

# Boys In Blue

By: Kevin J. Prentice

“Oink oink. Oink oink,” The drive-thru cashier called out from her post to the line workers of the kitchen after she realized the order had been placed by an Atlanta police officer.

Two double cheeseburgers, extra pickles, a large French fry, and an extra-large diet coke cost nineteen dollars. The added surprise would be on the house. The patties came off the grill and slid onto the buns. Then the cheese and extra pickles. Before the top bun completed the process, the worker breathed deep into his lungs, forced up phlegm, and planted a loogie that resembled a dead slug on each of the double cheeseburgers.

“Here’s your order.” The bag moved through the miniature automatic doors and passed from the worker to the officer. “Have a great night!”

“Extra pickles, right?” Officer Pat McWinters clarified his order as he rummaged through the delicate paper bag, semi-stressed out. “You guys remembered the extra pickles?”

“Absolutely officer. Have a wonderful night.” The worker smiled, aware that in a matter of minutes Officer McWinters would consume nasty saliva.

“Excellent. Thank you. You have a great night, too.”

Officer McWinters rolled up the window of his department issued SUV cruiser, placed the fast food bag gingerly on the passenger seat, and signaled left out into traffic.

Officer McWinters sucked hard on the straw. A raspy sound of partial liquid from melted ice cubes prompted him to shake the extra-large cup in hopes of one more mouthful of diet coke.

Sufficed that he drank every last bit, he wiped the combination of burger grease and diet-coke from his round face with the back of his sleeve.

“Best burgers in town.” He said to himself.

Settled in the driver’s seat of his SUV, which sat on the shoulder of Dearborn Ave, a notorious strip for illegal street racers, McWinters scanned the call log on his cruiser’s laptop. 3:10 in the morning, and no calls had been placed to his section of downtown Atlanta in over fifty minutes, which meant, more likely than not, the shift would be slow for the young officer.

He had hoped at the start of his shift to catch a street race in action and make a possible arrest. The idea of an illegal racer taken off the streets by him, even for one night, fueled McWinters’ imagination and his delusions of grandeur. Other officers, maybe veteran officers, would approach him with congratulatory pats on the back or extend invitations for post work drinks at The Billy Club, the police hangout. His story of heroism would be relayed to the cute bartender. Who knew, he may be given free drinks or even her phone number with the hopes that she would be taken home by him at the end of the night.

The idea brought a smile to his face and he slowly drifted further from reality. His eyelids became heavy. Then they closed completely. McWinters could see and smell every detail of his dream. Acceptance from his peers. It had been what he craved his entire life.

Suddenly, from outside the cruiser, loud engines that could have been mistaken for fighter jets, flew by at break neck speeds. McWinters shot awake. His heart raced. Off in the distance he saw two pairs of tail lights, one red the other neon green, rapidly swallowed by the darkness.

“Car nineteen to base.” He called through the radio, voice cracking and hands trembling from the instant shot of adrenaline.

“Go ahead car nineteen,” The static voice of the dispatcher responded within a moment.

“Staked out on Deerborn Ave, and just got sight of illegal street racers. Request for back up and initiating pursuit.”

“Roger. Back-up requested.”

McWinters dropped his radio. The SUV roared to life. The lights on top blasted out red and blue rays that lit up his immediate surroundings as the siren began to wail.

“Here we go.” He said to himself, “Let’s fucking get some!”

Gravel shot out behind the SUV as the back tires spun wildly. McWinters kept his eyes towards his left, the direction the two street racers headed, and pulled out onto the street, never noticing the third street racer.

The front end of the third racer smashed directly into the side of McWinters’ SUV at a rate of ninety miles per hour. The front hood folded like an accordion as the back end lifted into the air and began a summersault over McWinters’ cruiser and through a hurricane of its own debris. Glass shattered. The driver catapulted out of the car. Metal doors, engine components, and axles folded easier than out of date newspaper.

The SUV cruiser split in half. The back portion spun wildly and fell down the hill on the right side of Deerborn Ave, while the front portion, with McWinters still buckled into the driver’s seat, rotated and flipped until it came to a rest, upside down, on the left side of the road. Its lights, still operational, flashed and sprawled red and blue rays out across the pavement. All fell silent.

Then, sirens of the other officers grew louder. The first car upon the scene saw the carnage and called for immediate airlift transport to Piedmont Hospital. As Officer McWinters’

bruised and badly broken body flew above the city lights towards the hospital, the other officers on the scene located the body of the third street racer. Almost twenty yards down the road, she had become impaled on a tree branch along the side of Deerborn Avenue.

## **Part Two**

McWinters found a parking spot in the back of the department lot. He sat with the idling engine for a moment and thought about the previous eighteen months. Each and every one of those days he would wake up and make an effort to get himself back to work, and a sensation of fear, joy, and anxiety now swelled within him.

He hadn't been the first Atlanta Police officer injured on the job, though he had become the first to sustain those serious level injuries and decline the disability pension, otherwise known as early retirement. The higher-ups in the force could not believe their ears. With a shattered pelvis, two broken legs, a herniated disk, internal bleeding, and brain damage, Pat McWinters made strides to again one day work as an Atlanta Police officer. His day had come.

The lobby appeared the same. Marble floor with a grey and white pattern, the sign in desk on the right hand side, and the doors to the offices and locker room straight ahead. He made his way through the doors to the side where only law enforcement had access, and the fear and anxiety seemed to instantly lift from his chest. He smelled the burnt coffee and stale food from the kitchen, and heard the same stream of heated emotions from officers talking shop and bullshit.

The locker room got new lockers. Red stainless steel ones, doubled in size, replaced the old and condensed wooden lockers from before. Number 6034, empty, and McWinters started to fill it with his belongings. His toiletry bag, bath towel, street clothes, and workout gear fit with room to spare. Then he took out his medication.

Oxycotin, five every twelve hours. Ultram, three every eight hours. Percacet, one every twenty-four hours. The cocktail of prescription pain pills had coursed through his veins since the day he left the hospital. At first they made him see double, hallucinate, and sent him into a warm and sleepy daze. Soon enough the side-effects wore off, and the pills properly sank their hooks into McWinters, making themselves a necessity just for him to get out of bed.

“McWinters, welcome back,” Boomed a deep voice from behind, “I assume you’re making the necessary adjustments.”

The voice belonged to Lt. Phants. He had spent twenty-three years in the Atlanta Police department and quickly ascended the ranking system. Known around the city for his benevolent charity work as well as his hard nosed approach corruption within the department, the lieutenant earned the respect of his peers and acknowledgment from his superiors, which had been hard to come by for a man of color in Atlanta’s police department.

“Lieutenant,” McWinters, startled, jerked his head over his shoulder before he rose to his feet. “Yes. I feel ready.”

“Good to hear. Though one-hundred percent after a wreck like you encountered seems like a fallacy.”

“I am determined, sir.”

“I can see that, officer. That is why you are here today, instead of at home, retired, doing what you want to with the city’s pension.”

“This is what I want to do, sir.” McWinters attempted to put more conviction into his response as it felt to him that Lt. Phants wondered why he had come back to serve.

“Right.” The lieutenant cleared his throat. The collar of his buttoned up shirt hugged his neck, pinching his skin together. “Let me cut to the chase, McWinters. You’re back against all odds, and in the eyes of the top brass, including the mayor, you’re a liability.”

“Excuse me?” McWinters interrupted, head tilted to the side with confusion.

“The department got hit hard with the wrongful death suit of that street racer. The city lost over a million dollars from it.”

“Sir, with all due respect, they are the ones who broke - .”

“Let. Me. Finish,” Lt. Phants cut in, “I know. Everything has been settled. What we have to deal with now is an officer returning to duty after sustaining near fatal injuries, who in the eyes of the court acted in error while he was healthy.”

McWinters’ head remained tilted.

“Do you understand?”

“I think...”

“The mayor thinks you fucked up when you were at your healthiest, and now that you’re returning with injuries, he sees you as a liability.”

“To what? His next election year?”

“Don’t get smart with me. You bite that tongue or you’re on desk duty in traffic sector until you quit or retire.” Lt. Phants’ eyes narrowed, piercing McWinters. “He makes a valid

point, one that I agree with, but between you and me, yes, of course the next election factored into the decision.”

“Sorry.”

“Right.” Lt. Phants cleared his throat, attempting to lower his intensity, “Seeing as how I give my officers the benefit of the doubt, I am willing to let you back out onto patrol.”

McWinters’ eyes lit up. He felt as though he could give the lieutenant a hug.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m willing to let you back out there under one condition. You are now partnered. No questions. If you refuse, you’re on traffic ticket duty. If you accept, and prove yourself capable of not ...” The lieutenant searched for a phrase that did not involve the death of an Atlanta citizen, “Lets just say royally fucking everything straight to hell, then we’ll see where we stand in one year’s time.”

One year. McWinters’ heart sank at that notion, but it had been the best news he could have hoped to hear.

“Does that sound adequate to you, officer?” Lt. Phants pressed McWinters for some type of response.

“Yes. Absolutely.” McWinters responded, suddenly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. “That will totally work for me.”

“I had the feeling it would. Well, you’re partner is in car forty-seven. Officer Zarnota. He’s informed me that you two are friendly, and he volunteered to take you on as a partner.”

McWinters successfully hid his confusion. He knew Zarnota as a bit of a hot head, but he would never call their status a friendship, or even a relationship. McWinters could not recall them saying more than five words to each other. Ever.

“Excellent.” McWinters answered and coughed to clear his throat. “He’s an excellent officer.”

“He has his way of doing things, and I agree with him. You two will be a good fit.” Lt. Phants glanced up at the red numbers on the digital clock, “Your shift starts in fifteen minutes. Best get yourself together. Zarnota is at the cruiser in the lot.”

“Right.”

“Welcome back, McWinters.” Lt. Phants extended a hand, but no smile. The two shook and then the lieutenant left the locker room without another word. McWinters looked up at the clock on the locker room wall and read the time, 22:47.

“Shit.” He said to himself.

McWinters marched through the cruiser lot at double time, rapidly recounting everything he needed for the shift and praying he packed it in his duffle bag. Headlights from cruisers, both returning from and embarking on their shifts, crisscrossed each other in a moving pattern, leaving McWinters disoriented. He could not tell which way to go. The bright lights began to make the inner workings of his brain vibrate sporadically, a side effect from his fractured skull. Just as the pain became too much, and he thought he very well may vomit, a voice called out his name.

“McWin’ers.” It echoed around the lot. “McWin’ers, get your ass over here.”

It had come from his right, and when he looked over, McWinters saw the dubious face of Officer Zarnota. Hanging out of the driver side window of car forty-seven.

“Thought I had to send a search party out for you.” Zarnota said, his voice stretched thin like an old-time comedian’s. “Throw your shit in the back and hop in.”

McWinters played cool. He jogged across the lot to car forty-seven and its open trunk. Before he slammed it down McWinters felt around inside his duffle bag for his prescription bottles, and desperately tried to identify the labels in the dark. The engine roared to life, and Zarnota, perpetually low on patience, gave the horn three quick hits. Flustered, and borderline embarrassed about his poor start, McWinters gave up and jammed the three different bottles into his vest.

“Welcome to car forty-seven,” Zarnota mimicked a game show host as McWinters climbed into the passenger seat, “Where all your hopes and dreams are sure to come true.”

A smile crossed McWinters’ face, as some of his nerves evaporated and he sank comfortably into his seat.

“Thank you. Uh, good to be here.”

“That you should young man, that you should. That is real leather you have parked your fat ass on. Don’t look now, but those are indeed dual cup holders, which can hold your thrity-two ounce soft drink. Diet-coke, I presume? Pretty fucking fancy if you ask me.”

McWinters felt the sting of the insult and did not know where to look, so he kept his eyes on the floor mats. After a long pause and the heat from Zarnota’s death stare, McWinters finally looked up. He noticed Zarnota’s protruding chin extended to a point beyond his lips and had a dimple in the center. His brow appeared strong, like it had a packet of gel beneath the skin, and it

made McWinters think of the malleable icepacks kept in the first aid kit. Zarnota kept clean shaven, and his face appeared slick in the darkness.

“You know I’m fucking with you, right?” The sense of humor left Zarnota’s voice, as it became stern and matter of fact. McWinters never appreciated being told how he should feel, but Zarnota’s force of will caught him off guard. He nodded. “Right? I mean Jesus Christ, the last thing I fucking need is another fucking pussy as a partner and to take a joke the wrong way and try to write me up. Fucking liberal pussies...” Zarnota trailed off as his gaze diverted towards the windshield. “I want to know what the fuck ever happened to freedom of speech, huh? I made a fucking joke. No harm. No foul. You’re fine with it.” His eyes once again locked on to McWinters.

“I...I don’t know what to tell you. I mean, snowflakes, what can you do?” McWinters placated his partner.

“Fucking snowflakes.” Zarnota’s slow boil seemed to subside at the recognition of camaraderie. “How are you? You feel ok? I heard about your accident. God damn, McWinters you killed a man!”

“Yeah, I feel, uh, I have my days. I have my meds for those, and it was actually a woman. I...I don’t like to talk much about it. Can barely remember it to be honest, but yeah, it has been a long time coming to get back here.”

“A broad drove that car? No wonder she crashed.” Zarnota laughed from his gut. The creases around his eyes folded and betrayed his tender age of thirty-two, four years older than McWinters. “No wonder the city got hit so god damn hard with the wrongful death suit. Jesus

Christ, now that's a story worth telling at Billy Club. Alright. You don't want to talk about it, let's drop it and get down to business."

Zarnota logged onto the laptop on car forty-seven's dashboard. The device buffered, and he began to log the patrol car in for duty. The beep and vibration from the computer caught McWinters' attention, bringing to life buried moments, and for the first time since the night of his accident, he remembered the meal he ate in his cruiser. Double cheeseburgers with extra pickles.

"Tonight we are patrolling the eastern district bet-," Zarnota began, then stopped short when he noticed McWinters' far away look, "Hey. Eyes up front. Pay attention."

"Right. Sorry. Go ahead."

Zarnota's eyes seemed weary of his new partner, but he pressed on.

"Tonight we are patrolling between Bryant and East Ferry streets. That is roughly four square miles of nothing but crackheads, whores, and drug dealers." Zarnota stepped on the gas with the car still in neutral. The engine roared. "Lets go crack some fucking skulls."

Car forty-seven dropped into Drive, darting out of its spot, across the lot, and turning right with out slowing down. McWinters, who still felt like an out-of-tune orchestra wrapped on from within his cerebellum, gripped the door handle for a semblance of stability, while a single thought crossed his mind, 'At least it's not desk duty'.

Nothing good happens after midnight, and so the first hour of Zarnota and McWinters' shift passed without major conflict. They had come across a group of high schoolers in Jackson Park on a school night, but the cruiser's high beam spotlight and a menacing threat from Zarnota scared them off.

“Dumb fuckin’ niggers,” Zarnota scoffed, “Hope they can shoot a three pointer or else they’re never getting out of the ghetto.” He turned the cruiser slowly onto Withering Ave. “Odds every kid in that group won’t live to see twenty-one, or if they do it’ll be from the inside of a cell.”

“Maybe they’re good at school. They can get an education and make their way.”

McWinters spoke up.

The underlying racism and disdain for the city’s youth from Zarnota made McWinters’ stomach feel sick, which seemed to exacerbate the pain from within his head. Every other minute McWinters would glance at the clock in hopes that it would be time for his medication, but like sand in an hour glass, time trickled on.

“They’re out in the park on a Thursday night, drinking, smoking, beating up on each other, and you think they’re good at school? My asshole can do long division better than those little turds. Shit. Get your head out of your fucking ass McWinters.”

McWinters agreed just so Zarnota would stop his tirade. A small nod of his head and shrug of his shoulders sent the message of understanding needed to halt the hate speech.

“We’re in downtown Atlanta. Not Beverly Hills.”

Car forty-seven continued down Withering Ave at fifteen miles per hour. The spot light on the front of the car lit up the broken down and abandon houses, each with a different combination of busted out windows, boarded up doors, and indiscriminate graffiti.

“Look out there, McWin’ers.” Zarnota implored, “This is where those kids come from. Have you ever been inside one of those houses?”

McWinters shook his head ‘No’.

“Consider yourself lucky. Human depravity at the highest level goes on in there. Fiends on the hunt for their next fix, whores willing to suck the heroin out of a dealers dick, and dead bodies. O.d. and murder victims are dumped there because they know police will literally do anything to avoid going into one of those houses.”

The imagery conjured up by Zarnota filled McWinters’ stomach with steamy bile. He looked at the clock with a more strained sense of desperation, but twenty-eight minutes remained before he could take his next pill. Globes of sweat formed on his forehead and even more accumulated under his arms. McWinters’ breath slowly decreased in length. In a instant, McWinters’ door flung open and vomit shot out onto the street in a strong stream like a water pump.

“Holy shit!” Zarnota exclaimed, “Welcome back to the fucking job, McWin’ers!”

The car stopped. McWinters collected himself, shut the door, and apologized to Zarnota.

“No need. This place will do that to the lame of heart. C’mon. Let’s get an early lunch. You need to put the protein you lost back in you. I know the best place for breakfast sandwiches.”

“Everything is in the bag, right?” Zarnota shot a look of accusation towards the late twenty-something who had been placed on overnight manager duty.

“Two egg and bacon breakfast sandwiches, extra cheese on one and pickles on the other.” The manager responded, semi-offended. “Check for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“Don’t get fucking smart with me.” Zarnota snapped.

The manager recoiled at the verbal assault. “Total comes to \$18.45.” His voice more sheepish.

“No. That’s wrong.” Zarnota stated. The manager double-checked the register, tilted his head, and wandered through confusion.

“How about this,” Zarnota continued, “These are on the house with my police discount, and I won’t tip off my friend about the wetbacks you got running the dishwasher back there.”

Zarnota pointed back towards the kitchen, where Spanish music soared from a transistor radio, and immigrants willing to work for their living dunked dirty dishes into sinks of hot soapy water.

“I...I don’t do the hiring.” The overnight manager bartered.

“Even so, an INS raid on your watch won’t look good in the owners eyes, will it?” Zarnota laid out the worst case scenario. A grim look on his face locked into the young manager’s eyes until the bag slid across the counter. “You’re doing your civic duty, kid.”

Zarnota grabbed the paper bag off the counter, strutted past the green suede booths, and out of the front door as the bells on the entrance clattered over his head.

Inside car forty-seven, McWinters encountered a struggle of his own. He placed an oxycontin pill in his mouth, then poured in a thimble’s worth of water from his bottle. With his head tilted back he attempted to swallow, but the water and the slowly deteriorated pill got spit back up onto his uniform.

“Got lunch.” Zarnota declared as he climbed back into the driver’s seat, “Or breakfast, which ever you prefer. Extra pickles on a breakfast sandwich, you sick fuck.” He handed the hot

tinfoil mass towards McWinters, “Jesus Christ, McWinters, did you forget how to drink water while I was in there?”

“No,” McWinters took the sandwich, “Its my injury. Brain damage makes it tough, almost near impossible to swallow sometimes. Which is great since the docs gave me pain pills that I NEED to swallow.” McWinters sounded defeated. “I ate nothing but smoothies and protein shakes for the first six months.” McWinters readied himself for another attempt. “If I see the words ‘muscle milk’ one more time I’ll bow my head off.”

“Slow down, now.” Zarnota attempted to ease the situation. “Just so we’re clear I’m not going to mama-bird your food for you. You know, chew it up and spit it in your mouth.”

A genuine laugh emerged from McWinters’ gut for the first time in months. “No, thats ok. Im in more pain than I am hungry to be honest, and I can’t get this god damn pill down.”

The timber of McWinters’ voice raised at the end of his sentence, and Zarnota picked up on his partner’s desperation. Luckily, he had an idea.

“Alright, McWinters, take out your notebook, ‘cuz I’m about to take you to school. Give me your pills.”

On the dashboard of car forty-seven, beneath the pink neon light of *Diaz’s Diner’s* sign, Zarnota put three oxycontin pills under a napkin then proceeded to crush them with his walkie-talkie. When he removed the napkin, a coarse powder had replaced the solid pills. It had been a street level junkie magic trick performed by a boy in blue. Zarnota licked the tip of his index finger, rolled it in the center of the powder, and then rubbed his finger along his gums. He urged McWinters to follow suit, and when the injured officer rubbed the powder along his gums he discovered it to be more potent than ingesting the pill. The powder soon disappeared from the

dashboard, and feeling buoyant and intoxicated, the boys in blue ventured back out to protect and serve.

### **PART THREE**

One week back at full duty had taken more of a toll on his body than McWinter's had expected. His slipped disk and damaged vertebrae kept him awake each night, which made the pain doubly worse for his shift. To compensate he upped his dosage of pain pills, crushing them how Zarnota taught him, but his supply quickly dwindle. Officer Zarnota had noticed.

"McWin'er's," Zarnota called from the opposite end of the cruiser lot, "Over here today."

Zarnota stood in front of a late model, grey, Crown Victorian unmarked police car. A grin he could not help to hide bunched up his right cheek and formed a dimple that made many women swoon. Cocky and self-assured.

"What happened to car forty-seven?" McWinter's asked.

"I put in a request and got the unmarked cruiser for an undisclosed length of time."

"We're doing under-cover work?" McWinter's heart raced at the idea, unsure what to expect from his increasingly cavalier partner.

"Something like that, yeah. I have a plan to help you out with your situation."

McWinter's gave a confused look.

"Just put your shit in the back. I'll explain as we go." Zarnota ordered.

The trunk popped open for McWinters, who dropped in his duffle bag and purposefully left his pain pills stowed inside. His throat ran dry. Before he slammed the trunk down and began

his shift, he whispered a small prayer for safety, something he had not done since his first shift of active duty.

For the first portion of their shift Zarnota and McWinters patrolled B-District, their normal route, and encountered little disturbance. Still, Zarnota had not explained his plan, only insisted that it'd be easier to show McWinters. Eventually, the time had come.

The unmarked Crown Vic turned onto Withering Ave, immediately slowed to a snails pace, and Zarnota turned off the headlights. It stopped on the south end at the corner of Withering Ave and East Pressing. On the other side of East Pressing loomed the vast and ominous Jefferson Park. A sick sensation coursed through McWinters' gut, and he convinced himself that it stemmed from nerves.

"Jefferson Park." McWinters stated matter of factly once Zarnota killed the engine.

"Look out in the park. See that young kid with his jacket hanging off his shoulders and around his elbows. That kid is a dealer. Oxy. Benzos. Heroin."

"That's his sign for holding?"

"Exactly."

"So we're going to take him down? You want to steak out a buy?"

"You're almost there," Zarnota responded, almost giddy, "So the problem you're having with the prescription of oxy's, the doctor won't refill for you,"

"Yeah,"

"I'm here to tell you the doctor can go fuck himself. He can go fuck himself for not helping out a boy in blue who puts his life on the line day in and day out while the doc wears a

lab coat and looks at women's coochies all day. Fucking perv. We don't need that mother fucker to get your pills."

The confused look once again returned to McWinters face. A small part of him grasped the intention of Zarnota's plan, but the larger portion of his being prayed for it to not be the case.

"I...I can't stick up a drug dealer, I..." McWinters' voice fell into itself, cracked, and barely rose above a whisper.

"Stick him up?!" Zarnota flashed his impervious grin at the thought, "Hell no we're not going to stick him up. Do I look like I'm fucking insane?"

McWinters' desperately wished no repercussions would follow if he answered that rhetorical question truthfully.

"He's definitely got a piece on him and ready to use it," Zarnota explained the danger of robbing a drug dealer, "No, a stick-up is too risky. We're going fishing."

"Fishing?"

"We steak out the dealer. We sit here and we wait." Zarnota's took a deep breath, settling into a meditative stare.

"Wait for what exactly?" McWinters treaded carefully, not fully sure if he wanted to know anymore of Zarnota's plan.

"We wait until our boy out there makes a deal." He turned to look at McWinters, who through the shadows of the night saw the dead look in Zarnota's eyes.

Coldly, Zarnota elaborated, "We wait until he makes a deal to someone who has a lot to lose."

Time slowed to a crawl inside the Crown Vic for McWinters. The pain in his back and neck flared up from the stress of the situation, and he could barely concentrate. Twice Zarnota asked him if he took his oxycontin bottle out of the bag in the trunk. After the second answer of ‘No’, Zarnota apologized and again explained that it would be too risky to retrieve it.

They had witnessed six exchanges. Each one the exact same. Someone, down and out, dressed in rags, stumbled up to the dealer. In their hands they carried the little money they had left in the world, which had either been bartered, stolen, or earned from nefarious deeds, and desperately extended it towards their savior, the dealer. He pocketed the cash. Then, in his pair of new Timberland boots and gold chain, he walked over to the stash hidden inside of an abandon tire, which Zarnota called, ‘A fucking rookie move’. After the final step of the exchange the ragged person stumbled off into the darkness, while the dealer attempted to look as casual as possible in a public park at 3:30 Am.

Zarnota explained in morbid detail how these people would not be the appropriate targets to take from. Low-end, strung out junkies likely bought heroin. The boys in blue wanted pills. The end of their shift grew closer, narrowing Zarnota’s window of opportunity, and a sense of relief slowly stirred within McWinters. All of that came to a halt when Zarnota poked him in the ribs and told him to look alive.

A maroon BMW cruised down East Pressing Ave, passing the Withering Ave corner and their Crown Vic, while Zarnota watched it like a father witnessing his son’s first steps. It stopped along the side of Jefferson Park, and Zarnota beamed as his patience finally paid off.

“Keep an eye on this one.” He told McWinters, “This could be our guy.”

McWinters watched as the dealer went right to the abandon tire then to the driver side of the BMW. The driver never exited. Within a matter of seconds it pulled away and the dealer went back to his normal position.

“Time to ride.” Zarnota cried out. He started the engine, but kept the lights off until he drove past the dealer. They caught up with the BMW at the next corner and began a tail as it turned onto the first available on-ramp leading out of the city. A quarter mile down the virtually empty thru-way Zarnota flipped the switch for the Crown Vic’s lights. A sea of red and blue circled from the dashboard and splattered the four lane highway. The BMW knew exactly what to do, and both cars slowed to a stop.

“No, no.” Zarnota snapped at McWinters, “Do not enter any information about this stop. Understand?”

The cold stare from Zarnota cut through McWinters, who slowly closed the car’s computer.

“This is off the record. One-hundred percent off the record. Now, in one and a half minutes exactly, I need you to walk up the other side of his car. Shine your flashlight in the backseat, in his face, and sound mean.” Zarnota explained McWinters unwitting role before he himself exited the cruiser and approached the driver’s side of the BMW.

Zarnota’s flashlight shone through the back windshield, illuminated the leather seats, and then he used the head to tap on the rolled up driver’s window. A light buzz sounded and the window lowered. Zarnota put his right hand on the roof of the car and lowered himself to the window’s level with the light pointed directly in the driver’s eyes, forcing the sunken and pale white face to recoil.

“Do you know why- whew!” Zarnota pulled his head away from the window, “That is some strong gin you’ve been sipping on this evening. License and registration.” The stiff scent of alcohol poured out of the car and raced up Zarnota’s nostrils. When he lowered his head back down he noticed the driver, who’s license read ‘Dringer, A. Marc’, had bloodshot eyes and sweat seeping from under his black once slicked back hair.

“I’m going to be honest, you’re fucked buddy.” Zarnota leveled with the man, who desperately avoided eye contact. “My partner and I saw you at Jefferson Park. We tailed you, and it’s our lucky day because we get to add drunk driving to your drug charge. Two felonies in one night.”

“I didn’t buy any drugs!” The driver proclaimed in an attempt to save himself.

“Bullshit. That is straight bullshit.” Zarnota’s tone turned dramatically dark and direct. “I know you picked up from that little shit in Jefferson Park. I saw you, so do not deny it or I will lock you in a cell myself. Fucking test me, mother fucker!” A loud thud echoed in the car after Zarnota drove his point home with a wallop on the roof.

The driver sat still like a school boy scolded by a nun, temperamental about an impending blow. One and a half minutes had elapsed. McWinters climbed out of the Crown Vic, flashlight drawn.

“Give them to me.” Zarnota ordered.

“Wha-what?” The driver stammered, confused and disoriented from McWinters flashlight now in his face.

“The drugs you bought at Jefferson Park. Give them to me right now or I swear to god,”

The driver, on the verge of tears or a panic attack unlocked his glove compartment, pulled out a tin container once used for breath mints and handed it out the window to Zarnota.

“The fuck are these?” Zarnota opened the tin and used his finger to root around the pills.  
“These aren’t oxycontin. What are these?”

The driver began to weep openly. “Please. I have a family, and my firm can’t know about this. Please.”

“That is up to you. That is purely on your shoulders right now. Tell me, what the fuck did you buy from the kid in Jefferson Park?”

“They’re...they’re...oh god, forgive me.”

“This is your last fucking chance!” Zarnota slammed his fist again. Both the driver and McWinters jumped.

“McWinters, give me your cuffs. Times up you mother fucker. Get the fuck out of the car.” Zarnota reached for the door handle. Locked.

“No!” The driver wailed. “Ok.Ok. I’ll tell you. I bought,” His words intermittently broken up by huge sobs as he saw his life engulfed in flames, “They’re rohypnol. I bought roophies. Just kill me. Oh god, kill me. Please.”

Zarnota stood up, looked across the BMW’s roof towards McWinters, and identified with his expression of utter surprise. Marc A. Dringer’s moans and pleas to be put out of his misery filled the placid Atlanta night air on the side of the thruway. Time rapidly ticked by for Zarnota as he tried to think of what to do next. McWinters motioned back towards the Crown Vic, and silently wished to end the abusive charade.

“Ok, mother fucker,” Zarnota leaned down to the window after an idea popped into his head, “You’re going to do a favor for us or we book you right now for attempted rape and take bets with other officers for how long you’ll last. My money’s on you’ll be dead before dawn.”

The sickly face of Marc A. Dringer, gaunt cheek bones and shallow eye sockets, turned up towards Zarnota, who now knew he had him in the palm of his hand.

~

The young man in fresh Timberland boots and a gold chain around his neck stared fixedly into his phone. The fluorescent light from the screen, the only light in the otherwise barren Jefferson Park, lit up his face.

“Ah, mother fucker,” he snapped, unable to level up in Candy Crush. Then he noticed a pair of headlights approach. He reverted back to his cautious stance, and grew even more so when he realized the headlights belonged to a familiar maroon BMW.

The car parked. The engine shut off and the lights died along with it. The driver, Marc A. Dringer, exited. A mixture of defeat and helplessness surrounded Dringer as he approached the young dealer.

Across the street, assumed in their previous position, McWinters, with the oncoming of another migraine, and Zarnota, desperate for the prescription opiate, watched and waited inside the Crown Vic. The engine idling, headlights off.

“The fuck brings you back?” The dealer asked, cautious and reserved.

“I...I need more.” Dringer stammered. He tripped over his words and feet as he approached.

“Fuck you,” The dealer said with authority, “That shit is hard enough to come by. I filled yo’ special request, the fuck makes you think I got more. You the only mother fucker out here askin’ for it.”

“No, I need more of other stuff.” He wiped snot away from his nose. “Oxys. I need as much oxys as this will get me.”

The dealer looked at the wad of cash Dringer extended towards him. A skill that his uncle drove into him with the buckle end of a leather belt had been the ability to make a rough estimate of loose cash. If all the bills in his hand are marked twenty or higher then that meant Dringer had brought nearly four hundred dollars.

“The fuck you need oxys for, old man?” The dealer asked.

“I...I need them for a friend,” Dringer tried to be as honest as possible before attempting to correct himself, “...and for myself. They’re going to be for both of us. My friend and myself.”

The correction only served to add to the dealers suspicion. The money in Dringers hand slowly lost its allure, and the dealer began to pick up on red flags. He noticed sweat trickle down Dringer’s forehead and pool in the corner of his eye sockets. The hand that held the cash shook with a life of its own. Dringer’s usual demeanor of calm and cool seemed to have been uprooted. The dealer made a judgment call.

“Nah, man.” He waived his hand towards Dringer as though he swatted a fly, “Get the fuck outta here with that.”

“Please. Please. I need them. I’ll give you all of this.” Dringer took three more steps towards the dealer. The space between them reduced to a matter of inches. “I need the oxys.”

“...And I said you ain’t gettin’ shit, mother fucker.” The dealer declared and made breathing room between he and Dringer.

“Fuck,” Zarnota said aloud as he watched the unraveling, “Fuck me. Fuck!”

“Do we go in?” McWinters asked.

“Not yet.” Zarnota answered, with his eyes locked on the two men in the park.

“Here’s,” Dringer held the money out in front of him like a holy offering and began to count to the exact dollar, “Here’s four-hundred and fifty-five dollars. Take it, all of it. I just need some oxys.”

The dealers estimate had been close. He thought back for a moment. On every other occasion, three in total, the old white man made it clear that he wanted Rohypnol. Nothing else. Why the sudden change of heart? An uneasy feeling about the situation slid into the dealer’s gut. He always trusted his gut.

“You don’t like oxys. I knew it’s a mistake gettin’ involved wit your white ass. Shit. Think you can fuck with us niggas cuz you got money.” The dealer turned his back on Dringer.

“I NEED them.” Dringer begged, lunged forward, and grabbed the dealer by the shoulder.

The dealer spun around and immediately planted his fist in Dringer’s nose. A quick jab to let him know that he now tread on dangerous territory made blood drain out of Dringer’s nostrils and into his mouth. Wounded, Dringer let out a whimper and fell to his knees. His hands immediately shot up to his face, and the cash, clenched into his palm by his thumb, soaked up blood.

“Jesus christ.” Zarnota snapped.

“We have to intervene.” McWinters pleaded.

“No!” Zarnota’s voice raised.

“We have to at least call him back.” The pain in McWinters skull now made it difficult to speak.

“I said no!”

The dealer watched Dringer squirm. “I ain’t gonna fuck wit you no more. Test me again and you see what the fuck gon’ happen.” Rage seethed through the dealer’s clenched jaw. Part of him wished for Dringer to persist just so he would have a target to unload his anger upon.

Dringer obliged the secret wish. He crawled on his hands and knees towards the dealer. “You don’t understand,” He sobbed. “My life...my life depends on these.”

The dealer stood resolute. Tired that his warnings had been ignored, he reached for the 9mm pistol tucked in the back of his waist band and waited. Blood spilled onto the dealer’s new Timberland boots as Dringer crawled and prayed at the dealers feet. He pulled the pistol out and brought the handle down hard on the back of Dringer’s head.

“I jus’ fuckin’ got these, and you gon’ spit blood on ‘em,” The dealer screamed, “Get the fuck out or the next one is a bullet in the back of your head.”

“That’s it,” McWinters caved, “I’m calling it in. Assault. It’s in our district, and we can say we drove up while it’s in process.”

Zarnota’s hand clamped McWinters’ forearm, overpowering the officer.

“Listen to a god damn word I say,” Zarnota seethed, “It’s my call and we are goin’ to wait it out.”

“He’s going to get himself killed.”

“He died long before he pulled up here tonight.”

Zarnota released his death grip. Red marks, early signs of bruising, already reached around McWinters forearm.

Motivated by the will to hold in place the remnants of his slowly shattering life, or the promise that it would soon come to an end, Dringer rose to his knees. The dealer, disgusted, spit at Dringer’s face when he saw the blood covered lips and chin. He felt no difference between shooting him or squashing a cockroach that scurried across the kitchen floor.

“I...need...help.” Dringer said softly and fell forwards. His hand reached out and planted the blood soaked cash in the dealer’s chest.

“No one gon’ help you.” The dealer promised. “You workin’ for the boys in blue, ain’t you.”

Bang.

A single gunshot echoed through Jefferson Park, and the bullet tore through Dringer’s stomach. Motionless, he descended facedown towards the earth, leaving the dealer momentarily standing with a broken gold chain and blood stained t-shirt before fleeing under the cover of darkness.

“No! No! No!” McWinters screamed in agony and despair.

Without missing a beat, Zarnota popped the Crown Vic into reverse, kept the headlights off, and raced backwards down Withering Ave.

“What? No, go back. He’s shot!” McWinters pleaded, attempting to open the car door.

Zarnota, turned and looking over his right shoulder, concentrated on the street through the back windshield. The car made it to the corner, and in one fluent motion the front end spun around one-hundred and eighty degrees. The engine roared as it raced up the block, away from the shooting.

“Get on the radio,” Zarnota could barely catch his breath, “Get on the radio, tell them we were on patrol in B-District and we heard what may be gunfire.”

A piercing tone sliced right through McWinters’ skull. Fumbling for the radio, nearly blind and deaf, he tried to rationalize the situation in his own mind.

“Do it!” Zarnota shrieked.

McWinters obeyed the order, and he radioed to dispatch about a possible shooting in the B-District of Atlanta. Dispatch relayed the transmission out to other units, and within fifteen minutes three police cars, including the Crown Vic, descended upon Jefferson Park, the maroon BMW, and Marc A. Dringer’s lifeless body. They spanned out across the neighborhood in the early hours of the morning in search of witnesses, evidence, and a murder weapon.

Most residents did not answer their doors for the police. The ones who did truthfully claimed that they had been asleep and thought they heard a gunshot but could not be certain. No murder weapon turned up. The stash of drugs had been found inside the old tire, and from their a theory gently fell into place. On the official report, co-written by Zarnota and Mcwinters, Marc A. Dringer had driven himself to Jefferson Park in the early morning hours to purchase drugs. A struggle ensued. A single 9mm round entered his stomach and he bled to death within a matter of five to ten minutes. They had zero suspects, and the case had been filed with the rest of Atlanta’s unsolved murders.

McWinters could not sleep for months after that night. His pain sensitivity increased and most days he could not get out of bed. Zarnota made it continually clear through open ended threats that if McWinters breathed a word of the incident to anybody, serious consequences would ensue.

After the remainder of his personal and vacation time had been exhausted he decided to turn in his badge and walk away from the force. His uncle owned a general store in a country town about three hours outside of Atlanta, and McWinters thought a change of scenery and pace would do him good. With his car packed he set out for his new life, and by luck, or lack-there-of, a patrol car pulled him over minutes into his journey.

The officer slowly approached, McWinters lowered the window, hoping he would have some influence left.

“Heard you’re leavin’,” The officer said, “Don’t ever let me find you stepping foot in Atlanta again.”

McWinters stared for the last time in his life into the eyes of Officer Zarnota.

**THE END**