

Jones -- 1

Steven Philip Jones
437 Duke Street SW
Cedar Rapids, IA 52404-8215
(319) 366-5176

4,122 words
(c) 1994 TMP, Inc.

SPAWN

(based on characters and situations created by Todd McFarlane)

adapted by

Steven Philip Jones

*Art thou a spirit of health or goblin damned?
-Shakespeare*

*...the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns...
-Ditto*

PROLOGUE

Some folks will tell you that life is a crap shoot. Their motto is: "You pay your money and you take your ride."

Other folks claim that people are components of some great cosmic scheme. That all mortals are integrate cogs in a Grand Designer's ultimate universal plan.

Still others believe that humanity has been placed in the field of an eternal moralistic combat betwixt and between Good and Evil. Their faith lies in the

Jones -- 2

opinion that we are all pawns at the mercy of the whims of a benevolent God who loves us and a scheming Beelzebub who covets our souls.

Whether any of these theories is true is a mystery. Maybe the greatest mystery challenging mankind. A mystery, no matter which theory people believe, nearly all folks agree will be answered beyond the grave.

Dead men, ready or not, are supposed to know everything. Ready or not and like it or not, but apparently not one moment before the death rattle has passed through a person's bloodless lips. This way the grave goes on keeping its secrets from the hapless living. Like the perceptive pirate said, "Dead men tell no tales."

On the other hand, of course, all of these theories could be wrong.

CHAPTER ONE: (HOUR OF THE WOLF)

The Woman awoke. Shaking.

What had frightened her? She had no idea. Not a nightmare. She was certain she had not been dreaming. Something else must have disturbed her, but all she could remember was an abrupt nauseous sensation overtaking her sleep, a feeling that someone might have tripped over her grave. And then she realized...not *her* grave, but *Al's*. Al Simmons, her first husband.

The Woman twisted her head towards the clock-radio tucked into its appointed cubbyhole in the headboard. Its illuminated digital numbers showed 3:00.

"In the morning," she moaned sadly. Three A.M., what the Down East folks in Maine called "The Hour of the Wolf." The time when the night grows so still you can hear deathwatches skittering like rats in the walls. So quiet that the sound of your heart pumping blood into your ears becomes so intense you want to rip up the floorboards to kill the noise.

There would be no more sleeping tonight the Woman knew, so, moving gracefully, not wanting to wake her husband, she slipped out of bed.

The night was pitch-black, thanks to a new moon, and the Woman's eyes had adjusted to the darkness as much as they could, which meant she had to crouch and feel for the robe she had carelessly cast to the floor four hours earlier. When her fingertips brushed against the garment she grabbed it and slid it over her body, which was nude except for her favorite silk sleeping shirt. Navigating cautiously, relying upon recollection and outstretched hands, she succeeded in maneuvering undetected from the master bedroom, down the hall, past her daughter's bedroom (where she paused long enough to listen to her little girl breathing) then into the kitchen. Here the electric emerald light from the microwave's clock illumined the way into the study.

She closed the door behind her, carefully shuffled towards the study's desk and turned on the library lamp. After her eyes readjusted to the dim light she moved to an antique attorney's bookshelf behind the desk and knelt down. From the top shelf the Woman removed a thick leathern-bound photo album, the second in a series of four memory books placed beside her family Bible. The four albums chronicled the Woman's life in pictures and keepsakes, beginning with her birth announcement to the present. With a flip of her wrist the memory book fell open to the page she wanted. She had not even glanced at this page for a year, but there had been a span of months when she could not live a day without rereading Al's obituary, and the ritual had worn a permanent groove into the album's spine.

Five years, she marvelled as she stared at the date on the lengthy newspaper clipping. *Can he really be dead five years? We were only married for three.*

Introduced by a mutual friend during the Woman's senior year in college, to the casual observer it hardly appeared to be love at first sight for either party.

Al, a decorated Marine veteran who had been temporarily assigned to the Secret Service for reasons he had never explained, was four years older and much more worldly than her; nevertheless, the two were attracted to each other, although they denied it, even to themselves. It was not before Al was seriously wounded in the act of protecting the President from an assassination attempt that this mutual denial evaporated, withered by his gaze with tragedy. Less than six months after they had been introduced, the Woman and Al were pronounced man and wife.

Now here she was, eight years later, her life unlike anything she had planned it to be on that wedding day. But how could she have foreseen Al's career change?

The rescue of the President had attracted a job offer from a select secret government task force. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for a man like Al Simmons, a soldier itching to right some of the world's wrongs. And at first he was satisfied with his job, which occasionally took him away for days, even weeks, Heaven only knew where. His service oath prohibited him from discussing what he did while he was gone. These separations were not a problem for her at first because of Al's satisfaction, but that changed as the months passed and he began to grow disenchanted with his work. The Woman never knew the particulars behind this disillusionment, although she was tempted a thousand times to ask Al to tell her. He had always been there for her. She wanted to be there for him. And then, before she knew it, it was too late. Two weeks after their third anniversary Al was sent to Botswana on what turned out to be his last mission.

After Al's funeral, the Woman pasted her husband's obituary into her memory book, and instead of burning a candle she read the clipping every day to keep his

memory alive. Gradually, inevitably, the pain of his death began to ebb, and, without realizing exactly when, Al Simmons became a part of the Woman's past. In hindsight it seemed cruel, but she refused to feel guilty. She realized moving on was the only natural outcome after mourning ran its course, and that Al would have wanted her to live her life.

But, suddenly, since waking, nothing felt proper. Something was wrong with the world. She could sense it. What exactly, she had no idea, but for some inexplicable reason in the pit of her stomach she felt it involved Al.

The nauseous sensation gripped her again, and again the Woman began to shake. Then, as quickly as it had struck, the sick feeling passed, but not the shaking. She could not stop shaking. So she closed the memory book and pressed it against her chest, like an infant clutching a security blanket. The Woman stayed in that position, unable to get off her knees, until the first rays of dawn came through the study's bay window and broke the spell.

CHAPTER TWO: (9*9*9*9)

Three A.M. in New York City on an unholy night.

Looking from the Atlantic towards the Apple's cityscape, beginning on the stroke of three, the dark light of the new moon began to absorb the metropolis' sodium-and-neon artificial halo, while across the raven horizon stars dimmed and flickered before fading from sight. Inside the city the shadows went bad, like cankered fruit, turning so black that they resembled cavities into the abysmal, impossible dream-space of a laughing, quivering primordial demon-god, where an unwary walker might plummet and plunge forever and ever.

Something had *definitely* gone wrong with the world. Something really, really wrong. And now that it was three A.M., it was about to get worse.

The car was a rag-top 1958 Plymouth Fury past its prime. Its powder blue paint had faded from too much sun, and the driver-side door, replaced after an accident, was khaki green. Two cracks in the passenger side of the front windshield converged to form a big V, and the bent and pitted expired Alabama license plates were crusty with road gunk. The Fury's muffler, cancerous with

Jones -- 8

rust for months, had given up the ghost, coughing up its last C-clamp and dropping off on the ride from Time Square, its absence giving the car the roar of a cave bear.

John Quirin, a transplanted 'Bama good-ol-boy, was driving. Riding shotgun was his visiting cousin, Josh Bourne, the Fury's owner. Stuffed into the back were ^(Jr.)Josh's two closest friends, Shep and Dave Joseph, both defensive linemen ten years earlier in high school, but whose bellies were now showing the accumulated affects of too little exercise mixed with too much beer. Sitting between the brawny Joseph brothers was a prostitute, knees and hands tucked under her chin, the white of her eyes wide around her brown irises as the razor-honed blade of Shep's bone-handled fishing knife scraped the skin over her jugular vein.

Bourne, a sinewy outdoors type with the lazy eyes of a man unaware of his insanity, gazed at the maze of old buildings outside his window. "Johnny, where in creation are we?"

"Red Hook district. This here's the old waterfront 'cross from Governors Island. It's been a crappy part of town for years, so's I'm told."

Dave Joseph latched onto the headrest behind Quirin and pulled himself forward, putting a strain on the bolts holding the front seat to the floor. "You thinking 'bout breaking into one of these warehouses?"

"Christ, no! These warehouses ain't safe for decent folks. Bums and hobos come to Brooklyn just to camp out in them, and the homeless would just as soon slit your throat than look at you if it gets them your pocket change or your Nikes. What's worse, they eat and sleep in packs, so after sunset you'd be a wise man to keep clear of the Red Hook warehouses."

"So where we goin'?"

The driver grinned and pointed ahead. "There."

Quirin parked in front of a deserted and neglected tumble-down church, its Gothic buttresses topped by a menacing spire capped with an Orthodox cross. As he turned off the motor an eastern breeze, humid yet cool like the air before a thunderstorm, started to blow and, up on the belfry, the wind billowed the fringes of what appeared to be a scarlet banner or flag attached to the cross.

"A *church*?" Shep sounded repulsed. "You want us to gangbang her in a *church*? What's wrong with you, man?"

The other Joseph agreed. "Are you nuts, Quirin?"

"Shuddup!" Bourne snapped. "Ain't no bums gonna be livin' in a church. Besides, from the looks of this place, the good Lord lit out of here a long time ago. It's perfect. Grab the whore and let's get with the program."

The Josephs did as instructed, Shep mindful to transfer his knife from the prostitute's neck to the delicate combe at the base of her throat, cutting off any ideas about screaming for help she might have had as they got out of the Fury. Bourne, meanwhile, strolled to the back of his car, unlocked its trunk and removed two Coleman electric lanterns, packed as precautions in case the Fury broke down at night during their New York trip. Before he closed the trunk Bourne decided to grab some protection out of his tool box, a Model 1911A1 Colt .45 revolver tucked into a soft leather concealment holster.

"Might as well take this along, just in case" he said as he handed the weapon to Quirin. "Remember to give it back after I'm done with our gal and before you take your turn." Quirin nodded and clipped the holster to his belt.

Properly outfitted, the group clambered up the church's front steps, mindful of the precarious footing caused by plentiful brickbat that had fallen off the facade into the patches of weeds breaking through the concrete stairs. No one seemed to notice or care that, up on the steeple, the scarlet banner had disappeared.

In the church Bourne switched on the Colemans, and along with his three companions gawked at their ominous surroundings. Darkness inhabited the church's colossal nave, so viscous it repelled the leaden light seeping out of the lanterns. Dust drifts covered the box pews, altar, hour-glass pulpit and sounding board. Cobweb vines drooped between the pointed arches of the gallery and entwined the clustered Gothic columns. Bourne succeeded in keeping his hand steady as he ~~passed~~ handed one of the lanterns to Dave before carrying the second light down the center aisle to the altar. The wood floor creaked with each step, and like a boy whistling past a cemetery he joked, "Careful where you put your feet, girls. This floor might give out and you'll all fall straight through to Hell."

Shep said, "T'ain't funny, Josh," and Dave seconded.

"Why don't you both put a cork in it and haul that whore over here."

The Johnsons hesitated, long enough that Quirin decided to take the lantern from Dave and lead the way down the aisle. Bourne waited until the prostitute was within his easy reach, then snatched her out of the brothers' grasps. His fingers wrapped around her skinny triceps and bit into her skin until he bruised her. The painful shriek this squeezed out of the prostitute's lips helped alleviate his anxieties, as did the tears that welled under her eyes and spilled over her cheeks.

See bottom
Ex 101
p. 312
for House
of
descriptions
- F O G

"You ain't the prettiest hooker I've ever balled," Bourne said, "but you sure do have the longest legs. That's what caught my eye back in Time Square, that thoroughbred gait of yours." He shoved her against the altar. "Lay your ass down here."

"No," she whimpered. "Please."

"Don't make me lay you out myself. You won't like it. Or maybe you prefer the floor?"

"No! No, please don't!" She tried to struggle free and Bourne slapped her, so hard her knees buckled. He caught her by the crown of her cropped brown hair with his left hand, while his right snagged a fistful of her blouse and yanked. The dazed prostitute found the strength to scream in Bourne's face, and he slapped her again.

"Dammit!" Bourne's face twisted in pain. "She's got my ears ringing!" He turned to Shep and barked, "Give me your knife! Let's see how loud this tramp can scream with her tongue cut out!" The brother started to do as told, but stopped when a reverberate basso voice from somewhere behind the altar warned, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Shep."

All four men felt their blood thin in their veins from dread. Bourne forgot everything and let go of the prostitute, who was too numb from pain and terror to run away. She collapsed to the floor, huddled in a ball, while the mysterious voice spoke again.

"Leave the girl and get out of here," it said. "Now."

Quirin tore the Colt out of its holster and trained it in the direction he thought the voice had come from, a vestry room beside the apse. "Maybe you ought to take your own advice and bug out, mister."

The stranger stepped out of the vestry room to stand beside the pulpit, and the men could barely make out through the gloom the Radcliffean figure of tall man soaked with blood.

"Glory to God," Quirin moaned, his bladder on the edge of emptying itself. "What are you?"

"One last time," the apparition said. "Leave the girl and get of here. Now. Or you're all dead."

Bourne rushed to Shep and grabbed the knife. Trembling, he swiped the blade in the figure's direction. "You get outta here! Hear me? Don't be messin' with us! We'll kill you!"

"Kill me?" The weird voice spoke with the calm, eerie tone of a brass temple bell struck with a rubber hammer, somehow tantalizing yet menacing at the same time. "You four?" The crimson figure stepped away from the pulpit and into the boundary of feeble artificial light. "How are you losers going to pull that off?"

"Josh!" Quirin moved beside his cousin. "Get a gander at him! He looks like one of them Youngbloods!"

"Johnny's right!" Shep shouted, relieved. "It ain't no spook! It's a superhero!"

The intruder was certainly dressed the part, decked out in a sable and crimson costume with white trim. Draped over this costume was a cavernous crimson Dracula cape, which had tricked the men into imagining the stranger's

linebacker body was bathed in blood. Around the stranger's right knuckles and calf and left forearm were leather straps studded with formidable steel spikes. Jacob Marley chains with a skull buckle were belted around the man's trim waist, while a shorter chain with skull clasps attached the outlandish cape to the intruder's thick neck. Covering the stranger's entire head was a sable mask, a white Rorschach blot that resembled a bat plastered across its face, blistering green sockets glowering through slivered eye-slits in the bat's extended wings.

"I'm still waiting for an answer," the superhero said.

Bourne inched forward. With each step he exchanged Shep's knife from his right hand to left and back again, trying to keep his opponent off-balanced the way he had been tutored twenty years before at the Stabler County juvenile delinquent home.

"Want an answer, buddy?" Bourne asked. "All right, I'll give you one, but you won't like it none. I know 'bout you people. Superheroes. You got morals. Play by too many rules for your own good. When push comes to shove, like right now, you people ain't got the rocks to gut a channel cat. We ain't going nowhere, and neither's the whore. So push off, ~~before~~^{by} we stomp a second mudhole in your ass."

The stranger was a statue, unconcerned and unimpressed by Bourne. "Listen up, little man. I think you're confusing me with that other fellow in the red cape, and that's a dangerous, dangerous mistake. And be careful with that blade while you're at it. You might lop off a finger pretending like you know how to use it."

Bourne had no doubts the costumed man was not bluffing. The smartest thing for him, Quirin and the Johnsons to do probably was to cut their losses and forget

they were ever in this church. And it wasn't like the costumed man wanted to apprehend them. The freak simply wanted them to leave the prostitute alone. But Bourne had never backed down from a fight in his life. Not from his old man, not in juvenile hall, not even in prison, and he wasn't about to start now, not with his cousin and best friends watching and backing him up.

"Big words coming from someone looking as ridiculous as you do, you fancy-ass pansy. And I'm gonna make you look a lot stupider...*right now!*"

The thin man was close enough ~~now~~ to lunge, and he did, stabbing at the superhero, the knife aimed at the gap between the stranger's ^{*second*} ~~second~~ and ^{*third*} ~~third~~ left ribs. Bourne was fleet, but the costumed man reacted like a cobra. The superhero plucked the thin man's wrist out of the air with one gloved hand, and husky taloned fingers clenched until the wrist *snapped*. As Bourne hollered the superhero's free hand smothered his face.

The costumed man asked: "Who looks stupid now, big mouth?" Then he tossed Bourne aside like a Frisbee. The thin man sailed out of the light into the church's immutable darkness, crashing into the gallery where his body crumpled to the floor, broken and lifeless. "Now, who's next?"

Quirin started shooting before the man in the mask had finished the question. Seven of the Colt's eight bullets went wild, but one hit its target, piercing the sable and white mask just above the tip of the bat's right wing.

The impact jerked the superhero's head back and elicited an "Ugh!", but the big man refused to fall. Instead, he slowly straightened his head, and the three wanna-be rapists gaped at the steaming dot of green sizzling where the bullet had penetrated.

"Shot your wad, hick?"

The costumed man raised his left hand and extended its index finger. From the peak of its claw a tiny green-tinctured eldritch ember ignited. It floated towards the three men, crackling like a sparkler as it skipped across the murky air, leaving a sparse trail of steam that reeked of brimstone in its wake.

"Boys," the superhero said as they concentrated on the ember, "you're way out of your league."

The ember erupted, exploding with a teeth-rattling *bang* and blinding brilliance.

Bourne's corpse was forgotten. The three men charged out of the church into the street in a frenzied scramble to get into the Fury and away from Red Hook.

Alone, the victor went to the huddled prostitute and knelt beside her. "It's all right," he said as soothingly as his voice permitted. "They're gone. You don't have to be afraid. I won't hurt you."

The prostitute wasn't convinced. "Please...don't. I'll do what you want."

"I don't want you to do anything. Those men are gone, and I--" The next word died in his throat. He suddenly couldn't breathe. He was being attacked. Not his body, but his mind, assaulted by visions that scalded his hindsight.

Kaleidoscopic images twirled behind his eyes. First of an exquisite woman with caramel skin and a heart-shaped face, as beautiful as a Siren's serenade. She was smiling, about what he couldn't guess, but it was a lovely smile, as if she were asleep and dreaming. Then the smiling image tumbled into a black hole and the woman, whose body was as handsome as her face, stood beside a coffin draped with an American flag. She was wearing the clothes of a widow, while countless

mourners surrounded her. The beautiful woman looked brave as she stood apart from the mourners, but somehow he could sense inside she felt deflated, her life's focus ensepulchered within a pine box about to be buried six feet deep.

And then, like a revelation, the superhero realized who was in the coffin.

It was him.

He was dead. And the woman was his wife.

The funeral image disappeared, replaced by the grinning, guffawing bestial visage of a pulsing, quaking antediluvian devil-lord squatting in a perdition at the epicenter of a supernatural realm of shadows. His soul had travelled to this Hell where this devil-lord offered him a chance to live again. His need to return to the woman was so emphatic that he did not hesitate to accept the beast's offer. His love for the woman was all the reason he needed to forfeit his soul in exchange for a new life with her.

Now, he was back.

Except he had changed, and the world had changed, although how different they were he didn't know. Yet. His memories were limited to arriving at this church, followed by the painful kaleidoscope visions. To learn more he would have to investigate his past ~~and~~^{or} wait for further revelations, more of which he somehow felt certain would come and when he least expected them.

Suddenly, he could breathe again, as well as feel arms wrapped around him. A woman's arms, gentle and protective. For two seconds he convinced himself it had all been a nightmare. That he was at home in bed and the woman was waking him up. Then he recognized the nave and the prostitute and began to cry when he recognized his life had become a nightmare.

"It's okay," the prostitute whispered into his ear, pressing him against her breast the way a mother comforts its whimpering child. "You're all right. It's all over now."

The superhero let her go ^{for} for a few moments, then found his voice and asked, "Who...who are you?"

"My name's Joy. Joy McGee. Thanks for saving me. So who are you? I never saw a Youngblood toggled up like you before, or one who broke down and cried after rescuing anybody."

He didn't answer. Not because he didn't remember his name. That had come back along with the memory assault. He knew he was Al Simmons. But he couldn't remember who Al Simmons was, or, worse, his wife's name. Except for these paltry scraps, the book and volume of his brain had been wiped clean.

"I...I don't know, Joy," he stammered as she went on holding him. "I honestly...don't know who...or what I am." All he knew for certain was that he had to find the woman from his visions. He *had* to. If he didn't, he would have damned his soul for nothing.

Al looks in
a phone book.
- Dozens of Simmons & Blakes
- And did she leave in
New York or New Jersey?

CHAPTER THREE: (ONE HEARTLESS BASTARD)

Early morning traffic on 5th Avenue was backed up for six blocks on both sides of a police barricade. Protected from the angry motorists inside a circle of yellow-and-black saw-horses was a small patrol of police cruisers, unmarked cars, an ambulance and the usual assortment of official personnel. Smack in the middle of the barricade was a corpse, a sheet draped over it, the white cotton fabric stained in huge blotches from blood.

Detective Sam Burke stood over the corpse, his partner "Twitch" Williams beside and behind him. Burke was a barrel-bellied tall man with shrewd small eyes, his most attractive feature a luxurious head of black hair. His partner, Williams, was a four-eyed chinless wonder with curly sandy-colored hair and mustache.

"Let's see the street pizza," Burke told a middle-aged medical examiner kneeling beside the splotched sheet. "We've had a busy night, and Twitch and I are going to be writing up Fives until Christmas if we don't get our butts back to the precinct."

"You got it, Sam." The M.E. peeled back the sheet.

"Quite a mess," Burke commented as he lit a Marlboro with a Bic lighter and took a puff. "But that's Carlo Giamotti, all right. I'd know the bastard anyway. Son of a bitch is the most cold-hearted ice pick working for the Serrafimo Spang family. Cover him up. Looking at trash like him makes me sick."

The M.E. dropped the sheet, stood up and waved for two paramedics with a stretcher to cart away the corpse. "Giamotti's been dead a shade over two hours. According to building security, he was thrown out of his bedroom window--"

"At three o'clock or shortly thereafter?" Twitch asked.

"Yes. Like I said, he has been dead around two hours. But it was not the forty-four floor plunge that punched his ticket."

Burke puffed once on his butt, cleared his throat, then jerked a thumb in his partner's direction. "That wasn't why he asked. This whole town went buggy two hours ago. It was like every loon in the five bro's made a pact with each other to engage in some form of illegal activity right at three on the dot. Damnedest thing we've seen in years. The toms and every holding cell in every precinct between here and Jersey are packed."

Twitch added, "The courts are going to be busy."

"He's right. You ought to see night court. It's a circus."

"I wouldn't know," the M.E. said. "Forensics and I have been here waiting on you two guys to show up since three-fifteen."

"Department's spread thin," Burke winked. "We got here as soon as we could. So, about Carlo. If the fall didn't kill him, what did?"

"Good question. To borrow your words, it was the damnedest thing I've seen in years. I guess you might call it heart failure."

Jones -- 20

"You mean like a heart attack? He had himself a coronary during re-entry?"

"No. Someone ripped out Giamotti's heart and stuffed it into his mouth before tossing him out the window."

Burke shook his head in disbelief. "I didn't see no heart in Carlo's mouth."

"Excuse me, detective. I took the opportunity of extracting it while waiting for you two. If you'd like, I can go fetch it from my car if you want to see it."

Twitch suggested that that would not be necessary. "Graphic photos couriered to our attention will suffice." But Burke was confused and asked, "When you say 'rip,' what do you mean? That it was cut out?"

"No," the M.E. said. "The killer apparently punched through Giamotti's ribs and pulled out his heart. For all I know, the killer showed it to Giamotti before he died, just like in all those bad kung-fu movies."

My God!
"My God. How much strength and speed would that require?"

"I don't know. Before I saw Giamotti's chest cavity, I would have sworn such a thing was humanly impossible. Listen, I'll get started on the autopsy straight away and try to have my preliminary report--complete with graphic photos--
on your desk
before the end of your shift. Maybe I'll have some answers for you then."

The M.E. left Burke and Twitch alone.

Burke took a last puff off his cigarette, dropped it on the street, and squashed it into the tarmac with his shoe. "Twitch? Did you talk to forensics?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about building security?"

"Ditto, sir."

"It sounds like we're looking for a gorilla of a man with a very bloody hand. We need evidence that somebody fitting that description was in Carlo's apartment or seen leaving it around three this morning."

"I'm aware of that, sir. Unfortunately, no such evidence has been uncovered yet."

"That's impossible, Twitch. Ripping out a heart creates an awful mess. Those Freddy Kruegger movies make a fortune off that absolute. There has to be bloody footprints on the floors, bloody smears on walls and doorknobs, the works. This killer should have left a trail we can follow in a snowstorm."

"All accurate, sir, but, at present, all we have is the mess without the clues."

Burke tapped another Marlboro out of his pack and lit it. "This is nuts. This whole night is nuts."

"Yes, sir."

"I think New York City has finally gone to hell, Twitch."

"You may have a point, sir. What would you like to do next regarding the Giamotti mystery?"

That's a good question, Burke thought, puffing hard on his cigarette. Eventually he had to admit there was nothing they could do until forensics and the M.E. filed their reports. "Come on. Let's go back to the precinct and fill out our own reports so we can get home some time this week. We'll pick up breakfast at Emil's on the way. My treat."

"I'm behind you like always, sir."

The detectives returned to their car as the ambulance departed. Left alone, the uniform officers began to clean up. Twenty minutes later the saw-horse barricades were removed and the congested traffic began flowing again.

* * * * *

A few blocks away, Giamotti's killer was busy boasting to a scraggly, rancid tomcat in an alley alongside Penn Plaza.

Four feet, two inches tall, the idiosyncratic killer tipped  scales on the plus side of two hundred pounds and was built like a bowling ball. Sloped shoulders accentuated the roundness that defined his overall physical design. They also made it appear that his football-shaped head, bald except for two tufts of steel wool hair that sprouted out from behind his ears, rested on his chest without benefit of a neck. His arms and calloused hands were enormous, like a union stevedore's, but his fat and flabby gut was so distended his khaki chinos and striped white and gray muscle shirt could not contain it, leaving his hairy naval exposed. Over his back he wore a dark raggedy tuxedo jacket one size too small for his rotund frame. Odd as his appearance and attire were, what really set the killer apart from the crowd were his clown makeup and evil eyes. White greasepaint edged with black covered his double chin, sardonic lips, meaty nose, both cheeks and forehead, an M-shaped design crowning his eye brows. Glaring out of this weird makeup were the killer's baleful red eyes, otherworldly orbs that sweltered inside narrow isosceles slits.

Alone in the alley except for the stray, the killer raucously described to the cat how "--then I'll tell ^{him} if he begs really, *really* nice like, I might only amputate one leg. *But!* If he puts up a fight, I'm gonna rip his innards out, make fillets outta his lungs, make a milk shake outta his heart, and soft-boil his eyeballs, 'cause (and here the killer paused to take a breath) I'm the *Violator!*"

The tom, fascinated by noise and motion like all cats, decided to meow for no cognitive reason when the killer stopped talking long enough to wait for the animal's response.

"Impressive," the Violator said after the meow. "I know. But, when you're striking fear into the hearts of others, a little bravado goes a long way. Besides, it seems to work in comics.

"Anyways, it'll finally come down to that long, drawn-out battle. *But!* Just when I'm about to pull his spine through his nose--I'll stop!" Inspired by the gory picture he painted with his words, the killer began to wave his arms like a ham stage magician, foul emotions squinching his face into a series of exaggerated smirks and sneers. "I'll tell 'im real pleasant like how I could ice 'im sixty-five different ways, but *I'm not allowed to!* Oh, that will ruin his day! He'll start to beg me, and I'll spit in his face. Then he'll cry, at which time I'll kick his teeth in! And when he thinks it can't get any worse, I'll pulverize 'im into a little itty bitty cube and suck 'im like a Lifesaver!"

It was too wonderful even for the killer's diseased imagination. The Violator laugh^d sick and malicious, an uproariously ground-glass cackle that bellowed from the alley out into the street, where, when overheard by passerbys, made the listener feel feverish and break out in a clammy sweat.

Jones -- 24

"I gotta tell ya, Mr. Pussy," the killer said, "I'm having far too much fun. The boss will be *totally* impressed. Hell, *I'm* totally impressed! Oh, I love being me! And I'd hate to be him tonight."

The tomcat meowed again, in the form of a question, or so it sounded to the psychopath. *Who?* the cat seemed to ask.

"*Spawn*," the Violator answered. "I'd hate to be Spawn!"

CHAPTER FOUR: (QUESTIONS ARE THE EASY PART,
ANSWERS RAISE THE DOUBTS)

Al spent the day haunting the abandoned church.

He wasn't tired and he did not feel hungry. He just wandered like a ghost in a lurid paperback, his brain too agitated for him to take stock of his surroundings, anything of possible interest to him inside the church ignored. His mind, preoccupied with his precious few memories, returned over and over to the divine woman and the blasphemous demon-lord like a tongue working a painful tooth, nothing else in the world mattering to him.

Somewhere during the late morning or early afternoon Al found himself outside on top of the steeple. Perched above Red Hook, he watched as the homeless people Quirin had been so careful to avoid meandered in and out of the warehouses surrounding his sanctuary. They seemed misplaced, like cattle set loose on the sidewalks, with no place to call their own and nothing to do except commiserate in groups or drink alone to pass the hours. People without purpose, society's castaways, drifting through life by circumstance or from choice. These lost people, though mortal and alive, seemed to Al to be as damned in their own

way ⁶⁰and he was in his, and he was surprised to discover he felt a distant kinship with them.

Later, back inside the church, Al stumbled across Bourne's disjointed body in the gallery. Without paying attention to what he was doing, he hefted the corpse off the floor and sat it down on a pew in the front row.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't getting acquainted with that lying beast yourself right now, you piece of crud." He began pacing the floor before the altar. "Well, the only advice I can give you, butthead, is don't make my mistake. Don't trade away your soul for any wooden nickels, if you know what I mean. All I wanted was to live again. To get back to the woman I loved. Now here I am, but what I am going to do? How am I going to find her? And what am I doing wearing this frigging outfit? And how did I create that spark last ni--?"

It was so obvious, Al couldn't believe he had forgotten about it. "The *spark*!" He had performed magic! He had powers!

"What kind of powers? What kind of things can I do?"

As if expecting to find an answer, he spread out his hands, palms up, and stared at them. When he saw his taloned fingers, his heart crashed and he chocked.

"Jesus, what's happened to me?"

