arrests. Ten plead guilty and three were still pending. Child molesters had

infiltrated online services and it was no longer necessary to haunt and prowl the parks and playgrounds. Predators flipped a switch and with a little conversation, ordered up their victim like room service.

Rob leaned back. The end of the article had a hand written postmark stating that the competition got the scoop with video of the arrest when Voss stepped off the plane, airing on the 6 pm time slot. The screen saver floated around in the constant changing colored mirage of his P.C, his reflection staring back. He switched off the computer and left the building.

FILE:Mattie.DOC:

Mattie Liddell stood in the dark next to the living room window staring out at the rain beading down the glass. Tears trailed down her cheek much the same way, ignored in the midst of a silent prayer. Her lips moved softly as each word was offered and she fought the urge to abandon her faith as the realization of defeat settled in her heart. The woman reflected in the glass seemed old now, streaks of gray in her hair she didn't remember being there before. Overnight it seemed everything had changed. John Harley had aborted her life and left it to die, left her sterile of relationships. Her mind refused to accept what she had started, reasoning old excuses now without hope. The rain poured harder, pelted the glass and camouflaged her reflection, the details in her face disappearing.

Faith was easy when there was nothing to lose. Before all this, there was no cost for the belief that God would take care of them, but now she felt abandoned.

Across the wet street, neighbors filtered in from work. While eating dinner and watching the news, they'd learn of her family's defeat, shake their heads and wonder what she had done to cause it. That's why she thought she deserved the anger, now mutating to rage. A small voice in the back of her mind restated the times in the past two years when God had not interceded, quiet whispers in constant accusations

asking how she could be so stupid. *You were too busy with yourself.* How could she love this child and not see what was happening? What power did John Harley have that she didn't, and what rare gift did he offer that she couldn't? Lightning danced from cloud to cloud in finger veins.

Jerry wasn't sophisticated enough about the outside world and that was her fault, but who knew? Who knew the extent to which predators would go for a victim? Who knew? *You didn't want to know.* John Harley knew. Harley became a part of their family in transitory descent and was willing to take Jerry with him into whatever abyss awaited.

What angered her the most? Those times she encouraged Harley to involve himself in Jerry's life and placed her son in his arms and watched as he walked off with him time after time. When she thought of how many times, it sickened her. For once the lines weren't so clear. She expected to recognize the predator by his mere presence, but there was just that small twinge in the back of her mind. *You were happy to dismiss it.*

She couldn't even pinpoint everything sacrificed, because John confused them all. His relationship with her family had been so solid, applied slowly in orchestrated installments, and only now could she see his manipulation. He had manipulated each word, each smile, and each confident assurance as if he had done it a thousand times before. There were no warnings in underlying conversations. *You didn't want to know.*

"I'll be glad to take Jerry out for awhile. Don't worry about dinner, he and I will stop and grab a burger." All those times he told her, "I'll keep him overnight. We'll watch movies and play games. It will give you time to yourself, Mattie."

He never slipped up and revealed his intentions. If she weren't quite so human, perhaps she might have smelled the predator in him, the stench of rancid meat, that alarm to flee with her child, but there had been nothing. *Are you sure?* Exhausted, she struggled with her mental investigation once

more. There were no new answers to quiet the guilt. *Liar.*

She knew it was a lie, but anything that might relieve her suffering felt like a betrayal to Jerry. She needed to carry this burden as self-punishment for allowing it to happen in the first place and she didn't deserve mercy from God, or Jerry, and certainly not herself.

Mattie stood at the window, determined not to wipe away the tears. Headlights flooded the window, exposing her face as a distorted featureless thing, shunning the light.

FILE: George.DOC:

George pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition, listening to the ticking of the engine and the rain. He pressed the remote on the sun visor to the garage door and held his hand in front of his face, sticky between the fingers, blood drying to a dark crust on the knuckles. His hands dropped to his lap. He slid down into the seat and closed his eyes.

It was achy exhaustion. He thought the last time he was this tired might have been the night before trial, as if it were important to pin it down, as if it was some kind of gauge of how he was functioning. Maybe the day after the verdict, or the night he learned of Jerry's abuse. Abuse, now that was a nice word, as if Jerry were a pet tied to a tree without food or water. And good old Harley, a "person of interest" they called it, which graduated to suspect, and then what, offender?

Sitting with him at the kitchen table, he remembered discussing scripture and the failure of modern religion, and how the church was turning away from the Bible. Harley had debated him on the literal intention of the New Testament and tried his best to convince him the culture was just so different then, that there was no such thing as absolute and that everything was up to interpretation. It gave him the creeps. Looking back, he understood why Harley claimed the ground he stood. Well versed or not, the guy seemed off, just slightly, like a doorframe you'd study for a long time until

you figured out that one side was an inch higher than the other. At the time he couldn't pinpoint why he felt weird around the man. It was Mattie and Jerry's total devotion to Harley that held his suspicions at bay. Mattie said once that he was envious of John, envious of his scriptural knowledge and faith.

George laughed out loud in the Chevy with a bloody steering wheel, with the rain beating down. He laughed until his chest hurt, the laugh twisting the pain into fear.

The fine folks at church had called Harley an anointed teacher, said it for months while Harley played with kids, distracted the parents and raped. Immediately after the arrest, the whole damned congregation rallied to support him, saying it must have been a misunderstanding on the part of law enforcement, or Jerry. They insisted that an anointed teacher just wasn't capable of such things, not in their church, as if their faith was so much better than anyone else's.

Lightning lit up the house like a ghost that suddenly manifested in front of him and then just as suddenly, disappeared, hiding behind the torrential downpour and nightfall. George's mind spun on and on, questioning exactly how someone misunderstands molesting a kid. He had even asked that question out loud of people he had shared the better part of his life with. Their best answer was that it was probably a minor offense that could be cleared up with an apology and a handshake. He tried digesting that one for weeks. He looked at his friends, fellow believers, differently, suspected some of them to this day still didn't believe it, and came to that conclusion due to the lack of support during the trial. They were on their own, like today. He discovered the word "misunderstanding" was a banner of retreat for anyone who didn't want the involvement. Which seemed to be just about everyone they knew.

He was putting it off. Having to explain Harley's jubilant victory to the ones he loved. The dark garage waited, years of collected junk, boxed and piled against the walls, the

car banished to an oil stained driveway, its place filled with sports equipment, rusty paint cans, and Christmas decorations spilling from their containers. It felt like an invitation to visit the past, to remember why each thing was saved, what made it so special when he knew most of it should have been pitched.

George got out and stood in the rain, face to the sky, his eyes pinched shut, the drops stinging his skin. Wind swung in behind him, swept up his back and over his shoulders, pushing him on, pushing him in.

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She was staring out the window when he switched on the light, and he saw, from the look on her face, she already knew, gathered the tears came with the news. He felt somehow relieved, yet ashamed for being such a coward and glad that he wasn't the one to tell her their suffering was for nothing. "Who told you?"

"It's all over the news," she said turning from the window, wiping her cheek with a forefinger.

"A year... a year of pretrial motions to protect *his* rights. Suppression hearings, motions to dismiss, back door delays and now after all that the judge throws *me* out! You believe that shh..." George threw his brief case to the floor and kicked it across the room. It spun around and slid under the coffee table.

Mattie jumped and suddenly noticed the blood. "What happened to your hand?"

"Forget it," he said.

She looked back at the window, pretending not to notice his rejection. "Alright then, one of us has to tell him. I've kept him from the TV. The media has been calling for interviews. I told them no comment. For now. I don't think I can do this anymore."

"And I can!" George snapped.

Mattie shrunk away, bit at her thumbnail and waited

for the anger to peak. She wanted to tell him why it was harder for her, but kept her mouth shut. She suspected he was already familiar with her guilt.

George stared at the faded beige carpet. "This carpets got to go. Look how it's worn down to the jute over here." He rubbed the carpet with the tip of his shoe. "We talked about replacing the carpet once before..." George muttered something at the end, but Mattie didn't hear it. He glanced up. "What color you think?"

"Color?"

"Yeah, something with color. I'm sick of neutral. I'm sick of..."

He stood with his coat draped over his shoulders as if waiting for someone to tell him it was okay to leave, that walking out the door was in his best interest, and how this situation would work out without him. "I need to paint in here again, too," he added.

"You just painted a few months ago, and six months before that. It doesn't need it."

"It needs something. Washing the walls never feels clean to me."

"Blue maybe," she said, bewildered.

George stared at the carpet for what seemed a long time, then turned and walked down the hall. At Jerry's bedroom door, George knocked and opened the door to explain to his son the court's opinion of the insignificance of his life and how it had been reduced to nothing more than community service.

FILE:Bridges.DOC:

Alone in chambers, Judge Bridges packed his pipe with cherry tobacco while waiting for the computer to pull up his email. The thick leather chair, the arms worn and discolored, creaked and groaned from his weight. The screen popped up with an instant message. He read it not really paying attention. Most email came from colleges in reference to one case or another. The word DIE caught his attention

and arrested his ability to inhale.

"Kid rapists die."

Bridges obsessed on the three short words, and debated whether to bring it to the attention of authorities or not. He knew this type of email came with the job, knew people found ways to vent their angry, often threatening opinions at the decisions he made. He turned the system off.

He got up and locked the door, went back to his desk and sat down. He sat very still, like a wax statue selling museum time, then opened the bottom drawer of his desk. In the back, neatly stacked, were several magazines titled *Boy Lover*, wrapped in a brown paper bag. He unwrapped and spread them across his desk, and opened one.

With a vague smile, he petted the image on the page, his respiration quicker and more audible as his hands worked over the pages, one to the other. Wiping the perspiration from his hands across his thigh, they trembled to his belt buckle.

FILE: Carrin.DOC:

Rob knocked on the door of a 1970's ranch style, middle class home in an older established neighborhood in Orange County. It appeared the way he expected, neat, clean, all the right *things* to place this family in the book of averages. What made one family a target and not another? He thought about that question a lot and intended to find the answer if the Liddell's allowed him the interview. He should have called first, arranged an appointment, but knew they would likely hang up on him.

Rob pressed the doorbell. A gray facade seemed draped over the place as if the owners had covered it for the winter and decided not to summer here this year. The welcome mat and potted ivy by the entrance felt like a bad attempt at normalcy.

The door opened. Suspicion and annoyance on George's face conveyed that it was going to be a tough sell. Rob remembered the expression from the sentencing interview

and expected the door to slam in his face when he introduced himself. George gave him a look and invited him in, led Rob back to the family room without speaking, heavy tension pushing the walls as if he were being led to an execution. Rob stood at the doorway waiting, talking in his head, reviewing questions, and hoping to stay long enough to get answers. Wood smoke perfumed the room with sautéed garlic and onions that drifted from the kitchen. Solid middle class smells. As if pushed, Rob began talking.

“I understand your reluctance to speak to anyone in the media, Mr. Liddell, and normally I wouldn't impose like this sir, but I feel this issue deserves better coverage than what it's gotten. My intention here is to do an expose' on the problem, you know, get it to the forefront of the public eye? The best way is to bring it to a personal level, you know, one people can associate with. I also think it's important to alert the public to what seems to me a real miscarriage of justice. I've been following your case and the three cases before it in Judge Bridge's district and I have to tell you, something isn't right about it.” Rob talked fast to get everything out before he was cut off and kicked out.

George turned, “You do, huh?” He wasn't sure why he invited him in, could have been the anger and the need to peel it off on someone else.

“If you're willing, I'd like to include you in the story. Tell your side,” Rob said slowing down. He sat on the edge of the sofa with his hands clasped, resting his arms on his knees, submissive, waiting.

George stabbed at the half-eaten logs in the fireplace with a metal poker, pushing them to arouse the coals underneath. The metal poker clinked against the andirons and dove into the logs sending sparks into the chimney. The logs caught fire again.

“I had to explain to him why no one cared,” George started, his voice soft, “I tried to give him a reason I didn't even understand. Any idea how that feels, Mr. Carrin?” George was asking with his back to Rob. He poked the logs

again. It sounded as if he was talking to himself and it took Rob a second to realize he was being asked a question.

"No, sir, I can't even imagine it." Rob watched George squeeze the poker.

"Neither can I. We, his mother and I, were hoping to end it, but it's still here and I don't know how to get rid of it. Like a bad guest that won't leave. Don't guess you have any answers in that notebook there?"

"No, sir, I wish I did." He wondered how George knew he was going to write without turning around.

"So do I." George replaced the poker in the tool rack and melted into a recliner next to Rob defeated, the life draining out to an uncomfortable silence.

Rob opened up his notebook and pulled out the pen wedged in the spirals. "I have all the facts of the case, but what I'd like to do is get your perception on the system and what you feel could be done to improve the outcome. What reason did they give for pleading Harley out?" He wrote down the question without looking up.

"You think they gave *me* a reason? You think Lucas gave me a reason? He didn't. I've got nothing, Mr. Carrin, no facts, nothing that makes any sense, and you, you have what they want you to have," George leaned across the arm of the recliner on his elbow, his finger pointing to Rob's chest, "See, Lucas didn't tell you about the conversations we had behind closed doors, the promises and expectations... the lying prick." He leaned back stiff, the muscles set hard in his jaw, the furrows deepening in his forehead. "I asked him, 'can you guarantee Jerry's safety, that this monster stays behind bars and we can stop living in fear?' I asked him, 'Do you have what you need to do that?'" George shot forward leaning over in Rob's face, hands gripped to the padded armrests, "and the prick sat there, as close as you are to me, saying 'Oh yes, Mr. Liddell, he won't see the light of day for a long time!'"

Motionless, Rob sat locked on the drama that spewed from George's mouth, spit settling on his cheeks in a fine mist. Eyes wide, George stretched his neck to get a little

closer, as if just spitting on him wasn't enough, that maybe a bite would be more satisfying.

"Do you think he knew all along? Do you think he was saying to himself how *easy* it was to stuff us full of crap, knowing all along the outcome? Do you think Mr. Carrin?"

Rob was a little frightened. George was close enough that Rob could smell his breath, sour and hostile.

Agitated, George sprang from the chair, reliving the details of the conversation. He retrieved the fireplace poker again, squeezing until his knuckles turned white. Holding it above his head, threatening some invisible enemy, he dropped it toward the floor, flipped it back up, over and over again. Held with such control, his eye concentrated on the tip as it cut through the air.

Rob felt compelled to distract him, didn't want to end up being the victim George wanted to target; his face replaced with Harley's, or the state attorney's, or God knows who. "Now that it's over, where do you go from here?" Rob didn't think about the question before he asked it, but thought about it now, and how the question just might be gasoline thrown to the fire in George's mind revealing a plot of revenge Rob didn't want to know about.

"Who said it's over?" George gazed at the tip of the poker as if everything had suddenly righted itself.

Rob heard revenge in "*Who said it's over?*" George was going to spew his plan right in his lap and there he'd be, trying to escape, praying to get to the police before George realized he had confided in the wrong person and now had to kill him for knowing about it. Rob was staring at him, his mouth opened, the hamster on the wheel of his brain racing as fast as the little legs would go.

"I was under the impression the state attorney was satisfied with the outcome and wouldn't appeal it. Do you know something to the contrary?" His mouth had detached from his brain and was now working on its own. He cringed waiting for the answer, making up his own, imagining every possible scenario of how to successfully kill a man in a middle

class family room.

“Oh, I don’t know. Nobody really cares what I think. Never have.” George placed the poker back against the fireplace.

Rob took a deep breath and turned to a new page on his notebook. He closed his eyes to pull himself together before starting the interview again. “With your permission, I would like to run your story in an expose' I'm working on. It's a multipart segment the station is starting this week. I'm interviewing several people, both families and law enforcement. Who knows, it might keep another family from going through what you did.”

“What more do you need?”

“Just an on camera interview. To say what you think needs said.” Rob felt this might appeal to him, but the cold silence corrected that assumption.

“Then the whole damn world will know.”

Rob looked at the TV. “They already know, Mr. Liddell. You've been on camera in every promo for the six PM airtime.” He glanced at his watch. It was five forty-five.

George took the remote from the end table and turned on the TV. They watched George's life unfold, watched video of him anxiously wading through reporters before being forced to stop and explain what happened to his family. His words echoed through waiting need, bloody chum feeding the crowd still not quite satisfied.

Rob felt this story could really go somewhere. He saw it in George's face. Saw it in the reaction of his colleagues.

George sat in his recliner seemingly mesmerized by a Lexus commercial, \$399.00 a month, no money down, pre-approval required. “There's a car for you,” he muttered at the TV. A news spot followed about the Mars rover, computer graphics showing it crawling on the surface of the red planet, searching for life. George sat forward rolling the remote in his hand, as if the mars rover was about the most important thing he had ever seen. “Think they'll find it?” he asked. Rob looked at him confused. He shrugged his shoulders. George

added, "Bugs maybe, green slime. Don't think they're expecting high-rises."

Rob looked up at a photo of ten year old Jerry on the mantle of the fireplace. His blonde hair layered around his face, accented the deep dimples in his smiling cheeks. From the family photos in the room, Jerry took after his mother.

"He's a nice looking boy, Mr. Liddell."

"One of the reasons he was targeted," George said looking up at the photo. "Had that picture taken before John blew into town. See how happy that boy is? That boy is gone, my boy."

"How's that, the reason I mean?" Rob asked.

There was a seemingly endless silence after George clicked off the TV and stood in front of the fire again, staring into the flames. "He was the target of a preferential predator. That's what they call it. Preferential, situational, all nice clean names that don't rub the real stink on anyone. Ever notice how they've sanitized it so it's more politically correct?"

Rob looked up from his notebook wondering if he was supposed to answer the question.

George continued, still staring into the flames. "We knew John Harley. Thought we did. He was the new youth pastor at our church. John was one of those people Jerry could go to if he needed someone to talk to, when talking to us was beneath him. I thought it was fine, that hell, he was safe...he came to the house regularly for dinner and Jerry seemed to like him a lot. So did Mattie, my wife." George paused as if reflecting on the last statement.

Rob sensed something there, but didn't interrupt.

George went on, "Jerry talked about him all the time and they'd take little trips to different places like the zoo and museums, places I didn't have the time for. Not in my wildest imagination did I ever think John was..." George turned slightly, as if wanting to look over his shoulder, but not committed to it. "When you walk into the house and see the detectives sitting there, you know something terrible has

happened. You know it has. I refused to believe it when they hit me with it. The low life.” George sat in the recliner, rubbing at a stain on the arm, rubbing harder and harder with each stroke. “The church contacted lawyers, Harley contacted lawyers, everyone contacted lawyers. Seems everyone had protection but Jerry. Pastor Warner, I called him a...I couldn’t understand why we weren’t told first, knew we wouldn’t believe it. Probably right.” A dent began to form in the fabric.

“It kicked the wind out of me. A train at seventy miles an hour in the chest and no warning,” George bent forward, uncomfortable and tense. “Mattie absolutely denied John could do what he was accused of. Defended him long after I was convinced. Insisted she knew him better than anyone, said he wouldn’t do...you know, what they said.

“I think I called the detective a liar to his face, but you know cops don’t come to your house unless it’s bad.” He sat back.

“After they started to explain it, I think I stopped listening, you know? My mind went back to the grades that started to slip, change in attitude. And here I was writing it off as puberty. Isn’t that stupid? Just stupid. I... I tried to push it out of my head as if it would make it all disappear, but then...” George’s voice went soft. He stared into the blank screen of the TV. “I’m standing in the doorway of the bathroom, staring down at the floor. Jerry’s bleeding out bad from his wrists. I can hear my voice screaming for Mattie to call 911.”

Rob suddenly quit writing. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“No, don’t guess you would,” George sighed, pulling out of a trance. “We kept that out of the media, but then it’s not about Jerry anymore, it’s about *him*. The focus is always about Harley.” George looked up as if to confirm that truth in Robs’ eyes.

“How is he doing now?”

George rubbed at the wrinkled stain again. “Jerry? Goes to school, eats occasionally, avoids us. Refuses help

from anyone. I know it's because he doesn't think he's worthy. He won't talk to me. I don't know if it's because he doesn't trust us or he loathes us." The incessant rubbing stopped. George gazed over Rob's shoulder as if concentrating, and occasionally looking Rob in the face to be sure he was listening.

"When he was in the hospital, Lucas came to see him. That man stood there looking through the glass in ICU watching the monitors hooked to Jerry's body... saw Mattie wrapped so tightly in fear and grief, I was afraid she have to be admitted, too. He felt the cost, Mr. Carrin, I know he did, that's what I don't understand. When did Jerry not matter anymore? I don't get it."

George seemed bewildered and small. "See, you can't see the damage because you didn't know him then...he's different now. Guttled." He leaned forward and opened his hands. "You know what makes me sick? Jerry still cares about him. After everything he's been through, *we've* been through; Jerry still clings emotionally to that bastard! We've fought about it, cried about it.

"I'm terrified my boy won't come back. Can't imagine how a person could be so damaged on the inside and never show it. Then we find him in a pool of blood on the bathroom floor...but I'm lucky, know why?" George asked.

Rob, entranced by George's rendition of events, shook his head.

"Because he's still alive. I still have him, and I'll take whatever I get no matter how bad. I wake up in sweats at night dreaming things are normal, before Harley infested us. The others, staring at me through the TV whose kids were found dead, full of grief, they haunt me. I don't understand this guilt. Guilt for his survival, for his victimization, my own uselessness." George fell silent trying to blink back the tears.

Rob flipped to a new page in his notebook and stopped just as the pen made contact with the paper. He felt alone, his intrusion thick, lost in mortal fear growing through the house like black mold.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Liddell. My hope is this expose’ will help someone else who might be going through this. I promise to do my best to throw light on this. Thank you for your time. I’ll get in touch with you for the filming. I’ll let myself out.”

Rob backed out of the room, feeling the walls on either side of the hall before turning around and heading for the front door. As he reached the doorknob, Jerry appeared from the kitchen with a soda in hand, curious, but not startled. Rob nodded, felt as if he had gotten caught stealing. Unable to find any words, he waved and slipped out.

FILE: Harley.DOC:

John Harley took his time driving through the rain. The last thing he wanted was contact with the police. He reviewed the last seven months of his life and the justice system he had encountered with great relief. He smiled the same smile George witnessed, as the curvature of his lips pushed his cheek up until he could feel it under his right eye. It was already starting, that insatiable need. It drizzled under his skin much like the rain on his windshield, not quite hard enough to need wipers, but too wet for clear vision. It always began that way.

He had been experiencing that need since the age of seventeen, but over the years had come to recognize it for what it was and what it wasn't. Harley knew luck let him slide by the skin of his teeth this time, and deep down where it was too painful to explore, wished he hadn't. They didn't do him any favors, although he appreciated it now in the light of freedom.

It had almost come to an end, this *need* for little boys that fed on him from day to day, but the fear of incarceration was stronger than the wish to starve the *need*. He rationalized it in his mind as being too painful to endure, not to mention what they did to people like him in the state prison system. It had been explained to him what he had to look forward to in general population by his lawyer, how if

convicted he'd need the security of solitary confinement. Not convinced, Harley knew some file clerk would screw up the paperwork, by accident of course, and how he might face his past as a shank slit his gut, extinguishing that need forever.

The county jail effected closer observation while he awaited trial, so his chance of an untimely death was small, despite the occasional death threats. Living in a halfway house and counseling drug addicts seemed an easy alternative to what his life could have been.

Sitting at a red light, he glanced over at the car next to him. In the passenger seat was a little boy about the age of eight or nine rooting through his backpack. Harley could see the boy speaking to his mother, captivated by the movements of his lips and the way his small hands pulled at the paperwork in the bag. The boy grinned with pride at the circled red "A" Harley saw clearly written on his paper, waving it back and forth. For an instant the boy made eye contact, smiling, then looked back to his mother.

In that same instant, Harley's heart skipped and dropped to the pit of his stomach where the ache waited to feed, where piranha clustered in the deep, hoping to shred that hidden place of need, a jolt so hard, his mouth dropped open.

The light turned green and traffic crawled through leaving John Harley, fully breathless. He watched the boy and his mother pull ahead and steadily drive away, straining to hold them in sight until they disappeared, his gold crucifix swinging back and forth from the rear view mirror.

They should have known, he thought to himself. It would only be a matter of time.