

Mojave

Mojave

1

Lancaster, California - 6/18/2015 - Mojave Desert

"What've we got?"

Norman Wilkes Jr. had been working for the county sheriff's department, by that point, for the better part of his life. That night, an anonymous tip had dragged him from his usual patrol route to a dried-out lake about a half hour into the Mojave Desert.

He'd known it well.

He and Norman Sr. used to fish here.

The night sky would take over with splatters of fluttering stars cast as far as the eyes could see.

Soon, they'd be making way for the sunrise.

At one time, that too had a been something of a spectacle—watching the rays of shine glimmer and dance over the rippling waters was unanimously considered therapeutic.

Now, with nothing but sand and a pile of dead bodies in place of the water, Norman feared that the sun would do little more than provide good lighting for a sight that no one had wanted to see.

Shit way to go...Shit way to start a day, Norman thought and slid his thumbs into his, already strained, waistband—yanking at his green khaki pants and not so discreetly adjusting the pink lace underwear, he'd snuck under them.

...they made him feel pretty.

"Three bodies, chief." The young officer spoke in a low pitch—as if to feign non-surprise at the scene. Bobby Johnson's shifts had always overlapped with Norman's. Though he'd had little say in the schedule (a choice) Norman always made sure that Bobby was on duty whenever he was.

"There are two over by cacti," Bobby said.

Male and female. Identified as Mr. and Mrs. Guzman. They were neighbors whom Norman had considered friends. In Lancaster, most people were a fair bit more acquainted to most others than you'd find in any big city.

"And a third a little further out," Bobby continued.

He's competent, Norman thought as his eyes connected with the corpses.

Mojave

"Who's the third?" Norman asked.

Bobby's head sprouted from his chest—breaking alignment with the notepad that'd been trembling in his hands. "Um..." Bobby staggered. "It's—Uhm. Definitely a woman." He'd sounded more like he was guessing a million-dollar question on a game show than an officer on duty.

Cute, Norman thought. "You're going to have to do me a little better than that, son. Who's working on the identification?"

"Forensics are on their way. But..." *A pause*. "I really don't see that making much of a difference."

"Why the hell not?"

Bobby's head shot out of the desert and toward the highway where the morning rush had just been begun to trickle out of and into town. His face flushed and he was hesitant to answer.

Bad sign, Norman thought.

"Officer!" Norman barked. "I asked you a question!"

"She has no head, Sir." Bobby rushed.

"Excuse me?"

A beat.

Bobby continued. "The third victim appears to have been decapitated. We won't know any specifics until the right guys get a look at it. Honestly chief," Bobby dropped his ass on the hood of his patrol car. "I think that we're just working security on this one."

"Cause of death," Norman asked.

"For two out of three, I'd guess a .45. The third one over there, that one seemed personal."

"Hmm," Norman growled. "Who else have you called?"

"For now, just you. Sorry I—I wasn't sure exactly what the protocol was. This has got to be the first triple murder in this town since the gold rush."

Though, he would never consider himself an old-man (despite the increased frequency of elderly nicknames), moments like this—the numb ones—just reminded Norman of how much he'd seen.

How much he'd repressed.

How much he'd broken.

"Right," Norman answered. *A grunt*. "I want you to head back into town and personally knock on every door and start asking questions. Start with the neighbors and don't stop until we've got a lead. *Capiche?*"

Mojave

"Crystal clear, Sir." Bobby stood at attention. "But what about you?"

Norman smiled.

"I've got some guys on the way. I'll send you a "bad-cop" if you're up for playing the game. Other than that." A belch. "We're just picking up breadcrumbs and hoping to make toast. Here..."

A single hand flew into Norman's pocket, bounced around, and rose with a wrinkled \$20 in its center. Norman jettied the bill to Bobby. "You go get yourself a nice cup of *joe* and something to eat. It's gonna be a long day, kid."

"You got it, chief. But," Bobby had almost appeared afraid to ask—given that he'd just been gifted a *get out of trauma*-free card, Norman couldn't blame him. "What about you?"

Norman dug his thumbs back into his stretchy waistband. "I'm going to stick around here for a little while. Wait for forensics. Maybe see if I can't rustle up something that we can use."

A pause.

"Do you think that we'll catch him, boss?"

"Don't worry, kid," he encouraged with a confident nod. "We're gonna' be alright. We'll catch this son-of-a-bitch in no time and I'll be god damned if he doesn't get the *sweet-needle* for it."

"For the love of everything that's good, I hope that you're right, Norm."

"Rarely wrong when it comes to crime, Bobby."

"Oh, and chief?" Bobby said as the car door swung open and he'd just as quickly melted into its seat. "There's one more thing."

"What's that?" Norman snarled.

"She, uh—"

"Spit it out, boy!"

"I can't say for sure, but by the looks of it, she may have been with child."

"Hmm," Norman grunted. "So, he's killed four?"

"Not exactly," Bobby lamented. "Whoever did this, must've cut the baby out. Fair warning--the corpse looks like a truck with the windows busted in."

"Real delicate, Bobby..." Norman quipped.

"Hey, it's just us and I'm just reporting. Trust me, you'll appreciate the heads up."

"Noted," Norman answered.

Not a minute later—Bobby had driven off (almost too eagerly), leaving a long horizontal cloud of dust hovering over his tire tracks—unaware that his engine had been rigged to blow.

Mojave

And Norman was alone.

"God damn it, Claudia," he muttered and lit a cigarette.

"What the fuck did you make me do?"

2

Lancaster, California - 6/16/2015 - "The Trap" Bar & Grill

The bar was a gross looking thing—and quite simply what it was built to be. On a single large mirror covered the entirety of the western wall. In addition to giving the small space a larger look—it'd also seemed to attract several sketch and graffiti artists--the floors were covered in the sparkling shimmer of glass pieces too tiny for the broom to sweep up.

On the opposing side of the mirror (which Norman had now believed to dual as a blackboard) was the bar—along with several rickety bar stools and a dusty jukebox—whose primary function was aesthetic (though it did play a single song. "One" by Bob Dylan).

By then, Norman had heard that damn tune enough to let it serenade him into madness.

But, there were more pressing matters at hand.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Norman shot as the stringy-looking man sat on the barstool beside him with a grin and little else. Combined with his addiction-inspired appearance and unkempt facial hair, he'd looked more like the target than the killer.

But it was the best that Norman could've done at such short notice.

"Our business is done," Norman angrily added. "You're supposed to be halfway across the world by now."

"Sorry, big guy." He sounded like an executioner—forced to bid his victim farewell. "I run a business. That being so, I am apt to absorb any opportunities that may come my way. *Exhibit A*, your sorry ass..."

He threw an arm into the air and from his tweaking digits, managed to keep two fingers still long enough for the bartender to notice. He'd been here often. Too often.

As a matter of fact, they'd met here not that long ago.

"I don't understand," Norman said, as a highball of whiskey was displayed in front of the two men and garnished with lime and soda. "Our *business* is done. You've got your money." *A sip.* "Fuck off."

Mojave

"You see," the stringy man shrugged. "I don't necessarily agree with that statement."

"Oh, no?" Norman released the latch on his gun-strap—nice and slow so that the man could see. "You're treading steep waters here, son."

"Hmm," he mocked. "How adorable."

"Pardon?"

"No. No. No." He dismissively waved his hands and shook his head. "Please...Please finish threatening me, so that I could add something to my file of your recorded phone calls and bank deposits."

The latch reconnected.

"Piece of shit..." Norman grit. "What do you want?"

"Half..."

"What!" Norman startled. "Half of what?"

"Insurance pays a pretty penny for dead spouses. I just want my fair share."

Norman leaned in and muttered with a rasp, "You got your fucking money and, right now, you're lucky that I don't arrest you for blackmail."

The stringy man laughed. "Arrest me? Really? Is that your big plan," he shrugged he'd been threatened by a child.

"Could be. Of course, it wouldn't be the end of it either," Norman added.

"Norm," the stringy man spoke softly, almost as if trying to *woo* the aging officer to his way of seeing things. But, this wasn't a negotiation. Norman had long decided against that.

Too many times. He thought. Too many times, I've seen bastards shipped off to hell just because someone got greedy.

Not me.

NOT ME.

The stringy man continued.

"...I'm a mid-40's contract killer who's been doing this since before the last time you were able to see your toes while standing up. If you're going threaten someone, make sure that it's someone who'd give a shit about your badge."

"Oh," Norm said flatly. "It has nothing to do with my badge. "Similar to you, Derek, I've been around the block a few times as well."

"How the fuck do you know my name?"

Mojave

"Only an idiot would get involved with a guy like you without taking certain precautions. I've got to say...it wasn't easy."

"I should kill you where you sit."

"You could," Norman took a sip of his whiskey and let it slither down his throat like death-knell it was. "This is good stuff. I'd love to try it again sometime. How about you?"

"Don't fuck with me, Norm. I want my money."

"You've got your money," Norman muttered again. "FUCK...OFF."

"Listen," Derek crunched in close and had suddenly dawned an expression of panic. "If you think that I want to be here, in front of you right now, doing this, then you are highly fucking mistaken."

"We had a deal, Derek. You're only here because you've pissed through what you got. *Not my problem.*"

Derek shot his head around the bar. It was almost midnight on a Tuesday. There'd been some traffic in and out, but for the most part—the place was a ghost-town accompanied by a Bob Dylan record and some subtle racism.

Derek's chin dove into his collarbone. "...And the kid?"

A pause.

Fuck, Norman thought.

"What about it?"

"I'm not going to get into your business here, Norm, but promises were made. Ten grand a body. Double for kids. That's my price. That was our arrangement. You knew that."

"First off," Norman sniped, "...if you think that I'm about to let you charge me for your dual fuck-up, *you're* highly mistaken."

Norman chugged the remainder of his whiskey and stood to his feet—closer to wobbled. "And secondly, you knew that she was pregnant. As far as I'm concerned, that's on you."

"You've got some kind of fucking nerve..." Derek slinked over the bar—craning above his drink like a fly on shit. "Thought you were supposed to be the good guy? What happened to that?"

Silence.

The pause was enough to ward off any further questions or antagonization. Norman spun away from Derek and concluded, "When it pays." Adjusting his off-duty attire—sweatpants, a windbreaker jacket, and black kangol hat—Norman shuffled his way out of the bar.

Drunk...

—but not overly so.

Mojave

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At two in the morning, *The Trap* would close and with its abrupt end followed the closest thing that anyone in town had gotten to prohibition. After Norman had left the bar—seemingly having destroyed any chance of paying him, Derek decided to get drunk.

Too drunk.

He wasn't quite sure if it were due to his sullen haunting of the space with his jeers and obviously *spun-out* gaze into the abyss of nothing as the bar-maid intruded.

"Sir—" in a nasally wane. "Sir, are you going to need a cab?"

"No," Derek nearly vomited. "I'm fine. I'm fine." His head lowered back to the bar table—bouncing a bit before settling beside his empty glass.

"Sir," the waitress intruded again. "...the bar is closed and I can't start cleaning until everyone is out."

"I don't mind."

"It's regulation..." She added—biting down on her maw as if it were the pin to a grenade. Derek figured that a part of her wished that it had been...He'd been unsure if he agreed. "I need everyone out or I'm stuck here. So, if you don't mind..."

"I get it. I get it. I'm moving."

Using his arms, Derek pried himself from the bar and somehow managed to his feet without tipping over to one side or the other—though that possibility had still been as real as the hangover he'd be expecting the following morning.

"Take care now, Maisie."

"Will do, D." She winked at him as he used the front door as something of an inconvenient crutch. "Try to keep yourself out of trouble, you hear?"

"Crystal clear, beloved. Tell your sister that I said hi."

"Pshh..." The waitress chided. "She doesn't want to talk to you."

Never stopped us before, Derek thought—pushing the door open and letting it slam shut behind him.

It was his own, personal, little, "*fuck you*" to decency.

He figured that she'd get over it.

Outside, was something less than a parking lot. More so, it was just a patch of dirt—indistinguishable from the rest of the desert (save for its closeness to civilization). Derek had driven a 1999 Toyota Corolla—a graduation gift from his mother upon her passing.

It was chipped.

Mojave

Rusted.

And stalled more often than it beat the speed limit.

But it was his.

"Hey, girl," he whispered to the car. "How are you doing ba...*urgh*."

Something had wrapped around his throat and been squeezing like a python strangling its branch to avoid the fire. "*Lerrrrttt gooooo*," Derek babbled as he gripped his assailant's arm and wriggled in countless directions—hoping to find freedom.

Hoping he'd survive.

"You want to make fucking threats, you little shit?"

Norman? Derek thought.

"I'll make you a fucking promise."

"Wait," Derek pleaded. "Norman, please! I'm—"

Craaacckkkk.

Like kernels of popcorn, Derek's vertebrae had popped from his spine. When his body flailed to the ground—he could have sworn he'd heard his own cartilage and bone swilling beneath his skin like loose marbles in a sock.

"I promise that you've made your last mistake."

Norman wiped the blood from his windbreaker with a napkin that he'd kept in his breast pocket. As all things had gone black, he'd waited to ensure that nothing arrived for Derek but the cold chill of death and the ceasing of his beating heart.

"Let go, kid," Norman encouraged—as if he hadn't just killed him. "Let go..."

And he did.

Norman had almost left without noticing the tiny passenger in Derek's backseat.

"Fuck."

Mojave

Palmdale, California - 6/15/2015 - Guzman Residence (1676 Kirkland Ave)

"Okay," Lucy panted as she and Derek arrived just outside of the home. "Are you sure that this is it?"

"Positive," Derek answered.

It had been just past midnight. The streets were silent. Most folks were asleep. A steady breeze danced its way into the car as Derek lowered the passenger seat window. "1676 Kirkland Ave..." He scoffed. "Do you really think that I'm too dumb to figure out an address, babe?"

"No, I just...I just..." Lucy landed her back against the passenger seat and lowered it as far as it'd go without giving her nausea. "It's just hormones, I guess." A sneeze. "Can you really blame me for being concerned?"

Derek removed the keys from the ignition and unbuckled himself. For a minute or two, he'd been so consumed by the mission that he'd barely paid any mind to the possible consequences that could've come, had anything gone wrong.

This time, it wouldn't just be him that'd gone to jail.

It'd be him along with his fiancé, Lucy, and their unborn child.

By then, she'd looked like she was ready to pop—though the doctors had steadfastly claimed she'd need at least another couple of weeks before intervening in the child's estimated time of arrival.

Pregnancy proved to be an inconvenience, giving way to some tough times—in no small part due to Lucy being the better half of their operation.

Whereas Derek could flawlessly play the muscle, Lucy was the brains. Without her, they'd have still been on the streets—digging in trash cans for portions of discarded food and entertaining the idea of prostitution.

For either of them.

Derek figured that he'd fallen in love with her then. At the prospect of handing her off to another man, he'd not only flinched but responded in the only way that may have guaranteed her cooperation with his heart.

He put the baby in her.

He saw fit to pay the price.

"No, babe. I can't. But, I promise that this will all be over soon. Before you know it, we'll be back at our place, with our feet kicked up, and the whole world will be none the wiser."

A grunt.

Mojave

Lucy raised her seat back upright. "Good," Lucy pained. "...because I could use a foot rub, a back rub, and a warm bath." She'd struggled through her speech as if she'd been periodically dipping her head into a pool of water.

She'd been complaining like this for weeks but Derek didn't mind it. As far as he was concerned, it was a fair trade for fatherhood. He'd have gladly put up with twice as much—if it made her happy.

Lucy was a small woman—not legally designated, but she'd been no further than a few inches away from being deemed a little person. As a joke, Derek had often called her his *Tinkerbell*. Somehow, the name had stuck and was swiftly followed by the whirlwind romance of his life.

Now, all that he'd needed was to find a way to afford it.

"Don't worry, baby—" Derek leaned in close so that he could smell the baby powder she'd doused herself in prior to squeezing back into her *pre-baby* clothes. Placing a hand on her face—just on the curve of her olive-skinned jaw, he continued. "I promise that you're gonna have all of that and more, baby. Trust me."

"I trust you." Lucy smiled her half-grin—like a magnet had been pulling on a single side of her lips. As Derek stared deeply into her green eyes, she pulled his free hand atop her belly (which had been barely covered by the shirt she'd worn).

"We both do," she added.

After one of their passionate and over-affectionate make-out sessions, the game was on.

Both wielding shotguns the size of professional baseball bats, the two crept up the steps of 1676 Kirkland Ave and made their way in.

As promised, the door was left unlocked.

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"Shh," Derek urged as he and Lucy tip-toed through the home.

"Babe..." Lucy sounded worried. Then again, she always did.

"What, honey?"

"Are you sure that this is the right address?"

The street address had matched up with what Derek had remembered—though he'd been sheepish about admitting that he'd never bothered to write it down. When Norman had hired him, he'd specified the details to avoid any avoidable mix-ups.

This particular area of California had been notorious for repeating street names (replacing the latter word with *BLVD*, *LN*, *RD*, *CT*, or any other number of variations—just so that some magnate could have their surname plastered around town).

He didn't think it'd be too much of a problem.

Mojave

Who else would make this so easy, he thought.

"I'm sure," Derek rasped, just louder than a mutter.

White house. Two floors. Unicorn doormat, Derek thought.

"Did you get a look at the doormat?"

"No," Lucy answered. "Why."

A pause.

"No reason. Let's go."

The steps were older than Derek was told they'd be—though, he'd shunned the thought with a mental reminder of Norman's age. He'd specifically remembered Norman being proud of the staircase in his home (he'd just had them redone).

In any case, Derek couldn't shake the thought that perhaps the old man had been slipping a bit. Small details were of little consequence.

But, the check cleared.

Maybe he didn't hire me in all good conscience, Derek thought. *What if he's made a mistake?*

The thought to phone Norman had crossed his mind until he'd realized that he'd been in the home alongside him. Assuming that Norman would have been smart enough to provide himself an alibi, Derek continued—half-hoping that the old sheriff would pop up out of the shadows and tell him that he and his pregnant fiancé could go home—no harm, no foul.

No such luck came as Derek and Lucy arrived at the top of the staircase, and he'd made eye-contact with a woman—who'd been still beneath her bed sheets.

"This is it..." Derek muttered to himself. "You ready, baby?"

"Uhm..." Lucy had all of a sudden become bashful. It wasn't like her.

"What's wrong?"

A beat.

"I've got to pee," Lucy whimpered and soon was twisting and jiggling erratically—confirming her statement. "Can I go to the bathroom?"

A sigh.

"Alright," Derek agreed. "But, use the one downstairs. If anything goes wrong, I don't want you getting pinned in this shit-hole."

"Rodger that, captain," Lucy smiled. All at once, Derek had remembered why he'd fallen in love with her.

Mojave

He watched as she carefully descended the steps with her shotgun—still performing her "pee-dance" and uncontrollably popping with tiny squeals as every drop of her leg impacted the steps.

It looked like it hurt.

So, Derek was hesitant to correct her. "Be safe, Tweedle," he whispered.

"You too, Doodle," she answered and blew him a kiss.

A second later, she was out of sight.

And Derek had a job to do.

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Derek's business wasn't one known for its varied pages of rules and regulations. Moreso, everything in the world of a contract killer operated on a sort of *Scouts Honor* code of ethics (though there was no *real* enforcement to the rule aside from a potential price on your head).

All in all, the business was straightforward.

Curious or not.

Right or wrong.

Black or white.

The deal was made and Derek had already begun spending the money that he'd been intent to earn. He'd just hoped that things wouldn't get too messy.

Cleanups were the worst. And sometimes, nearly as much of a hassle as the murder itself.

"Best use a pillow," Derek said to himself, as he crept forward toward the bedroom door—it'd been left ajar enough to clearly make out the limp body on the mattress inside. "Damn, Norman..." Derek whispered to himself. "As deep as she's asleep, you could've done this yourself."

Derek placed his shotgun against the wall in the hall—beside the bedroom door—where he could easily retrieve it upon leaving and slid a single earbud into his ear.

"THE SOUND OF SILENCE" BY SIMON & GARFUNKEL

He pressed play and approached the body.

Grabbing a spare pillow from the empty side of the bed, Derek took joy in *performing* his murder—humming along while he floated the pillow over the woman's face and awaited the lyrics to begin.

♪ "Hello darkness my old friend..." ♪

Mojave

He descended the pillow softly atop the woman's head—it siphoned off her breathing. Anything too abrupt may have woken her.

♪ "I've come to talk with you again..." ♪

The first few moments were calm and eerily peaceful—almost as if the devil had yet to start the fire for his incoming soul.

Derek hummed and pressed the pillow down just hard enough for his fingers to align with her ears.

♪ "Because a vision softly creeping..." ♪

"Left its seed while I was sleeping," Derek sang lowly as the woman's body began to fidget and seize.

♪ "...And the vision, that was planted in my brain—" ♪

"Still remains..."

The woman's arms shot up into the air and flailed like fish ejected from a river rapid.

She was awake now.

But Derek had already come too far to be an angel now.

He pressed down as hard as he could—mounting the woman's body to keep her legs from jolting right off of the bed. Holding her still—locked stiff with his knees and elbows—he waited for it all to go blank.

♪ " Within the *soooooounnnnd...*" ♪

Derek paused the song.

A flushing toilet had snapped him out of his meditative state.

Looking down and seeing that the woman had no longer been moving, Derek removed the pillow and dismounted.

Again, as per instruction, he took the .45 from his waistband,

Screwed on the silencer.

And shot her twice in the head.

"Done," he sighed in relief—snapping a photo on his cell-phone for proof.

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"You alright?" Lucy asked—wiping a stream of sweat from a wrinkle in her brow.

Derek had been descending the steps—anxious and overjoyed that the job was finally done and that he and Lucy could finally return to their regularly scheduled program of "*Netflix and Chill*".

Mojave

He'd been charging down the steps with a smile when it occurred to him--

"Babe," he whispered. "Where's your gun?"

"Oh," Lucy stuttered, "I must've left it in the bathroom."

Almost as if on cue the double-barreled gun lowered just beside Lucy's head and rested on her shoulder.

"Who are you!" The man screamed—sounding more like a rabid dog than anything human.

"Norman! Calm down!" Derek urged—attempting to size up the man who'd been shaped quite different. "It's me!"

"Who's Norman!" The man shouted. "My name is Jeremiah Guzman and you have exactly three seconds before I blow this bitch's head off!"

Lucy's eyes shut tight enough to rip her eyelids clean off of her face, "Baby..." She cried as the men stared each other down.

A sudden contraction surprised them all.

"Ahhh...Urgh..." Lucy screamed.

Jerimiah pulled the trigger.

"No!"

Derek pulled his own.

He flew down the remainder of the staircase to Lucy. Arriving at her lifeless body, he'd held her hand and begged her to "...wake up".

He must've accidentally hit play. Beside his tears and panic was the score that had just moments earlier been one of celebration.

Now, it seemed to represent, only pain.

♪ "...Of silence..." ♪

4

Palmdale, California - 6/15/2015 - Wilkes Residence (1676 Kirkland Blvd)

"Norman!" Her voice was like having a perpetual stream of nails hammered into his ear-drum.

"Norman! You, old saggy bag of crap! Answer me!"

He never answered right away.

Mojave

And he hated dinner parties.

It was always better to wait until her throat had started to dry-out and interrupt her rampage with a barrage of cracks, coughs, and pauses. "Nor—"

Cough.

Cough.

It was the best way to ensure that he'd get a word in before she'd inevitably won the argument. "God damn it, woman! I'm diabetic, not deaf!"

"Could've fooled me, you shit-kicking mule."

They'd been arguing for months—in no small part due to an infidelity that he'd yet to confront her about.

"Look," Norman said pointedly, "Are we going or what?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Claudia snapped. "I'm just putting my face on."

"It's easier when you're sober," Norman chided.

"What!" Claudia barked.

"Nothing," Norman answered and squirmed back to his *EZ-SIT* recliner.

He thought it ironic.

After his first wife had passed some years prior—Norman had spent a fair amount of time (too much) courting prostitutes and strip clubs. Needless to say, he wasn't exactly proud of his behavior. However, at his age, he'd seen little other way to entertain his genitals and carpal tunnel had prevented him from *relieving himself* to any *real* satisfaction.

On the very day that he'd decided *paying for it* was the only viable option (other than seeking out an age-appropriate woman...which disgusted him), he met Claudia.

After four weeks of her fucking his brains out and draining his bank accounts—the two were engaged.

Two months later, they were married.

With eight years of marriage—long having taken its toll on the two—they'd found themselves trapped together "for better or for worse". Though he'd been willing to attempt salvaging the marriage, Claudia's mind had been made up and divorce talk had been becoming quite the conversational touchstone.

This bitch is gonna' take me for everything I've got? He thought. "Over my dead body," he mumbled back to himself. All at once he was awash with calming revelation.

This was his *mantra*.

Mojave

His jaded *haiku*.

His *peace*.

But why should a paid killer get to have all the fun, he thought.

He's seen this before.

Countless times.

He'd been on this call.

He knew the mistakes.

"Honey," Norman gently called. "Could you come here for a second?"

Gripping the arms of the recliner, he pushed himself to his feet (the first time in months that he'd done so without using the mechanism for assistance). Searching around the room—he'd found a thin but sturdy blanket and decided that it was right.

"I'M BUSY NORMAN!" Claudia yelled.

"Well, then..." Norman stood at the top of the stairs—blanket in hand and estimating how loud she'd be. Lucky for him, the two had argued enough that any death rattles would likely have gone by unnoticed—assumed results of presumed marital discord. Both correct.

God, I love this country, Norman thought. "I'll come to you."

A grunt.

"Fine," Claudia sniped. "Make it quick."

"Oh..." Norman assured. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

She was dead before his carpal tunnel kicked in and left him writhing beside her dented esophagus.

"That'll do, pig." He said while her death rattle slowed to a whirring gargle and then to nothing at all.

"That'll do."

*

Norman had been trying to call Derek for the hours between Claudia's death and Derek's *ETA*. When he'd first met him—through a mutual friend who'd prefer to remain anonymous--he took him as the kind of guy who got things done,

—permanently.

Now, with his ostensible neglect, Norman had become grateful that he'd allowed his impulse to prevail. *The bitch* was dead.

Mojave

He anticipated that what followed would be easy enough.

5

Lancaster, California - 6/18/2015 - Mojave Desert

Norman pulled the cigarette away from his mouth and exhaled a cloud of thick smoke as the sun began to peak over the horizon. About a half a mile away, Bobby's car had exploded—as planned—and been smoldering in a heap of desert ash and burning fuel.

The blaze would most certainly have garnered the attention of passerby's.

Time was running out.

"Look away, little one," Norman instructed to the child he'd left asleep in his back seat. Never having had any children of his own—he was ill-prepared and forced to line a laundry basket with some blankets. He'd strapped the baby in the center—using both buckles and a variety of soft things to wedge the makeshift crib still. "You don't want to see this."

Circling around to the back of the vehicle, Norman popped open his trunk and from it—heaved the bodies of both Claudia and Derek.

In a way, he'd seen it as poetic.

Reuniting in death, the very group of people who'd avalanched into each other's lives.

"Poetry," he muttered as his wife's body slammed against the desert ground like a maggot-infested sack of meat.

"Poetry."

He'd have to bury them. ALL of them, if he'd had any hopes of living the rest of his life without fear of a cell or that *sweet-needle*. With Bobby incapacitated, time was on his side.

In this, he took solace, though he feared it may have only been the sunrise.

To the baby, "You know, I used to come out here some years ago with *my* father. It was a lake back then. All of this was." Norman surveyed the land as if it were his and his alone.

The child had awoken. Though it'd been mute thus far, it'd made eye contact—the knowing kind that infants make to let you know that you've got their attention.

"Beautiful sight."

Like bomb strapped to his neck—it hit him.

Mojave

"You know, you ought to take a look as well," he said like the grandfather he'd always hoped he'd be. "After tonight, there's no telling if either of us will ever get the chance again."

Finally, the orange ring had been nearly visible as the sky donned a pinkish-golden hue—it'd spread across the sky at a snail's pace—dissipating the darkness and adorning the new day.

"Come on, kid. Let's get you started right."

He held the child while the sun dug a path back to its rightful place in the sky—bouncing him ever so gently.

"Damn *beaut...* ain't it, boy?" Norman smiled and looked down to the child.

When he looked up at him—with his blaring blue eyes and smiled back—Norman decided right then to keep him.

He decided that they'd be okay.

But first, *Pop-pop* had some bodies to bury.

The End.