

YOU LIE!

A

Cautionary

Tail

By Greg Wagner

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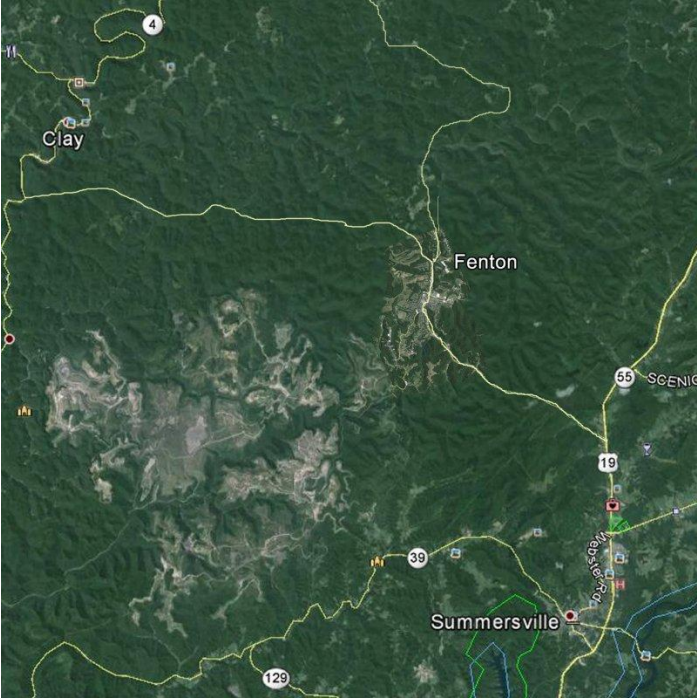
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I would like to thank (in this order) my wife Roberta, Wikipedia, Google Maps, and Amazon.com, because without any of the above, this novel wouldn't have happened.

Special thanks to Rob Cauthorne for his proofing of the flight dream and to everyone who has bought my books so far.

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Here be dragons...

Chapter 1 – So Far Away

Stone Rodriguez

The early morning sky was dreary and overcast.

Great heavy sodden clouds hung close to the East Andean foothills like a cold wet blanket, completely obscuring the twilit heavenly bodies with its nebulous, impenetrable, nimbostratus deck.

Pedro looked long and hard at the donkey beside him and took a drink from the bottle of tequila.

"...and another thing," he swayed a little and fell back against the wall, cracking his head, but then he jumped right back up again, "and as for you Gringo," he pointed at Stone. "I'm getting a little tired of ylou an fyour shhfatesh," this last part was said through the rough fur of his donkey Roosevelt, as Pedro slowly slid to the ground face first.

Stone staggered over, propped Pedro up and took the bottle away from him. As soon as the tequila left his hand he jerked back to life, "Did I ever tell you about the time?" and then he fell over again.

Stone shook his head, got an arm under his friend, and helped him back to his apartment. In the three blocks they had to travel, Pedro woke up singing twice, cussing like a sailor once, then crying and moaning, telling Stone all the rest of the way home, how much he appreciated him being there for his difficult first pregnancy.

Stone negotiated the sleeping streets of suburban Bogota, Columbia in a tequila soaked haze. All the while, the donkey Roosevelt tagged along, chewing on the edge of Pedro's t-shirt and looking around nervously at some of

the city's poorer residents, who it knew, had the ability to cook up equine meat oh so tender.

Once inside the apartment, Stone dropped Pedro on the sofa, where he hit the cushions and rolled off onto the floor groaning. "Ohh, why did you make me drink all that?"

Stone glanced at his watch. *Oh great*, he frowned, *in two more hours I have to get up for work*. He left Pedro lying there and staggered next door to his tiny apartment. He took a quick look around then plopped down in the old threadbare recliner, instantly drifting off to sleep.



Herman Mullins

Private First Class Herman Mullins gathered his jacket around his shoulders and settled in for the long overnight shift. He took a long drink from his cup of coffee and yawned so hard he almost dislocated his jaw. *Oww, that hurts*, he thought rubbing his face.

Low clingy mists hung heavy in the air across the wooded West Virginia ridgeline, depositing a thin veil of dew on the sleeping camp. The dusk-to-dawn lights that dotted the barbed wire fenced perimeter barely shone through the pervading gloom, instead making dull cones of yellow that hardly penetrated the darkness anywhere but directly underneath. Heavy buzzing and crackling noises filled the air from the high voltage power lines running parallel to the military installation, the big steel tower's insulators expending their immutable blue coronal discharges into the late evening dampness. A weak full moon peeked out shyly from around a bank of fluffy white clouds up in the otherwise dark sky.

Herman Mullins is an active member of the West Virginia National Guard. Usually a day shift warehouse clerk, Herman was unexpectedly called into work early to pull all night guard duty on the Sugar Shack. The "Shack," as it is affectionately known around Camp Delta, is a steel and lead reinforced concrete building located in a special fenced off area of the main guard complex. It is also off limits to anyone with a security clearance under a level six and that was all that level two clearance Herman Mullins needed to know.

His normal job is a forklift driver. It's his duty to drive out on the two hundred acre fenced lot to pick up the steel reinforced shipping containers the big C130 Hercs airdrop on the old surface-mine-turned military base. Once loaded on the all terrain fork truck, Herman transports the containers to the depot, unloads them, performs an inventory of the contents and then either ships it out or takes it over to the cavernous Section-B warehouse where he buries it somewhere in the building-long, five-high skid racks. They got anything from condoms and Q-Tips, to rocket launchers and canned hams in the daily airdrops.

Camp Delta is located at the old Aquila Coal Mine Complex just south of the town of Fenton, WV. At one time the original Dog Ridge #2 mine employed over a third of Nicolas County. They closed their doors forever four years ago, when the mine was purchased secretly (although all the locals knew about it) by the government, to be used as a military storage/training facility.

Herman yawned again and squinted out across the vast empty parking lot. Last night around midnight, one of the infamous black-truck convoys pulled into the complex. Herman was outside on his lunch-break at the time and

watched as the trucks escorted an oversized carbon black tractor-trailer through the front gate and went straight to the Sugar Shack. They quickly disappeared behind the twenty-five-foot tall steel blast doors for several hours before pulling out just before dawn, leaving behind a small security detail to guard whatever it was they dropped off.

Most of the time The Shack is empty, but Herman had heard rumors that it is used by government security agencies for special top-secret terrorist renditions and anyone caught snooping around it, gets to find out what really goes on inside, the hard way.

Herman knew better.

He originally enlisted in the National Guard straight out of high school as part of the ROTC program. He was under the impression when he signed up, that being part of the National Guard meant he would be defending the homeland, here, at home. However, in his first three and a half years of service, Herman has been deployed to the Middle East four times, once to Afghanistan, once to Oman, and twice to Jordan. Now he's five years into an eight year commitment and just counting down the days. Fortunately, he landed a full time assignment close to home, as the Camp Delta facility is just a couple hollars over from where he grew up in Maysel.

Herman never did like the graveyard shift. *People are supposed to be sleeping when it's dark*, he thought

He glanced down at his watch and shivered a little.

The mountain peeper frogs were on the prowl this evening. Looking for love, the little anurans filled the night air with a symphonic crescendo of croaks, shrills and

peeps. The noise was oddly hypnotizing. A lonely howl went out across the wilderness and for just a second the moon went black.

Herman shook his head; *it must have just been my imagination*. He glanced down at his watch again and thought frantically, *only twelve-thirty! How am I ever gonna stay awake till seven?* He slapped his cheeks and rubbed his eyes, moving his head from side to side hoping desperately for a second wind. After blinking hard a few more times, he sighed, *there, that's a little better*.



Amanda Wilson

A large, fast moving, vaguely bird shaped silhouette passed in front of the moon followed quickly by another, and then two more, darkening the scenery for split seconds like a strobe light between flashes. Four shapes followed after on the ground, dark patches against an even darker backdrop. A loud lupine call split the night and echoed from hillside to hillside, causing small creatures in their warrens to kick out fitfully in their nocturnal rest.

"Ok guys, I think we need to head back now," a concerned female voice could be heard above the other denizens of the night.

"Aww come on, just a little longer," a male voice whined back.

"No, we have to be at school tomorrow. I don't know about you guys, but I have a big math test first period and I better get at least a B or I'm screwed."

The dark shapes on the ground stopped and morphed into four teenagers. The group of winged lizards flew down and landed beside them.

The tallest of the teens offered a compromise, "Ok, but how about if we take the long way home?"

Amanda Wilson put her hands on her tiny hips, "Justin, you of all people should understand my position."

"I know," he conceded.

Her boyfriend tilted his head and laughed innocently, "Aww come on Mand, you know we don't get to do this very often, let him have his fun."

"Don't you start Devon!" she pointed, half-smiling, half-threatening, her bright red hair shining in the moonlight.

"I'd say majority rules," her best friend Tiffany piped up, "that's how they do it down in the state legislature anyway."

"Yeah well," Amanda sneered, "the state legislature doesn't have to be at work until nine." She turned to face Justin again, "and they also don't have a big math test first thing in the morning."

She crossed her arms, then gave in with a sigh, "Ohhhh, all right, but I have to be back by one at the latest." She counted off with her fingers, "That will give me a whole five hours to sleep," she rolled her eyes, "oh joy."

The four dragons looked up as Amanda finished the sentence. She smiled at her little saurian charge. She had to admit it felt good to get out and run a little. *Trying to keep secret the fact that you have magical powers and*

are the caretaker of a baby dragon can be difficult even under the best of situations, she thought. The dragons didn't seem to mind too much, most of their existence so far has been spent somewhere else, on another dimensional plane. Amanda didn't really understand it all, but she somehow couldn't help thinking maybe it's better that way, much less chance they will get discovered or hurt.

Having the ability to take any shape she wants, is a pretty handy talent to have. Amanda thought herself into a great, grey wolf shape and took off running down the road, growling playfully over her shoulder to her friends, "Nah, na na, na na, na, last one to Summersville Lake is a Baby Bat."



Stacy Lizemore

Bored almost to tears, Stacy Lizemore sat staring out the heavily tinted front picture window of the Lizemore Family Quik Trip truck stop.

A rainstorm had rolled in with the coming of dawn and looked to be winding up for a good spring soaking. Fat raindrops pocked the surface of newly formed puddles dotting the half-empty parking lot. Freshly awakened actinobacteria were busy feeding after the dry spell the town had been experiencing, gracing the few people caught out in the wet stuff, with their anaerobic earthy aroma, spiced up by just a hint of ozone and garnished liberally with the obligatory drowned worm smell that usually accompanies sudden downpours.

The entrance bell rang as an overloaded log truck wallowed into the parking lot and headed straight for the gas pumps.

Business was slow.

A few old men sat huddled together in the restaurant section, but other than that, they were the only customers she's seen since coming on shift. She idly twirled a lock of her short curly black hair and continued to stare out the window.

Stacy is the heir apparent to the great Lizemore Family Empire. That inheritance comes complete with a restaurant/dairy bar, gas station/service center, car wash, and a tiny strip mall in downtown Fenton. While Stacy appreciated and admired everything her parents accomplished in their life, being an only child placed a lot of pressure on her to carry on with the empire, *which is a problem*, she thought wistfully, *because I just might have other plans*.

The other waitress on duty, walked up just then and plopped down on the stool beside her. "Starting to really come down out there isn't it?" Ginny said with a lopsided smile.

Stacy nodded and looked the other woman over. *Thirty-five years in the waitressing business and look at what it's done to her*.

Ginny Baldwin is a pretty woman or at least she used to be a very pretty woman at one point in time. Easily over average height, Ginny possessed what reminded Stacy of a dancer's body *and she is so sweet, sometimes saccharine sweet*. She had the kind of personality that was quite possibly capable of bringing about world peace, even on a bad day. The older woman always keeps her short ash blonde hair, fastidiously cut and set, forming a loose bun

that just seems to float around her head more than lay there.

Unfortunately, the decades Ginny spent on her feet waiting tables, left her with a slightly hunched over look, deceptively creating the general impression she was tired all the time. Ginny also coughed frequently and even though she never smoked a day in her life, it was exposure to the secondhand stuff that left her voice so gravelly.

She gave Stacy a sincere smile as she leaned across and lowered her voice conspiringly, "You look down in the dumps Honey, anything you want to talk about?"

Stacy shook her head. "No, Ginny I'm fine thanks, just a little blue from the rain, I guess."

"Well you just keep in mind, if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I'm here." With that, she winked then snagged the half-empty coffee pot and headed over to the group of old men.

"Top you off gentlemen?" She could hear Ginny say from across the dining room.

Stacy smiled and shook her head; *I guess it could be worse.*

Chapter 2 – Trouble Comes to Town

Clarence "Starman" Williams

Seventy-year-old Clarence Williams lay sprawled out underneath the front end of a Buick Park Avenue sedan. He was elbow-deep in the vehicle's innards when the phone rang. He grumbled but continued removing the bolt he'd been working on, hoping his wife Doris would pick it up.

After struggling for the last fifteen minutes, Clarence had finally figured out the right combination of swivels and socket extensions to reach the one starter bolt that was hidden behind the engine's exhaust manifold, *and I'm not gonna stop until I get the damn thing out*. He rolled his eyes as the phone rang again.

"Dor, Honey," he yelled towards the house, "can you get that for me?"

No answer.

The phone rang again.

Clarence extracted his now partially numb arm and hand from the tight spot and rolled out from underneath the car. In the process, the end of his long gray ponytail caught underneath the wheel of the creeper and yanked his head back violently.

"Oww, son of a... "

Before he could stop it, a small ball of purple flames flew out from his index finger and scorched a three-foot section of the ceiling. It continued to smolder another second or two before going out.

Oops! He thought, looking at his finger and at the damage he did to the ceiling, *I forgot it was loaded.*

He cringed as the phone rang again.

Grumbling some more, he wiped his hands off and hobbled over to the workbench where he kept the cordless receiver. Halfway there the ringing stopped. He picked the phone up anyway and hit the caller ID button.

Private Name

Private Number

What is that? Clarence thought, *how am I supposed to know who called if they don't leave a message and don't use a caller ID? Oh well,* he shrugged and put the phone back down, *must not have been too important.*

He frowned to himself, *the world is crazy, people are crazy, and it's just getting worse every day. All the politicians care about is furthering their career and they don't give a damn who they have to suck up to or step on in order get somewhere.* He nodded resolutely. *So what does that get the working man? Kicked in the teeth, that's what, because while he's working his ass off and paying the taxes, the rich aren't even coughing their share.* He stopped in mid-thought, *Oh hey wait a minute, that sounds progressive,* he shook his head.

Clarence wandered into the kitchen and peeked around the corner, but didn't see any sign of Doris. He went back the hall to her pottery studio and stopped in front of the open door.

His wife of forty-nine years was sitting on top of a thin rubber yoga mat in the Lotus Position, eyes closed, legs folded, hands upturned and resting on her knees.

"Didn't you hear the phone?" he inquired.

Without opening her eyes, she held up one finger.

He frowned.

I should have known. It's like this all the time, he shook his head. Don't interrupt me when I'm meditating, she told him, because unless the house is on fire or you're having a heart attack, I will just ignore you.

Clarence stomped out to the garage, picked up the phone and crawled back under the Buick. He lay there fuming. Doris is one of those liberal tree huggers and Clarence is a neo-conservative, or at least he has been for the last two years, ever since he started listening to talk-radio.

With the government take over and too many beltway insider liberals running things, is it any wonder this country is going to hell in a hand basket? Classic example, last fall Doris got involved in protesting a proposed coalmine that was coming to town. There was picketing, angry grandmothers, glorified media hounds, the whole bit. Of course, in the end it was actually a good thing, mainly because it turned out the town of Fenton was built on the back of a millennia old sleeping Great Sky Wyrn. The exploratory drilling for core samples alone caused 7.0 Richter scale earthquakes as the great serpent came dangerously close to being aroused from its ancient slumber. As an odd side effect, that summer magic came to the town of Fenton.

Fenton has always been a magical place as far as Clarence was concerned, but suddenly people with even latent magic talent were full-blown ninth degree sorcerers. The appearance of magical creatures was so prevalent you

couldn't swing a tire iron without hitting a pixie, hobgoblin or faerie creature of some sort.

The Williams family talent for enchantment had awakened that summer too, not just in Clarence and Doris, but in their lawyer son Nathaniel, who developed a propensity for throwing fireballs and unexpectedly making things disappear. Everyone in the town was affected, but only a handful of people ever knew the real story.

Clarence has always been sensitive to the occult. After spending five years in a witch's coven with Doris back in the early seventies, he couldn't help but have some of it rub off on him.

Something is happening again, he sniffed the air suspiciously, I can't put my finger on it, but I have a funny feeling...



Herman Mullins

Herman was jolted awake by the heavy rumble of a black truck convoy pulling up to the camp's front gate.

Oh great, I fell asleep! He sat up and looked around frantically. As the trucks approached, he hurried to straighten his uniform and wipe the drool from the corner of his mouth.

Well, that's what they get for putting me on midnight guard duty. I'm the guy who fell asleep in the middle of Total Recall, when it was playing at the Bijou's Saturday afternoon matinee.

He saluted the driver of the lead truck as they drove past his post on their way to the Sugar Shack. The same Special Security Clearance ID that got the convoy

through the main gates also opened the big steel reinforced blast-proof front doors of the Shack. Herman watched as the last vehicle disappeared inside, thanking his lucky stars no one was paying attention to him.

The early morning sun was just creeping over the horizon. Herman was off duty in fifteen minutes. It had been a quiet night and he was ready to go home and get some real sleep. He slowly made his way back to the barracks to change into his civvies when his commanding officer came around the corner and bellowed, "Private Mullins!"

Herman whipped out one of his sharpest salutes, but because of his rather soft physique, it ended up looking more like a drunken Bali dance than a martial gesture.

"Yes sir!" he snapped as the rest of his body finally came to a halt.

"What in the blue blazes happened here last night?"

Herman felt something pinch his neck and he absently slapped at it. The Captain did the same thing, pausing only long enough to give Herman a sour look and rub at the side of his neck, "I'm waiting Private."

Herman was petrified. His head spun as he swayed on his feet and blurted out, "I wouldn't know sir, I've been asleep for the last couple hours."

The officer's eyes went wide and it looked like he was going to stroke out, but then he just blinked and replied, "You know I don't blame you son, I'm no good past eight o'clock myself, even on the weekends."

They both stopped and stared at each other for a second and then looked off to the side, as Herman struggled to figure out what had just happened.

Oh crap, I'm in trouble now, he thought worriedly. He attempted to break the spell, "I'm sorry sir, but I didn't see anything at all and I wasn't sleeping the whole night."

"I understand Private, but there's an alien ship in that building and two days ago, sensors indicated there were life forms in it and now there are none." Again, the two exchanged uncomfortable glances at the captain's frankness. "You didn't hear that from me by the way," he admitted, looking skyward. "Either way, we need to find out what happened in there or my ass is grass, so to speak. Now those surveillance cameras aren't showing anything so I, I guess I was just hoping you saw something."

Herman agreed something weird was going on, but he was still too shocked to form a proper reply without getting himself into more trouble, so he just shook his head.



Stone Rodriguez

After a long shift of staring at security camera feeds, Stone left the consulate and headed home. The working class Columbian neighborhood where he lived bustled with the late afternoon sound of children playing in the street and cars going past on their commute from the business district out to the hillside suburbs. As he parked his car and walked down the sidewalk, he saw his best friend Pedro sitting on the front porch with his hat pulled down over his eyes. Roosevelt the donkey stood beside

him, chewing contentedly on the next-door neighbor's already decimated flowering bush.

"Rough night my friend?" He offered.

"You know damn well I was plastered," Pedro said without lifting his hat, "by the way, thanks for making sure I made it home OK. Roosevelt said I was really out of it."

"*Haaaw*," the donkey added.

"Yeah well, you'd have done the same for me, right?"

"Not, if I was trashed too."

"Ok," Stone raised an eyebrow slightly and tilted his head back, "I'll have to keep that in mind."

"Oh now don't be that way," Pedro looked up, "you know if I'm able, I would fight through the gates of Hell with you, but if I'm drunk," he waved his hand, "forget it, you're on your own *File mou*."

Contrary to his stereotypical nickname, Pedro is the spitting image of Dudley Do-right of the Canadian Mounties from the old Saturday morning cartoons. Born on a tiny island off the coast of Greece, Pedropolis Constantinople grew up an army brat of a fifth generation enlisted man and a Danish dowager princess. In the DNA battle that ensued his conception, the Danish side won out, leaving Pedro well over six feet tall, skinny as a rail and pasty white, with sandy blonde hair and a chin you could crack coconuts on.

While he rarely rides the little donkey, he does take Roosevelt with him just about everywhere he goes. Pedro calls Stone, "Gringo" as a sort of ironic joke

between friends, even though in South America, Stone fits in ethnically way more than he does.

They both work at the US Embassy in Bogotá, Columbia, where Pedro is the general maintenance person for the fifty-acre complex and Stone is a security guard.

Bogotá is the largest city in Colombia. With over fifteen million residents, it figures among the top forty largest cities in the world. At eight thousand feet above sea level, it is the third-highest capital city in South America. Most of the city's residents live in the urban areas, with only a small population making their home in the northern foothills where the more affluent neighborhoods are located.

Stone preferred to live in the old part of the city. *The people are more down to earth here, he thought. It's funny, I feel way more comfortable living here, than I ever felt growing up in rural West Virginia.*

Chapter 3 – I Cannot Tell A Lie

Randy Herford

Randy steered his lifted and linked bumblebee yellow one-ton Ford F-350 Powerstroke-Turbo Diesel 4X4 pickup to the side of the mountain road and shut off the engine. Young Steffy Nottingham smiled up at him nervously as he shifted his considerable bulk around in the seat so he was facing her.

The moon was hiding behind a thick shroud of cloud cover, leaving the night sky and that section of forest, black as ink. Randy glanced off to the left and thought he could make out a faint glow on the horizon that marked the strip mine where he used to work. *That was before I got laid off indefinitely because of Obama's EPA,* he shook his head bitterly.

He smiled when he returned his attention to little Steffy, "You all don't have to sit so far away Sweetheart."

Randy reached back behind the seat, pulled out a bottle of Spiked Melon MD 20/20 and twisted off the cap. He tilted the container of cheap wine back and took a long swallow before offering it to Steffy. She backed away reflexively.

"You know Randy," she scoffed, "I don't think we should even be up here, 'sides, Mama told me I wasn't allowed to be alone with you." Steffy held up her chin and looked at him defiantly, as if just the mention of her mother would change anything. When it didn't, she sniffed and turned her back on him.

He reached across the seat and grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around to face him, then he stopped and forced a smile again. "Come on Baby loosen up. Here

try a little bit of this," he held up the bottle again, this time jiggling and sloshing the lime green liquid around for emphasis.

Her answer was the silence between them.

Well you blew it now, Randy thought as he recognized the look of fear in her eyes. He took another swig of wine and sat staring out the windshield of his truck.

The roads that intertwined with the Aquila Mine property went way up into the hills. Most of those roads (and in some cases goat paths) dead-ended out in the middle of the woods, like the one they were sitting on now.

He chuckled, *Far enough back in so no one can hear you scream,*.

Randy wasn't worried.

He grew up running these woods. That and he'd been a coal miner long enough to grow an impressive, if not intimidating mid-section. *One that would make even the baddest of the bad think before messing with me.*

He took another drink and they sat in silence.



Steffy Nottingham

Steffy knew now that she shouldn't have gotten in the truck with her mom's boyfriend. He told her he was taking her to the store, but by the time she realized he lied, it was too late.

Better to just do what he says and hope he doesn't try anything crazy.

Randy had been hitting on her for the last three months he'd been living with them, but every time Steffy tried to mention it, her mother told her to "just keep quiet and don't make trouble."

Randy sat in the darkness drinking and brooding.

Just as she was thinking she might be safe after all, she saw his eyes widen. When he turned to face her again his smile was the kind that incorporated all dozen of his remaining teeth, but was completely devoid of any goodwill or humor. Steffy scooted over on the seat, sliding up against the door so hard the handle dug into her ribs. She'd tried the latch earlier, but Randy had the locks disabled.

Just then, bright pinpricks of headlights appeared on the road below and slowly grew as they came closer. Randy slid back across the seat and squinted into the glare.

"God damn it," he snarled, "I can see you already asshole. Turn your hi-beams down." He started to get out, but when the blue and red flashing lights came on, Randy climbed back into the cab of the truck.

Bud Wilson, the Chief of Police for the Town of Fenton, stepped out of his black SUV cruiser, hitched up his gun belt, and slowly made his way over to the pick-up. Steffy jumped when Randy suddenly slapped at the side of his neck hard. "What the hell was that?" he whined in annoyance, rubbing at the spot with his hand.

"Randy Herford is that you?" Bud called out, shining his flashlight in on Steffy. "Hey Steffy, what are you doing out here?"

Randy smiled, closed his eyes to the glare, and opened his mouth, "Actually, I was just getting ready to

have my way with little Steffy here..." his eyes got big and he covered his mouth with both hands. Steffy's mouth hung open as she listened to Randy spilling his guts.

"You want to repeat that for me Randy?" Bud frowned and tilted his head, "I'm not sure if I heard you right."

Randy kept his hands over his mouth and just shook his head back and forth. When he didn't say anything else, Bud leaned into the window. "Can I give you a ride home Steffy? It's getting kind of late to be out here on a school night."

She nodded, pursed her lips at her captor and waited while he stabbed the unlock button. As she slipped out of the truck, Randy cautiously pulled his hands away from his mouth for a second and started to say, "but all I wanted was to get a little..." then slapped his hands back and rolled his eyes wildly.

Steffy climbed into the cruiser, closed the door, and watched while Bud went back to the truck and had a little talk with her mom's boyfriend. Bud frowned and pointed his finger a lot, leaning in occasionally for emphasis while Randy just stared at the ground and shook his head.

The Chief of Police climbed back in the cruiser muttering to himself, "What the hell was he thinking?" He turned towards her, "Is Randy always so honest about his attempts at sexual assault?"

Steffy shook her head.

"Do you think he'll try it again?"

She shrugged.

"Damn," he said, "I hope I put the fear of the law in him, for all the good that will do when he's drinking." He scratched his head, "Alcohol might explain the sudden psychopathic behavior, but I wonder what made him admit to it."

Steffy shrugged again, just as confused by Randy's actions. Bud shook his head, "Well either way, I'll have a little talk with your mother about this too, if you don't mind."

She shook her head; relieved that at least someone was on her side, "I really appreciate that Sir. I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"Now don't you talk that way, you didn't do anything wrong." He put his hand lightly on her shoulder, "Don't worry, we'll get this taken care of."



Stone Rodriguez

Stone sat in front of the wall of CCTV monitors, scanning the video feeds for anything unusual. As a security guard for the United States Embassy in Columbia, he is responsible for protecting the dignitaries who visit there.

He'd originally started his career right out of high school, enlisting in the Marines stationed in South America as part of a long term drug interdiction exercise. That's where he met Pedro. When Stone's time was up in the military, he wasn't sure if he wanted to stay in Columbia, but he also wasn't quite ready to go back home. At the advice of his good friend, he applied for a position at the consulate.

That was four years ago.

Working in the hallow halls of the United States Embassy in Bogota isn't all it's cracked up to be. Along with the diplomatic end of the mission, the embassy also houses representatives from the DEA, SOUTHCOM, CIA, ICE, DOD and a whole list of other acronym lettered agencies. In most cases, if Stone sees something out of the ordinary involving the staff, he has more of a tendency to look the other way. *If I want to keep my job.* With the many indiscretions he'd witnessed in the last four years, he has developed quite a kink in his neck.

Stone fit in well in South America. One reason is his ancestry. Born in Miami, Florida, Stone's father, Javier Rodriguez-Marrero was half Dominican and half Puerto Rican, while Stone's mother, Madison Whitefeather-Rodriguez is of German and American Indian descent, Choctaw to be specific. Ethnically, this made Stone, what would be considered a mixed up Mulatt-Ameri-Indian, with a just hint of Melungeon thrown in for flavor. The result is a dark skinned six-foot-three, two hundred and forty pound version of the ever popular and flamboyant, pay-per-view wrestler, affectionately known as The Rock. Leaving him with a look that, except for his height, could easily pass for South American, Mexican, or even Middle Eastern in a pinch.

Originally from West Virginia, the Rodriguez family lived in Miami until Stone was fourteen. Shortly after his Vato-Gangsta father got himself shot in the head in a drug deal, his mother moved him and his sister back to Appalachia.

Since going to work for the consulate in Columbia, the biggest problem Stone had was sexual harassment.

Never perpetrating it himself, but as the victim. More times than he could count, he has been cornered by unwanted attentions and forced to succumb to all sorts of groping and fondling, before being able to tactfully withdraw himself from the situation. This tended to be a problem, especially when your boss is the one with the Russian hands and Roman fingers.



Jasper Clark

Eighty-six-year-old Jasper ravenously gummed the piece of New York Strip steak his wife Eunice just broiled for him with a focused sense of determination. Hot juices ran down his chin where they squeezed out of the unbelievably tender cut of beef. He hated his false teeth and rued the day when he had to have the last of his precious originals yanked out in favor of sculpted hunks of hard plastic. *I have trouble even keeping them in my mouth without gagging.*

At eighty-three years young, Eunice still has most of her original teeth, the product of parents who spared no orthodontic expense in the name of dental hygiene. They also forced her to forgo most sugary snacks growing up, where Jasper was that kid who went to sleep every night with a big wad of bubble gum in his mouth. By the time Jasper was fourteen, he already had cavities in most of his permanent teeth.

It's tough being a lion when you don't have any bite, he frowned, lionesses laugh at you and the males of the pride are embarrassed for you, because they know that someday it will be them.

For a very brief period of time last year, Jasper was a lion again. He smiled when he rubbed his fingers together and sparks appeared between them. *Just eight months ago, there were real fireballs coming out of there. I showed Amos Hamrick how much his ratty old varsity jacket was worth, he nodded and chuckled, heh, heh, yep, scorched the damn thing right off his worthless hide when he messed with me.*

Unfortunately now Jasper was back to being ineffectual again. He rubbed his fingers together a little harder this time. Two tiny sparks formed and a little blue flame appeared, wavering for a second, only to fizzle out again just like before.

Somewhere in the process of his magical awakening Eunice has learned to show him a little more respect too, but for all of her caring and doting, she still treats him like a helpless old man.

Hunh, Jasper thought shaking his head, if I'da known growing old was gonna be this much trouble, I wouldn't have even bothered.

Chapter 4 – One Door Opens, Another Closes

Stacy Lizemore

The morning sun shone brightly as a stiff breeze blew across the airport runway. Stacy held her breath as the plane rocked back and forth in time to the buffeting winds. The FAA examiner had a mildly concerned look on his face, but otherwise waited patiently for the control tower to give them clearance.

Once they were ready for takeoff, Stacy said a little prayer and increased the throttle, allowing the RPM's to build a little before disengaging the brake. The airplane started rolling forward, taxiing slowly toward the main runway like a blushing bride stepping up to the altar. Once in position, she throttled both engines to almost full. The roar of the twin turbocharged three hundred and ten horsepower Continental power plants drowned out any misgivings Stacy might have had about her ability to ace this last part of her pilot license exam. She knew now that all the years of preparation, studying and the cockpit instruction time, wouldn't let her down.

When the plane reached take off speed, Stacy eased back on the stick confidently and felt the nose rise as the plane left the ground and began climbing up into the clear blue sky. When they reached ten thousand feet she let the stick return to the center, allowing her flight path to level off, then she reduced the throttle a little to conserve fuel. Stacy looked over at the FAA examiner and allowed an uneasy smile to crack the corner of her mouth. For the first time today, he smiled back, signaling she hadn't totally screwed up yet.

The final part of the testing for a commercial pilot's license required Stacy to prove she could fly blind using only instruments to navigate. That had turned out to be one of the easier parts compared to the seemingly endless hours of flight time required at two hundred dollars an hour.

Being a licensed commercial pilot has always been Stacy's dream. When she was a little girl, she used to marvel at the crop duster planes working the fields over her parent's farm. She knew right there and then, that was what she wanted to do when she grew up. She has been so dedicated to her dream that every spare penny she made for the last five years, has gone towards making this day happen.

So far the flight was going smoothly, everything according to plans, the plane's engines purred along like two four hundred pound Bengal tigers in the open sky. Suddenly, the low fuel warning light activated, flashing and beeping annoyingly, telling Stacy one of the tanks was low.

But I checked that all before we left! She thought as she stabbed the button to stop the light from flashing. *It's ok Stacy, just stay calm,* she told herself as she reached for the switch to change over to the other tank. The light stopped blinking and went out completely.

Whew that was a close one. She looked over at the examiner and shrugged, hoping he wouldn't hold it against her. The fuel gauges were both reading full. She poked at the malfunctioning gauge with her finger. Suddenly the fuel warning light and buzzer went off again. This time both lights were flashing. Stacy glanced over at the examiner and felt a surge of panic. There was a genuine

look of fear in the man's eyes as he reached across and started poking the buttons too. The buzzing was getting louder now and for some reason it was making her dizzy. She felt like she was going to throw up.

...and then she woke up.

Her alarm clock was one of those kinds that the longer it rang the louder it got. From the looks of it, it had been going off for ten minutes and finally reached full blasting your brains out volume.

Stacy rolled over, one hand holding her head and the other blindly slapping the snooze button. She rolled back without looking up. The sun was shining through the side window and right into her eyes. She'd been up half the night studying for her final flight exam and now she was paying the price.

It was Friday and she didn't have to be at work until nine. Lacking any real motivation, she closed her eyes again, knowing she still had a little time to lie in bed before the real world forced her to get up.

Another day of slingin hash at the truck stop, Stacy sighed, but soon, hopefully I'll be soaring with the eagles.



Stone Rodriguez

Stone had just finished his shift and was walking down the hallway in Diplomat's Wing of the main building when he heard what sounded like someone moaning in pain.

He backed up and the sound grew louder. It appeared to be coming from one of the many identical

offices located in the rarely used section of the embassy. He turned around and started back, listening for the sound again. He came to a heavy oak paneled door and leaned close, putting his ear right up against the cool wooden surface. The door must not have been latched too well because when he leaned against it, it swung open slowly to reveal a man and a woman standing with their backs to him.

The man was leaning over a desk; his hands were tied securely to the legs on either side and his feet were shackled to the other two. He was naked except for a black leather hood that partially obscured his identity. The woman still had her back to Stone and was also mostly naked too except for a skimpy black PVC bikini and red high heeled boots that came up to her crotch. She wore a leather biker's hat tilted sideways on her head and some kind of harness around her groin area. She appeared to be humping the man from behind.

Stone tried backing out of the office quietly, but his hand slipped on the knob. The door swung away from him and banged against the wall loudly.

Both occupants turned to look at him.

It was at that moment he realized the woman was his boss and the man appeared to be one of the homeless people who hang out in front of the embassy every day looking for handouts. The smell of rotten body odor and stale alcohol fumes confirmed his suspicions.

"Rodriguez!" Special Security Attaché Victoria Smith yelled at him, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Stone had trouble keeping the smirk off his face as he answered innocently, "I thought I heard someone in pain."

As if on cue, the drunk moaned again and tried to stand up. Victoria frowned, slapped him hard with her rider's crop and turned back. Stone briefly allowed his eyes to travel up and down her mostly naked figure and at the get-up she was wearing.

His boss grimaced. "Get out!" her eyes bugged as she yelled so furiously her nostrils flared to the size of marbles, "and don't you ever come back. I'm sick of you Rodriguez, YOU'RE FIRED!"

Stone was speechless. As he backed out of the room, he knew she was right. A security consultant working for the U.S. Consulate was employed as an at-will-and-pleasure subcontractor, meaning that even though he worked for the government, he didn't have any right to the grievance process and if she wanted to, she could get rid of him at any time, for any reason.

After four years of working at the Columbian Embassy, Stone Rodriguez was suddenly unemployed.

End of free preview

Greg Wagner lives in a tree house with his wife Roberta and their dogs Olivia, Cleo, and Abby on the side of Wagner Mountain (more like a really big, really steep hill) in Maysel, West Virginia.

When he isn't plotting to take over the world or in the search of spiritual enlightenment, Greg manages to find time to spin yarns of wonder and amazement. In whatever time is left, he enjoys riding his motorcycle, reading, splitting firewood, making music and playing with melted glass.

His other books can be found at <http://www.gregwagnerbooks.com>