

Beg for Death

By Michael R. Colangelo

They're partners, so naturally, Tom agrees to head over to Harry's place on Sunday for beers and bullshit talk. The older man suggests it coming off a shift at the fire station, and while Tom figures they don't have much in common, he says okay anyways in the spirit of camaraderie.

Harry lives by himself in a little house in a crowded subdivision downtown. It's plain enough; neat and quiet; if not a bit dated, décor-wise.

They sit on the couch together and do their best to damage a two-four while watching the ball game on TV.

Three beers in, Harry explains how his wife left him seven years ago.

Six beers in, and he asks Tom if he likes girls. Then he leaves and comes back with a stack of antiquated skin mags. Off goes the baseball game; on goes a stag porno circa 1950.

Nine beers in, Harry produces a different set of magazines named *Beg For Death*. Women are tied up, whipped, beaten. Between the pages, the publication is rife with pictures and stories of violence and torture. Harry asks Tom what he thinks. Tom tells him he likes the other magazines better.

Twelve beers in and Harry finally asks the question: "You ever wonder what it would be like to torture a dame like in these pictures?"

Tom shakes his head, laughs; tries to keep things from getting heavy.

"No, seriously, you ever think about it?"

Tom shakes his head again. The living room spins.

"I do," Harry says, studying the pictures in front of him. "You ever wonder what it would be like to strangle a gal with your bare hands? Watch their eyes glaze over?"

Tom excuses himself to go to the washroom. When he's finished, he calls a cab.

Harry piles him in and shakes Tom's hand. "We should do this again sometime, partner."

* * *

The latest fire is the worst yet.

Tom stands a little to the right and back of the podium while the fire chief gives the growing throng of press something to keep them busy.

This blaze is located in the Browning Heights Tenements – a decaying tri-cluster of three, four-story buildings. There's a separate fire in each building, the sprinkler system and alarms have been disabled. It's the same MO as the last one, and the one before that.

The newspapers are screaming serial arsonist, and while they profusely publish the idea that he only likes striking black neighborhoods in the south, the police department has warned them to keep quiet his exact precision. Each building he lights up is a crack den or a pimp's lair.

He likes to strike on Fridays and Saturdays – high time for the city’s tourists and business men looking for parties before they catch their Sunday flights home. He’s yet to kill anyone, but this will change soon if they don’t catch him.

He’s dangerous, and so every man in the department has been forced to attend self-defense and dangerous situation training. The job’s dangerous anyways, but when forensics reports they’ve found trace chemicals in the shapes of pentagrams and goat heads, they know they’ve got a real nut on their hands.

The Satan set tends to be a small-time group. They light the neighbor’s cat on fire, sometimes themselves – but this guy is different, and the Browning Heights blaze – three separate fires in total, is his biggest yet.

Tom’s waiting for the chief to finish up with the press so they could back them up beyond any sort of explosive blast radius that might come off the burning buildings. They’re also waiting for the volunteers to arrive.

He takes a stick of nicotine gum from his breast pocket, and then takes a second piece. He’s drawn rescue duty tonight; that means he has to go inside once the engineer gives the okay.

He hopes there are no bodies inside. Three gigantic apartment complexes is a lot of derelict space. If this was a party zone like the other two, God knows what he’ll find, or what he’ll have to rescue. Once, when he was barely joined three months, he’d found a crackhead passed out in the stairwell on a pass through an old townhouse. He lifted her up and carted her outside, and discovered days later she’d somehow managed to give him crabs.

A passing moment like that one, and he still felt fortunate. Guys he knows have been stabbed, bitten, attacked by dogs, hobos, and junkies. The city isn’t safe. It’s getting less safe all of the time.

“You ready?” Harry asks him. The older firefighter gestures that the chief and his entourage of reporters are moving away and they’re free to do their job.

Tom nods and checks his oxygen line and both axes – he’s got a big one for doors and debris, and a smaller hatchet for close quarters, locks, and safety chains.

He’s on point rescue this time. Harry is his back - and rescuer should something happen to him. Another guy is Harry’s back, and so on – a chain of them that would wind through all three complexes eventually.

“Ready?”

Tom pops both sticks of gum into his mouth and moves towards the building, past the hose men, and into the inferno. Each of the three complexes is designed simply and economically. Huge blocks of brick with five floors, ten apartments per floor, stairs and elevators that run each building’s entire vertical length on either side. This means the sweep will be relatively easy for such a large amount of ground. Tom will go in one building and walk towards the far side, checking each apartment as he goes. Locked or troublesome doors get the axe. If the axe fails, they’ve a locksmith on hand.

Once a floor is clear, he’ll move to the next floor. Impassible areas with structural damage or heat are radioed back to for the hose-men or ladder trucks to take care of. Any people and corpses are relayed back out of the building to safety. Depending on structural damage and surprises, the entire night might be short and sweet, or long, dangerous, and exhausting. Whenever they deal with fires in the projects, it’s always the latter.

Tom swings through the glass doors into the lobby of Browning Heights Building 1A. It's untouched by fire; eerily well-preserved and quiet. The only hint that anything is wrong is a thin layer of grey smoke that snakes along the ceiling and disappears through invisible seams at the corners of the walls.

He passes an abandoned front desk and moves into a corridor lined with apartment doors. Beyond, a stairwell and a trio of elevators sit at the opposite end of the hallway. He hopes they're as well kept as the lobby is.

He steps to the first apartment; corroded brass lettering marks it: 1A – 1A. He removes his mask and bangs on the door.

“Anyone inside? Fire Department.”

No response. So he uses the ring of keys they handed him outside and tried the lock. The door swings inward and jerks to a sudden stop. The safety chain inside rattles and grows taut between the narrow opening. He peers through the doorway. Inside the apartment, the curtains are drawn, the lights shut off.

Somebody moans in the dark.

Tom takes the small axe and, steadying the door with his free hand, takes the hatchet blade to the doorframe where the safety chain connects. It buckles in minutes and he steps inside.

The apartment is a mess. Clothes are strewn everywhere; a curio cabinet is upended and its glass contents smashed across the floor. In front of the television lays a man; half-dressed; pants off. He's face down and not moving.

Tom radios it back as he marches towards him. He kneels down and rolls him over, almost screaming into the radio. The man has no face left; a red and raw skull framed by flesh and hairline grins back at him. Someone has cut his face clean off.

He steps away, and spins on a whim towards the open apartment door. A second man, filthy and homeless looking, emerges from a coat closet and runs for the apartment door. He's wearing a white t-shirt streaked with blood and grime, and, worse, he's carrying a small, brown baby in his arms.

He pauses to catch Tom's gaze with wild, crazed eyes, and then bursts out into the hallway with his prize.

Tom gives chase.

In the hallway, the pursued sees Harry standing in the lobby, axe in hand, and so turns and flees deeper into the building. He's moving much faster than Tom, who is laboring beneath the heavy weight of his equipment.

Harry shouts, begins to move towards them, but Tom speeds off after the man; murderer, arsonist, kidnapper. His head swims as his body surges with adrenaline.

He chases him to the far exit of the building, just past the elevators and the stairwell. The exit doors are chained shut, and the man with the baby pulls at them helplessly. His free arm pistons back and forth against the locked steel.

It gives Tom time to catch up, but as he reaches the pair; his quarry turns and makes for the stairwell. The baby is crying; screaming wide, its face turning alternating shades of red and purple.

They run up the stairs and Tom is so close behind him he can smell smoke and some sort of chemical wafting from the man's hair and clothing. At the top of the stairs, the man stops – and throws the baby at him.

He launches the infant side-arm, Nolan Ryan-style, and Tom needs to adjust his footing to catch it with both arms. As the baby thumps into his chest and Tom teeters, the arsonist steps forward with both arms extended; palms up. He hits Tom in the chest and launches him off the stair.

The sensation of falling is accompanied by a feeling of hang-time that seemingly defies physics and he tosses the baby in a desperate, hopeless attempt at self-preservation, as if that would somehow reverse the split-second bad decision to catch it in the first place.

When he finally lands against the concrete incline, the first step is the worst. The back of his neck comes down against the concrete edge of a step, and there's an explosion of pain followed by cold numbness spreading down his back. He tumbles down the remainder of the stairs, weightless, feeling nothing at all until his body comes to rest at the bottom of the stairwell. There, he lies very still – his muscles twitch and convulse gently against his will; empty and unresponsive.

He can hear the baby's screech nearby, and is momentarily relieved he didn't land on it, and then a dark shape descends the staircase towards him, and the man who's just pushed him down the stairs is straddling his chest with a monstrous kitchen knife gripped in one hand.

He unstraps Tom's helmet and tosses it away, then pushes Tom's asbestos balaclava up. Try as he may, Tom's helpless to resist. His limbs don't respond; his arms are useless; skittering and smashing off the concrete floor. Leaning forward, the man presses his forehead against Tom's forehead. His are wild and empty.

"In the Realm of Baphomet, the Firefighter Mask is a trophy well-worth possessing."

Tom feels the tip of the knife press against the underside of his chin and a slight tug as it begins to slice. His limbs jitter fiercely as he struggles to regain control of them. When the arsonist is done with the bottom, he begins anew at other angles; the top of his forehead and down around his ears.

He finished the trace marks, and began to cut in earnest; the edge of his knife cuts so deeply that Tom can feel the steel scrape his jawbone.

Harry appears above them with his axe. He swings it across Tom's field of vision and the man drops his knife, retreated back into the stairwell. Tom's partner pursues and vanishes into a haze of smoke while screaming into his radio for support.

Tom tries to warn Harry. He tries to call out for him to stop and come back. He can hear Harry's footfalls echoing up the concrete stairs and half expects his partner to come crashing back down the stairs on top of him; then the maniac could have a two-for-one with both of their faces.

But it doesn't happen. Nothing happens. Tom lies in the dark and listens to his own pained cries to Harry come out no louder than a whisper.

His body has ceased its erratic jittering. Now, his legs well with a sharp pain and his left arm feels like its being eaten by fire ants.

"Hold still, sir. Don't move."

Two people hover over him dressed in white EMS uniforms. A hand, icy, feels along the underside of his neck.

"Shit. It feels like a pile of broken glass back here," comes a woman's voice.

"Hang in there buddy," says the male. "Hang tight, man. We got you."

There's a scream from the second floor; the loud braying of a man in agony that doesn't stop. It's the sound of a man being tortured, but the EMS crew has their hands full, and simply glance up the smoke-shrouded stairwell occasionally with fearful gazes as they work on Tom.

The sounds go on and on, and despite what one would think; Tom can't tell to whom the screaming belongs.

Somehow though, either way, he's glad the paramedics are here, because somehow, either way, he's not sure he wants to be alone when Harry or the arsonist comes back down those stairs.

Axe or knife; satanic arsonist or upstanding civil servant; reality blurs occasionally.

... and sometimes it doesn't matter.

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