

Nothing is Free

By Paula Sophia Schonauer

The weather had turned cold. A strong north wind blew down the plains turning what had been a beautiful late October afternoon into a chilly evening. Many of the prostitutes who had been dressed for warmer temperatures had disappeared from the street. Only the most desperate ones were still working out in the open. One of them was standing on the corner of 29th and South Robinson outside an O'Reilly auto parts store hugging her breasts, legs glued together for warmth. She stood there, huddled against the wind, wearing a beige halter top beneath a purple blouse made of wispy fabric, Mickey Mouse print spandex tights and a pair of white high heels. Her stringy, dirty-blonde hair betrayed a lack of hygiene, but her face was still pretty, youngish.

She smiled at Officer Larry Michaels as he drove by in his assigned police van, a great big white whale of a vehicle with a light bar on top and POLICE plastered on the side. It was a Ford E350 with an extra long cargo area, long enough for a detention insert. The van could transport up to ten people.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Stop-n-Go across the street. When he walked into the store the latest clerk, a heavy-set Hispanic woman, complained to Michaels, "You see that whore? The little bitch been working the corner there all day."

She wore heavy black eyeliner, thick red lipstick, and layers of makeup, but the pock-marks on her face were still noticeable. She had teased her hair up high, stalagmite bangs bent forward at the ends like a greedy claw springing from her forehead.

"Nice hair," Michaels said. He read her name tag. "Uh, Rosa."

Rosa wore a low-cut black t-shirt beneath her blue smock, and her large breasts stretched the seams of the thin cotton fabric.

"How ya doing, hero?" she chirped, puckering her lips, trying hard to look demure.

She couldn't quite pull it off, not for Michaels' taste, anyway. To him, she looked like a cartoon pig dressed in drag, but her overt sexuality excited him unexpectedly. He imagined plunging his face into her milk chocolate cleavage.

"Life's a bitch, Rosa," he replied.

He walked over to the soda pop dispenser, filled a 32 ounce cup with ice and Coca-Cola. He grabbed a box of Good-n-Plenty and laid the items on the counter. "How much?"

"You know, it's on the house," she said.

Michaels knew it was free, but since Rosa was new, he needed to make sure she was cool about it. "Thanks." He started to leave the store.

Another customer walked up to the counter with a bag of corn chips and a bottle of Diet Coke. He was a young white guy with slicked back hair wearing a fancy black suit over a dark blue shirt, a matching blue tie with a swirl of intertwined red and white stripes, and gold cuff links.

"Must be nice," the guy sassed.

Michaels turned to face him. "What?"

The young man stepped back, maintaining a sneer on his face. "Sorry, officer, I don't mean to offend. I was just pointing out how great it is to be a police officer in our fair city, all the free stuff you get."

Michaels hated these young, fashionable dudes who thought they were oh so wise. "Nothing's free," he said.

The man nodded. "Yep, you're right. I'll bet Rosa here will want something from you someday. And one of these days, you'll have to pay up."

Rosa winked, lowered her left shoulder coyly. "Yes," she said. "Come to my house. I treat you like a man."

Michaels fished through his pockets and brought out a handful of dollar bills and coins. "Here," he said. "Take this."

Rosa raised her hands, palms out. "Oh no, officer, my boss told me no charge for police."

"Fine, have it your way." Michaels took his Coke and candy and left the store. He heard laughter trailing behind him.

Michaels saw a black BMW two-door coup parked in front of the store. On a hunch, he walked behind the car and saw a car dealer's tag in back, one of those special license plates used by dealership employees when they drive the new demo models. When the suave young dude walked out of the store, Michaels was waiting for him, leaning against the BMW.

"Hey," the guy said, voice agitated.

Michaels ran his hand over the smooth front fender, leaving finger print smears. "Looks like you get some perks, too," he said. "Must be nice to wear fancy clothes, drive a fancy car..."

The young man lost his smirk. "Don't lean against my car."

"... I bet you live in a nice, fancy house," Michaels continued, "or a nice fancy condo. Yeah, that's it, a condo."

"So what if I do?"

“Just pointing out how things are, that’s all.” Michaels stood up straight, hand resting on the butt of his holstered weapon, a Glock 21 .45 caliber semi-auto. “What do you do for a living, Mr....?”

“The name’s Burton,” he said. “I work in auto sales. I’m a finance manager.”

“Oh, that’s so interesting,” Michaels said. He walked to the rear of the BMW, pointed at the dealer’s tag. “So, this car, it doesn’t belong to you?”

Burton pressed a button on his remote keyless-entry toggle. The car alarm beeped twice. He walked to the driver’s side door, opened it and sat down. Michaels walked up and stuck his knee next to the interior of the door, preventing Burton from closing it. He leaned toward Burton’s left ear.

“Don’t fuck with me about my perks when you got perks of your own.”

Burton’s hands gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white. He swallowed hard. “Yes sir,” he said. He pulled on the door, tried to nudge Michaels’ leg out of the way.

“Good, you’re smarter than you look.”

Burton slammed the door, revved the engine, and backed out of his parking space a little too fast. When he turned out of the parking lot into the street, the tires squealed, and the BMW fishtailed a little.

If he hadn’t been driving the van he might have given chase, stopped Burton and wrote him a ticket. As it was, it would take him too long to back the van out of his parking space, maneuver it around toward the street and get going fast enough to catch up to the pretty boy. He hated that van, regarded it as a mark of shame, a demotion of sorts signifying he wasn’t a top-tier cop.

Michaels had wrecked his patrol car a month before responding to an armed robbery in progress call at the Valero station at Sheridan and Western. He was hauling ass down Hudson when he came to the traffic light at Main Street. It was red, but he was going code-3 and decided to push through it. At the last possible second, some idiot plunged through the intersection. Though he missed the other car, he was going too fast to safely accommodate an evasive maneuver. The patrol car fishtailed out of control, bounced over the curb, and slid sideways into a light pole only a few blocks away from the robbery. Needless to say, the bad guys got away and Michaels got a reprimand. The lieutenant wouldn’t assign him a new patrol car. Instead, he made Michaels drive the paddy wagon, a vehicle prohibited by policy from making a code-3 response, until he completed a remedial driving course at the training center the next month.

The van did have a few advantages. For one thing, the driver of the van was the designated drunk unit. His primary responsibilities were to answer drunk calls and transport combative suspects or mental patients when needed. The designated drunk unit didn’t have to respond to traffic accident calls and

wasn't expected to do a lot of traffic enforcement, which gave Michaels more time to cruise his district looking for more lucrative activity: prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers.... Trouble was, they could see him coming from a mile away, almost literally.

Rosa tapped on the storefront glass and waved at him, clapping her hands. Michaels waved back with his right hand, a lone middle finger extended. He smiled like it was a joke. Rosa pointed at her wrist, mouthed the words, "What time?"

Well, at least he'd made an impression.

He looked across the street. The whore was gone. Either she packed it in like the rest of her compadres, or she got a pick-up. If she got a pick-up, she'd be back out there in fifteen-twenty minutes tops. Michaels decided to cruise the strip, see who else might be intrepid enough to brave the cold air.

The stretch between 29th and 44th on South Robinson was a long, flat two lanes festooned with pawn shops, a Harley Davidson dealership, several bars including the Snug Club, Trueloves, and a Mexican dive called El Divorcio, not to mention the notorious Twilight Motel off 33rd street. The strip was also home to half a dozen Stop-n-Robs and a few sleazy apartment complexes. Lantern Park, a neglected relic of a city park, languished across the street from the Twilight. The overgrown foliage and the dilapidated picnic pavilion provided ample cover for quickie sex, dope deals and ditching stolen cars.

It was quiet, too quiet. Michaels always marveled at how the weather impacted criminal activity, drove it indoors and underground, out of sight. Suddenly, South Robinson Avenue took on an air of respectability despite its rough edges: old bungalows needing new paint and new roof jobs, gang graffiti here and there on what had been blank brick walls, one too many shot-out street lights. It wasn't the circus it could be, and that fact made Michaels a little antsy. He didn't like being idle. For the first time in months, even the police radio was quiet. He clicked his mic to make sure it still worked.

"Wagon-2, do you have traffic?" the dispatcher responded.

"Negative," Michaels replied. He checked the time. It was only eight o'clock.

As he approached the Twilight Motel, he saw a guy run out toward the street, waving him down. The guy looked middle-aged, balding, and fairly well-to-do with a nice pair of slacks, a white button-up shirt. He had loosened his tie, and the collar was uneven. He looked harried, no, pissed off.

"Officer, officer," he pleaded. "I want to report a crime."

Michaels was somewhat pleased, something to do. But the guy had a quality about him, a certain sense of privilege. Michaels wondered if he might be an uptown fat cat come down to slum with the rats. If

so, he might get to have some fun.

“What’s the problem, sir?”

The guy waved him into the parking lot of the motel complex, a traditional horseshoe pattern of three interlinked buildings, a swimming pool in the middle and the manager’s office at the open end, except the pool had been filled with cement years before. The outer edges of the pool were still there along with the chain-link safety fence. The buildings had been constructed with old fashioned red brick, and the rod-iron railings hailed back to a bygone era. The Twilight wasn’t really a motel anymore, not in the classic sense. Most of the rooms had semi-permanent residents, most of whom were prostitutes who used the place for business. The so-called manager just collected the rent, probably took a bonus here and there for not calling the police about the preponderance of criminal activity on the property.

“I’ve been robbed, officer.”

The guy didn’t look hurt. No blood stains on his white shirt, nothing torn. He pointed at the open door of room seventeen.

“I was staying in there when someone came in and took my money.”

Michaels parked the van, got out and walked into the motel room. The door had no damage, no sign of forced entry. The bed was still made, the television on but badly tuned, a lot of visual snow and static hiss. A strip of wallpaper bent down near the far corner of the room. The once light green carpet had a dark swath leading from the door to the bathroom and around the bed, a heavy smell of mold.

“Were you in the room when this happened?”

“I was taking a shower.”

Michaels walked into the bathroom. No fog on the mirrors, no wet foot prints on the red hexagon tile floor, the towels still folded.

“I mean, I was going to the bathroom.”

“Did the suspect have a weapon?”

The guy hesitated. “Not that I know of.”

“Did he threaten to beat you up?”

The guy put his hands on his hips and paused thoughtfully. “Okay, so I wasn’t robbed,” he volunteered.

Michaels stared at the man, didn’t say a word. The silence got to the guy, and he started to get emotional, trying to choke back tears. “I was meeting a girl, a blind date. We were supposed to have sex, but she just left me here by myself.”

“How much did you pay her?”

A tear squeezed past the guy’s right eyelid, trickled down his cheek. “What are you implying officer?” He tried to feign moral outrage.

Michaels had had enough of this game. “I’m not implying anything. How much did you pay her?”

The guy looked down. “Fifty dollars.”

Michaels suppressed a laugh. “Fifty? Shit...”

“What? Is that too much?”

“Twenty’s too much. Around here, anyway.”

“I know. I know,” the guy whined. “She told me she was going to get change, that she’d be right back.”

“Okay, now we’re making progress. What’s your name?”

“Wilcox.”

“Mr. Wilcox, did she promise to do something for that fifty dollars?”

Wilcox blubbered. He wiped his eyes and mouth. “She was supposed to give me a blowjob. My wife won’t give me a blowjob. I just wanted to see how it felt, that’s all.”

“And now you want to make a police report, you want me to arrest her.”

Wilcox set his jaw firmly, blinked back his tears. “Yes, I do,” he said, all indignant.

Michaels had had calls like this before. Now was the time to have fun. “Okay, sir. Please place your hands behind your back, thumbs pointed upward.” He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from the back of his utility belt. He made a point of sliding the clasp through the lock. The series of quick clicks sounded like a rattle snake shaking its tail.

“Am I being arrested?”

“Yes sir,” Michaels responded dispassionately, “for offering to engage in a lewd act.”

“But I... but we... didn’t...”

“You want her to go to jail, don’t you?”

Wilcox wiped a splotch of sweat gathering at his brow. Despite the cold air, he was sweating profusely. “Officer?”

“If you want me to arrest her, I have to arrest you. You two came together to have illicit sex, Mr. Wilcox. You do know prostitution is a crime in the state of Oklahoma?”

Wilcox slumped his shoulders in resignation. “Yes, officer. I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again.” He sat down on the bed, face in his hands. “Please don’t take me to jail.”

Michaels forced the handcuff clasp through the lock again and again. Wilcox shuddered at the sound. "Tell me what she looks like."

"She's young, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She had blonde hair and Mickey Mouse pants."

Michaels felt a thrill of satisfaction. "Good." He replaced the handcuffs in his utility belt and walked out the door.

Wilcox followed him. "But officer, what about the report?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Wilcox stopped. The men eyed each other for a moment. Finally Wilcox nodded sheepishly, rummaged through his pockets for his car keys. He walked toward a blue Buick Century in the parking lot. The license plate had a tag decal: Clergy. A bumper sticker on the passenger side said, "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned."

Michaels felt the urge to spit. "Go home Mr. Wilcox and pray for forgiveness."

Wilcox paused, a dark frown on his face. Then he nodded to himself, got in the car, and left the motel.

Michaels, newly energized, got back in the van, determined to find the girl with the Mickey Mouse spandex. He didn't have to look long. After he pulled back onto Robinson, dispatch general broadcast a morals violation call, "All officers, SW 29th and Robinson. Calling party reports a prostitute working the corner. White female, blond hair, young, maybe eighteen or nineteen years of age wearing a purple shirt and black print pants."

"That's my girl," Michaels crooned to himself. He snatched the mic. "Wagon-2, dispatch. I'm in the area. I'll check it."

When Michaels returned to the Stop-n-Go the girl was still there. Rosa stood out in front of the store shouting at her, and the girl shouted something back. At one point it looked like Rosa was going to march over to the girl and kick her ass. It wouldn't have been much of a fight. Rosa had at least a hundred pounds on the prostitute and one hell of a mean streak to boot. It would have been fun to hang back, let the women get into a scrap, but here it was, time to pay up for all the free coffee, the free sodas and candy bars, time to do his job. He parked the van between the women. Rosa's attitude changed in a flicker. She bounded up to the van before Michaels could open the door.

"Hi there, Mr. Officer. Back too soon."

Michaels laughed at Rosa's ineptness with the English language. "Yes," he said. "Back too soon."

From his vantage point, he could see down Rosa's cleavage clear to the lacy red bra that barely

contained her breasts. He saw the edge of her areola, and she noticed him looking. She turned left and right like a model. "You like?"

Michaels opened the door, pushing Rosa backwards. "Get back in the store," he said in his best business voice. "I'll take care of your little friend here."

"Yes, Mr. Michael. You're so handsome."

Despite himself, Michaels felt his cheeks get warmer, and the specter of self consciousness invaded his thoughts. He briefly wondered what Rosa would be like in bed, and then he worried over all the shit his buddies would give him when she told them about their rendezvous.

Michaels walked around the van and approached the prostitute. She had one hand on her hip, face tilted, one eye slightly closed. A curl of hair dropped in front of her eyes affecting an exclamation to her general streetwise front. She shook her head when she talked, her chin wagging slightly, a sing-song African-American lilt in her words. "I don't need no five-oh giving me shit. That bitch is crazy."

Michaels laughed. "No argument there."

The girl moved her head backwards in mock surprise. She had a long thin neck. Michaels half expected it to bow like an Ostrich does.

She pretended to glance at a watch on her left wrist, but there was no watch there. "I ain't got no time for this shit."

Michaels affected a grim front, trying to seem aloof, but he felt charmed by this girl's attitude, her youthfulness. She might be seventeen or eighteen, but she looked fifteen. He ceremoniously opened the back doors of the van, opened the detention insert. "Get in," he said.

The girl made a show of planting her feet in the ground; stuck her lower lip at him. Michaels grabbed her around the belly just below her breasts. She was light, maybe less than a hundred pounds. He effortlessly carried her over to the van despite her kicking and protests then hoisted her onto the platform near the rear bumper and pushed her inside. She had to bend at the waist to avoid hitting her head on the center beam of the detention insert. "Watch your head," he said, a deliberate second too late.

The girl turned around, hands clenched into fists, lips tight with rage. She tried to jump out of the van, but Michaels closed the door. She struggled against the steel door while Michaels let her think she was stronger than she was. Then he leaned into it a little more forcefully and let the iron latches click home. She beat on the stainless steel interior for a few minutes but to no avail. Michaels climbed into the driver's seat and drove the van to a dark corner of the Stop-n-Go parking lot.

"Where you taking me? You ain't got shit on me." Her words echoed inside the van. Then she started

screaming.

Michaels turned on the van's FM radio, tuned the dial to one of the public radio stations, KCSC out of Edmond. Good, he realized, they were playing opera. He cranked the volume; let it reverberate through the van until the girl's protests were muffled. He didn't like opera, didn't know a thing about it, but the music was so antithetical to this girl's style. He did this trick in the same way mental institutions used the pink room, to create an emotional diffusing. He blared the opera until the girl got quiet.

Michaels grabbed a field interview card. "What's your name?"

He turned on a light in the back of the van so he could watch her through a window between the front seats. He angled the rearview mirror so he didn't have to turn around to see her.

The girl stared at the floor of the insert. "Easter," she mumbled.

Michaels didn't understand. "What?"

"Easter."

Michaels had to wonder. Was this a street name, a name like strip dancers used for their performance persona? "Bullshit," he said.

Easter twisted her lips defiantly. "That's my name, officer, Easter Renee. My daddy named me that because I was born on Easter Sunday." Her African-American speech affectation had wilted away, and she sounded like a small town Oklahoma white girl all of a sudden.

"Okay, so what's your last name?"

The girl hesitated. "You won't believe me, officer."

"Tell me."

"My name is Easter Renee Sunday, except now I spell it with an e instead of a y."

"Like an ice cream sundae? Why?"

Easter giggled. "Because I'm so sweet."

Michaels walked right into that one, but he had to laugh. This was turning out to be a pretty cool shift, and this Easter chick wasn't the run-of-the-mill street girl. Well, at least so far.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen?"

"No way."

"Yes way," she protested. "I'm really nineteen. I graduated from Thomas High School last year."

Michaels was impressed. "You actually graduated high school? Then why are you on the street?"

Michaels stared at Easter in the rear view mirror. She looked nervous, biting her fingernails. She

glanced up at the mirror, and the reflection of their gazes met. Their stares lingered for a long, uncomfortable moment until Michaels broke away as Easter started to smile. He had become the nervous one, now. "You're just a whore," he said softly.

After that he obtained the rest of her statistical data, her date-of-birth, her home address, her height, weight, and eye color. He cleared his throat, picked up the microphone and switched the channel on the police radio to channel 15, the crime information unit. "Wagon-2 to Unit 800, standing by."

There was a long pause, then a female voice responded. "Wagon-2, you're number two." That meant he was second in line.

He sat there waiting, his nervousness mounting. "Why do you hustle?" he blurted.

"Because, I'm bored," she said as though she was indeed bored.

"Do you have any kids?"

"Nope!"

"Do you need the money?"

"Nope. Just doing it for kicks, that's all."

Michaels had heard about young women going on the hustle for fun. He'd seen an episode about it on the Maury Povich show. "What? This is fun? AIDS, drugs, getting the shit kicked out of you is fun?"

"No, it ain't like that," she snapped. "Well, yeah, sometimes it is, but not if you're smart."

Michaels didn't understand. "What do you think is going to happen? Do you think Richard Gere is gonna come and sweep your ass away so you'll live happily ever after? Give me a fucking break."

Easter frowned. "Fuck you!"

There was another period of silence. Then, finally, a voice crackled over the radio. "Go ahead, Wagon-2."

"10-4," Michaels responded. "I need to run a subject for city and county warrants, information bulletins, NCIC and tracer. White female, name Easter Renee Sundae," and then he spelled it.

"You're kidding?" came back the response.

"Not this time."

Easter leaned closer to the window, looming larger in the rearview mirror. "What's that for?"

"I'm checking to see if you have any warrants."

She scooted back to the rear of the detention insert and tried to open the door. "There's no handles or anything."

"Duh," Michaels laughed. He tried to mock the girl by imitating his twelve year old niece, a sassy

high-spirited girl he was very fond of, "This is a police vehicle. Hello."

"Fuck you..."

Michaels laughed even more.

"I'm going to jail, ain't I?"

"Quite possibly," he answered.

Easter scooted back toward the window, looking thoughtful. "No, I don't have any warrants."

"Wagon-2," the voice from Unit 800 called. "She's clear, but city warrants are down. She is in our records though. The last name Sundae is an alias. Her real name is Easter Renee Galloway, the same date of birth."

Easter stuck her tongue at Michaels' reflection. "See? I told you. I am nineteen."

She seemed a little giddy, a glow of triumph on her face. Their eyes met again, and she winked at him seductively. "You're a nice looking guy. You look pretty macho in that uniform."

Michaels broke the gaze yet again, and he felt a wave of nervous anticipation. His mouth went dry, and he felt the stirrings of an erection. "How much do you cost?"

"Why? Do you want a trick?"

Her response irritated Michaels. "No, I don't pay for pussy," he sneered. "I'm just curious to see what a girl like you thinks she's worth."

"Oh, it depends. I got a hundred dollars for a blow job, once, but I never do it for less than twenty."

"How'd you end up here in Oklahoma City, on South Robinson Avenue? Some of these girls will take two bucks for a hand job. You're overpriced for this area."

Easter laughed. "Well, I guess I'll take that as a compliment." She reclined against the wall of the insert, stretched her long, skinny legs. "I usually work truck stops, but I got dumped over here last night. Just trying to make enough money to move on." She lifted the front of her halter top and pulled out handmade cigarette. She had a lighter tucked in her panty line. "You mind if I smoke?"

Michaels responded absentmindedly. "Sure, go ahead."

He'd never let anyone smoke in the back of his vehicle before. He couldn't stand the stench, but he was attracted to Easter more than he wanted to admit to himself. She lit the cigarette, and he was relieved to smell that it wasn't marijuana, just regular tobacco.

"What time is it?"

Michaels looked at the dashboard clock. "Eight-twenty."

"Shit," Easter said, exhaling smoke. "It's getting too late, too cold for another john. Guess I'll have to

pack it in for the night.”

“Okay,” Michaels said. “I’ll let you out.” He opened his door, started to exit the van.

Easter frowned in the rearview mirror. “Please, Mr. Officer, please give me a ride to my room.”

Michaels shut the door and placed the van into gear. “Where do you need to go?”

“I’m staying at that place called the Twilight? It’s not far from here.”

Michaels nodded, laughed. “Room seventeen, right?”

Easter was taken aback, scooted away from the window. “How’d you know that?”

It felt to Michaels like he might have regained the upper hand, but he laid the cards on the table anyway. “Oh, nothing. I ran into one of your former clients earlier tonight, some bald minister. Ring a bell?”

She laughed loudly, scooted back toward the window. “He called the police, didn’t he?”

Michaels smiled a response into the mirror.

“That sorry son-of-bitch. He was so nervous he couldn’t come. I worked that bastard for fifteen minutes, then he had the nerve to demand a refund. He paid me fifty bucks. I collected my shit and got the hell out of there. He was creepy.” She seemed to shudder slightly.

Michaels felt like a scolding parent suddenly. “Hmm, great fun, huh? The guy could have been a serial killer. You know they can’t get a nut unless they torture and kill someone?” As soon as he said it, he wished he’d checked the guy more thoroughly instead of just fucking with him.

“Oh,” Easter said. She looked down, thoughtfully.

Michaels grabbed the mic and told dispatch he was transporting a subject from the disturbance back to 33rd and South Robinson, “Starting mileage...” He read the odometer, “1.1.3.2.9.”

Easter remained silent for the short ride back to the motel. When they arrived, Michaels recited the ending mileage, “1.1.3.3.0.”, a precautionary procedure meant to protect an officer from allegations of meandering too long when transporting a member of the opposite sex.

Easter leaned back into the window, stared earnestly at the rearview mirror. “Please park the van in the alley. I don’t want people to see me being dropped off by the police. They might think I’m a snitch.”

He drove the van into an alley just north of the motel. An adjacent breezeway connected the alley to the motel’s courtyard parking lot. Back there, it was pretty dark. The street light had been shot out ages ago.

“Yeah, let me out right here.”

Michaels got out of the van. The cold air embraced him, sobered him a little, calmed the throb of

desire building in his groin. He opened the back doors, then he opened the detention insert. Because they were on a slight incline, the heavy door wanted to swing closed. Michaels took a bungee cord that had been wrapped around the door handle and hooked it to the van's outer left door to keep it open. He stepped back as Easter climbed out of the insert and stepped down onto the broken asphalt in the alley.

They stood face to face. Easter was at least a foot and a half shorter than him, a hundred pounds lighter. He looked down at her, and she gazed up at him with a come-hither look on her face. She reached out and stroked the bulge in Michaels' pants. He couldn't move. The cheap thrill weakened his stance. He felt his knees buckle.

"Well, uh, do you want me to take care of that?"

Michaels didn't give consent nor did he deter her advance. She coaxed him into a seated position at the back of the detention insert. He unfastened his Sam Brown patent leather utility belt, letting it fall behind him, careful to keep his gun out of Easter's reach. After that, she unbuttoned his pants, unzipped them and stuck her cold hand down into his underwear. His erection lost a little resolve, but she let her hand linger there until their body temperatures equalized. Then she started to massage him, bringing his libido back to life.

He groaned, abandoning his better judgment. She pushed on his chest, and he scooted backward to accommodate, letting her have a better angle with which to pleasure him. The whole world faded away, condensed down to a micro dot of intense, compressed pleasure. He was about to do his version of the big bang when something clamped down on his penis, his scrotum compressed in a tight vice. He moaned, "What the...?"

The pain came slightly after the surprise, but when it came, it came in a great big explosive flash of heat. "Oww! Ahh!" His scream echoed off the stainless steel walls of the detention insert. Involuntarily, he curled into a fetal position. The vice let loose. He lay there on his back screaming and cursing for a long agonizing minute, paralyzed by the pain.

"You fucking asshole!" Easter snarled. "You macho motherfuckin' asshole. You're just like my dad."

"Ahhh!"

"You self-righteous pervert. Fucking hypocrite."

Easter slammed the detention insert closed, then the two back doors. She went around front, turned on the FM radio and cranked the volume. She tuned the dial to a Hip Hop station, pressed the power lock button and shut the door.

It took awhile before Michaels comprehended what had happened. The bitch locked him in the back

of the van. Holy shit!

“Goddamn bitch! Fucking slut!”

He flailed inside the detention insert, bashed his fists against the cold steel walls, and then he had his first experience of claustrophobia. He couldn't believe this was happening, and he didn't know what to do. Luckily, he had enough room to refasten his pants. The Sam Brown belt was still there along with his weapon and handheld radio. All he had to do was call for help. But as his rational mind returned, he started to realize he would have a good bit of explaining to do. How does one get locked in the back of a police van in Oklahoma City's red light district without attracting some unwanted attention? First the traffic accident, now this. He was bound to get fired. His whole future crumbled to dust, his whole life dwindled down to a stupid thoughtless moment. For the first time in his life, he realized he could murder someone, and he fantasized seizing Easter by the throat, watching her eyes bulge with surprise, the light of her life going dim, feeling the satisfaction of her body gone limp. He began to plot his revenge, how he'd search every goddamn truck stop in the United States if he had to.

But then, through the loud Hip Hop beat, the unintelligible lyrics, he heard a radio call. “Wagon-2, 10-90?”

It was a welfare check, a routine procedure done by dispatch when they hadn't communicated with an officer for a set time. He turned on his hand held radio. He was on the verge of responding, but he didn't know what to say, didn't know how he'd explain the loud music in the background. The stress of the situation rendered him helpless, and he sat there head in hands unable to make a decision. He wished he could die right there and not have to face the consequences he knew would come.

“Lincoln 450, dispatch, what was Wagon-2's last known location?”

Shit, it was a lieutenant, the Vice unit lieutenant. He hadn't figured the undercover guys would be in the area. Maybe they saw the whole thing, sitting there snickering in the shadows. Maybe this had been a sting operation. Holy shit! He was fucked.

Dispatch responded, a certain amount of uncharacteristic stress in her voice. The radio clicked as officers were trying to get on the air. One of the transmissions had a siren in the background. “Lincoln 450, Wagon-2's last known twenty is 33rd and South Robinson.”

Michaels pressed the transmission button on his handheld but he received a non-acknowledgement tone. The transmission didn't go through. Perhaps the steel walls were blocking the signal. Perhaps the proximity to the van's main radio scrambled the receiver. He stared at his weapon, considered shooting his way out of the van. But the projectiles... they might hit something valuable, somebody... Shit, no way he'd

ever live this down.

“Dispatch, I’ve located the vehicle. Slow everyone down,” Lincoln 450 advised over the radio.

Then, in his darkest moment, he felt someone pounding on the backdoor, heard someone shouting, “Hey, anyone in there?”

The door to the detention insert opened. It was Lieutenant David Virtue, a legendary fixture on the Oklahoma City Police Department. He had a shock of white hair, dark bushy eyebrows, a handlebar mustache and a maniacal smile. He’d been through the ringer at least half a dozen times: shot through the head, sued after a questionable shooting, fired and then reinstated.... His file at internal investigations was encyclopedic.

“You okay, rook?” he shouted.

Michaels nodded.

“Lincoln 450 headquarters. 10-22 anyone else. Wagon-2’s okay. His handheld is malfunctioning.”

It took a moment, but Michaels began to realize he might not be in trouble after all. Was Virtue going to cover for him?

Virtue extended a hand. Michaels grasped it, scooted along the floor of the insert oh so carefully. His groin still hurt, and the pain swelled up to his abdomen. All he wanted to do was stay curled up in a fetal position. Virtue gently coaxed him through the door, out into the shadowy night.

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