

Release

by Brett Garcia Rose

After the comfortable darkness of the playing field, the halogen spots surrounding building 1402 humbled the nine men to silence. The change was visceral, chilling. They huddled behind a short hedge while Kyle took careful aim with the air-powered pellet gun, seemingly seasoned, oblivious. Now was the time for second thoughts, thirds, and they swept through the group like a fetid wind.

They were plunged into darkness even before they heard the tinkle of glass from the destroyed floodlight. Kyle turned to Nicholas and smiled. "Let's go," he muttered. One man would stay with the van, monitoring both local and university police frequencies on a scanner, two more would act as runners for the animals and supplies. The rest would remain in radio contact and enter the lab.

The side window was left unlatched as planned, and they hurriedly poured through it, Kyle the fastest of them, his slight frame slinking easily through the window, dragging his bag of tools loudly behind him. The hallways were dimly lit by amber lights spaced out in intervals along the base of the walls, leaving cutout shadows on the linoleum. Only the one student, Luke, had been in the building before, so he pointed down the hallway where they would find the records and video tapes. Nicholas and Donnie pulled out tranquilizer guns loaded with a strong Ketamine mix...a substance not unknown in some of the parties held at the same university.

Nicholas motioned for Donnie, the only one he really knew among the group, to follow him, while Kyle directed one of his men to accompany the student to the media and records room. They would take what they wanted and destroy the rest with muriatic acid and fire if necessary. Nicholas and Donnie headed toward the holding rooms to see to the animals; Kyle and his two men indicated that they would go to the lab as planned. The remaining three would go to the rear exit of the building to await the signal to douse the lights and begin transferring the animals and boxes.

Nicholas wasn't prepared for the deafening noise of the holding room, but Donnie seemed not even to notice. A brief inventory of the cages yielded 12 spider monkeys, 19 cats, and assorted rodents. The monkeys and the cats were in fixed cages, so Donnie radioed to the men out back to bring in carriers for the transfer. The rodents would be gathered in boxes and let out somewhere quiet to fend for themselves.

Nicholas tried to block out the constant obscenities coming from Donnie as the monkeys resisted him. The gloves were made of strong rubber, but the agitated monkeys always managed to bite and claw around them. After nearly 20 minutes Nicholas had transferred the last cat and turned to help Donnie with the remaining monkeys. He couldn't help laughing. One of the monkeys had somehow gotten around Donnie's head and was holding him from behind, tugging his hair and trying to get at his eyes. Donnie pulled out the tranquilizer gun and pointed it at Nicholas, rather than the monkey.

"Don't make me use this, Nikko," he snapped, as he finally got hold of the monkey and stuffed it into a carrier. "I got a nice bottle of Patron sitting in my freezer that smells a lot better than this," he said solemnly as he cleaned the saliva and monkey piss from his arms and shirt as best he could. The carriers were being taken down the hallway through a back window facing the woods, so Nicholas figured they'd be fine. Be on their way to Gloucester within minutes.

Donnie used the sedatives on the three monkeys who were the loudest and, as it turned out, the biggest. The rest had quieted down themselves. Smart animals. The cats were no problem, most being docile, former pets, either adopted from 'No Kill' shelters, or stolen from people's yards and brokered through Class-B dealers. The monkeys, however, were lab bred, so the tranquilizer guns were a necessary precaution. The guns each held 12 auto-feed darts propelled by compressed air. Donnie reloaded his and they headed out towards the main hallway.

Nicholas radioed Kyle, who said they had to go help with the records and asked if he and Donnie could finish up in the lab. When they arrived downstairs, the connected lab rooms and holding areas

were strangely quiet. One of the runners was collecting bags of dead animals to bring back to the van. Nicholas looked inside one of the bags, but all he saw was a stringy mess of fur and tissue.

The runner grabbed the bag from Nicholas. He shrugged and said "hammers. Sick fucks."

There were still nearly twenty animals in cages, again monkeys and cats, but those that were conscious were severely lethargic, whimpering in ethereal, almost human voices. Donnie walked around the room opening all the cages. Nicholas started checking the animals, working hard to control his anger. He shined a penlight in the eyes murky eyes one at a time, looking any some brain response. Most stared weakly, apparently unable to move. Six showed nothing at all. The majority were post-op animals, seemingly discarded after taking part in so many sleep-deprivation cycles that they no longer had basic brain functions and could not be tested further. They were barely alive, and only because the workers were too lazy to kill them.

Donnie started removing the animals into carriers with great care, this time encountering no resistance. Some of the cats had square transformers surgically attached to their skulls to deliver strong shocks at varying intervals to keep them awake for weeks at a time. All of the monkeys had shaved heads and seeping wounds on their skulls. Most likely, portions of brain tissue had been removed for further study. They had no implants, but they had small burns on their fur indicating they were kept awake in electrified cages. The burns were likely from students having too much fun at the controls.

Kyle had wanted to kill all of these animals after videotaping them, since they were unconscious and would provide no further stimulation. Said that's just how it is done. Nicholas had agreed at the time, but could not stomach it. Donnie seemed to have made up his own mind; they would find a place for them later.

Nicholas killed the remaining animals, those who obviously could not be saved. He went from cage to cage, quickly snapping the necks of the cats and strangling the monkeys with plastic ties. He hoped it was slightly more humane than the sledge hammers Kyle

used. He bagged the bodies, called the runners, and sat down on a desk with his head between his knees, vomiting in a plastic pail for five minutes until there was nothing left. Donnie just shook his head and squeezed his friend's shoulder.

After the runners had gone, Nicholas and Donnie spent ten more minutes working on the room. They destroyed every bit of lab equipment they found, and pounded the computers to crumbs of plastic and circuitry, swinging their hammers in silent rage. They collected some paperwork and videos that looked interesting, and then smashed the smoke detectors and flash-burned the rest in a metal wash bin. By the time they headed back upstairs their bodies were slick with sweat.

When they reached the records room, Donnie froze at the door. One of Kyle's men had a young woman strapped to a chair with duct tape and was waving a bloody hammer in front of her face. The woman, who appeared to be around 19 years old, looked pleadingly at Nicholas and Donnie as they stood in the doorway. She had blood seeping out from around the tape on her mouth and her sweatshirt was ripped down to her navel.

Kyle was on the phone and shrugged when he saw them, as if to say it wasn't his problem. After a few more seconds of muted conversation he snapped the phone shut and waved Nicholas and Donnie inside, tapping his pellet gun against his head in some sort of mock frustration.

"Moonlighter, says she's just a workstudy doing transcriptions, and she sometimes comes here when the dorm's too loud to hear the tapes," he said with a blank look on his face. "Luke over here says he knows her," he said, motioning with his gun towards the student who came in with them. "Says she's on the research team. Happens sometimes, but we're gonna have to take her." Donnie glared down at the smaller Kyle, his body tense. The two other men had moved behind them on either side.

Nicholas turned toward the man closest to him and was about to jump when he felt the steel of the gun against the side of his head. At that range, there was a good chance the lead pellet would

penetrate his skull.

"Let's all think about this here," Kyle said, waving his pistol in front of Nicholas' face like a fan. His skin was badly pocked from childhood acne, which had not entirely gone away. He was only about 5'8", but his wry frame was packed with ropey muscles. "Whatever she says, she does work here, and she will talk. These people hate us as it is. We have to be professional about this." His arm was fully extended, as if he wanted to keep as much distance as possible from Nicholas.

"What about us, Kyle. Will we talk?" Nicholas asked, angling slightly away from Kyle as he spoke.

"No, Nicholas. We won't," he replied, shaking his head.

"Amateurs."

Nicholas considered his options quickly, which were precious few. Chances were he and Donnie would go with the woman, wherever that was. Kyle might not shoot, but there were the two hammer gorillas behind them, probably already pumped full of adrenalin from smashing the skulls of the animals downstairs.

Nicholas jerked his head around suddenly to look at the girl, who was sobbing quietly, and he had his answer. Kyle wasn't a shooter. If he was, he would have shot. He turned back around to face Kyle and kept turning, jumping up on one foot while his other knee shot up towards Kyle's chin.

Donnie wasted no time. He kneed one of the men in the groin, then grabbed his head and smashed it into a beige filing cabinet, leaving a bloody dent the size of a watermelon. Kyle was stumbling back from Nicholas, blood flowing where his teeth had gone through his lower lip. Nicholas crouched just as the second man swung his hammer. Nicholas shot his left foot out, connecting just below the knee with a sickening crunch. As the man fell towards him, Nicholas rolled sideways and spun to his feet, snapping a solid front kick to the man's face as he was falling forwards.

As Nicholas started turning to go after Kyle, he felt the searing heat of the lead pellets smacking into his back. The impact spun him around and down to the floor. Kyle had somehow gotten around

them and was kneeling behind the girl, hiding. He was shouting at Donnie now, jerking the gun as he shot.

Donnie was hit several times, but it didn't seem to have much effect on his oversized body. He let the man's head fall back to the filing cabinet with a wet thud and was about to charge, when Kyle put the gun against the girl's head.

The girl was staring at Nicholas with a look of pure terror. He was still on the floor, watching the Kyle pull the girl's hair back until her neck looked ready to snap. The pellets were painful, but he could move well enough. They had penetrated though; he could feel warm blood running down his back. Kyle was shouting incoherently, spitting blood and saliva on the girl's head and digging the gun into her hair with enough force to make her wince. Donnie stood still, his head turning repeatedly from Nicholas to Kyle.

The girl looked at her feet and then back to Nicholas. He looked over at Donnie, who was yelling back at Kyle and inching his way forward with the hammer hanging by his side. Nicholas looked at the girl, then slowly back towards her feet. She had gotten her legs free from the tape and had angled her feet to one side. Suddenly Nicholas understood; casters. Her chair had wheels. He nodded his head slightly, signaling for her to switch her feet and push left, so she wouldn't get between Donnie and Kyle. Nicholas was betting that Kyle would try to shoot at Donnie rather than the girl. A split second later, the girl jerked the chair sideways with all the strength in her legs, enough to send her careening into a desk near the wall.

Kyle hesitated for a split second. He swung his pellet gun towards Donnie, shooting the whole time as Nicholas took aim with the tranquilizer gun. He snapped the trigger as fast as he could, pumping the one inch darts into Kyle, who didn't even seem to feel them. Kyle was shooting wildly at Donnie, landing a few more pellets, when he suddenly dropped the gun and his hands shot up to his face, clawing wildly at the dart protruding from his left eye. Seconds later he sagged to the floor, unconscious.

Nicholas rose painfully to his feet and walked over to the student, Luke, who was hiding behind a desk. "Get up," he said

quietly. Luke rose quickly, visibly shaken. "Where were they going to take the girl?" he asked.

Luke looked nervously at Kyle, then shrugged his shoulders, avoiding Nicholas' stare. "Didn't tell me," he answered quietly. Nicholas considered this for a few seconds, then raised the gun and emptied his remaining four darts into the student's neck.

Nicholas kneeled down next to the man whose leg he had recently broken, retrieving another tranquilizer gun. The man was fully conscious now, muttering threats to Nicholas, as six darts entered his shattered knee. Nicholas walked passed the other man Donnie had knocked out, firing the remaining darts into him without even looking.

Donnie had carefully sliced away the tape from the girls face and was talking quietly to her as Nicholas approached. "Name's Stephanie. Says we're a bunch of fuckwits and that there's a bottle of cheap scotch in the bottom drawer of the desk she crashed into."

"Watch the fingerprints," he said to Donnie.

"Yes sir," he replied with a mock salute, returning a minute later with three Dixie cups.

"So, Stephanie," Nicholas said to the girl. He held up his arms and tilted his head to one side.

The girl glared at Nicholas for a moment, then laughed when she saw Nicholas smiling. "Six bucks an hour transcribing those fuckin' twisted tapes. Burn the place; I don't care."

Donnie looked around the room at the bodies. "Dump them, Nikko?"

"Yeah. Give them some time to get their stories together, if and when they get caught. Don't think they'll talk though. Transportation?"

Donnie paused to think for a minute. "Yeah, I know someone. Take 20 minutes or so. Don't want him coming here though. Not that kind of guy." He looked back at the girl, who was painfully removing the remaining tape from her hair. And the girl?"

Nicholas looked back at the girl, who was actually quite attractive. "Stephanie. Do you actually know this guy Luke? He a student here?" he asked softly.

"Yeah, I know him. Kind of a weirdo. Not too many friends."

"OK, Stephanie, I'm not going to tell you what to do. We're going to be gone shortly, leaving a lab that was simply broken into. If you talk about this, they're going to think you were in on it, unless we tie you back up and you wait until someone finds you. Probably just better to forget it, but it's up to you."

Stephanie rolled her eyes towards the ceiling and tilted her head back and forth for a moment. "Might as well help you clean up," she said sweetly. "First, let's get some Band-Aids on your holes," she said, pointing to the bright red spots on Donnie's chest.

She spent the better part of 30 minutes carefully digging out the little pellets from the two men, who did their best not to wince. When she finished, she smiled at Nicholas, holding up a mirror so he could admire the patchwork of gauze and white tape.

Nicholas smiled back and helped her to her feet. Donnie was already running towards the door. "Back in 20 with the van. Good luck."

Stephanie poured another scotch for herself and Nicholas. "So, now I learn how to clean a crime scene? This is actually turning out to be an interesting night." She tapped her Dixie cup against Nicholas', then pointed to a utility closet in the hallway. "Garbage bags."

When Donnie returned they were almost finished. Stephanie seemed to enjoy destroying the media room and nearby offices. She had wanted to go down to the lab, but Nicholas stopped her, saying it was already finished and they were pressed for time. No need for her to see the blood. Donnie heaved the transparent garbage bags into the van, which was actually from a floral delivery company. He and Nicholas carried the bodies of the unconscious men to the van and said their goodbyes to Stephanie, who was into her fourth scotch and reapplying her makeup.

An hour and a half later they were back in Donnie's car, heading down I-95 towards New York. They had dumped the student behind a bar in Cambridge. Kyle and his guys were left naked in a wooded section of Boston Commons. They'd be awake and on their way in a few hours. Donnie clicked his phone shut and sighed in relief.

"The animals are fine. I told the guys a nice version of what happened. They're cool." He was reading a phone number from a scrap of paper and entering it into the memory of his phone. Nicholas looked at his big friend questioningly.

"Stephanie's digits. Turns out her family is from Queens. Wants to have dinner over Christmas," Donnie said, flashing his huge Native American smile.

Nicholas shook his head, laughing softly. Minutes later he was asleep.

