**Part 1- Gripping Introduction (The Exterior)**

My uniform felt tighter than usual. I could feel the jowls of my neck fold over my freshly starched collar. I looked hesitantly at my steering wheel trying to find my reflection on the plasma screen. Police work hasn’t been kind to my figure I thought as I looked at my chubby face.

Time really seemed to be moving backwards tonight. Boredom was definitely part of the job. Protect and serve? Our motto should really be: Sit and Wait. I glanced out driver’s side window. The dark seemed to swallow every living thing outside; even the crickets were silent tonight. *Too quiet,* I thought.

At that very moment, my navi-guide console started buzzing, vibrating my fingertips as they careless held onto the steering wheel. Three melodic chimes echoed in the cabin of my patrol car notifying me that dispatch was calling. Without delay, the operator at Omaha Precinct relayed my assignment via satellite link to my squad car. A 3-D laser-hologram message flashed bright red leaving a dark silhouette on my empty passenger seat. My stomach tightened with disappointment as I read the following message:

***Hadley Residence******425 Utopia Way******Omaha Quadrant******Possible Domestic Disturbance***

Possible Domestic Disturbance? My pocket trans-locator vibrated lazily against my waist while the directions to the nearby residence began to synch with my vehicle navigation system. Not another ridiculous argument to sort through, I thought. I’m a cop, not a marriage counselor.

Domestic disturbances were the worst part of the job. These types of investigations were usually unpredictable. Even worse, they always required a ton of paperwork. Tonight will be another night to forget.

I tapped the car’s GPS map with two fingers and dragged the address onto the hologuide steering locator. Right on cue, my patrol car’s headlights came to life. My vehicle carefully reversed itself from the parking lot of the 24 hour café’ and eagerly sped toward the domestic disturbance.

Bored, I gazed out the front windshield of my automaton vehicle. Behind the luminescent rays of its headlamps was a vast abyss of Nebraska nothingness and monotony. Nebraska was staring back in just the same way.

Before long, my patrol car had arrived at the front gates of the Hadley home. This neighborhood was quite expensive. Every time I drove through here, my stomach would tighten. These luxury homes had a condescending personality.

My patrol car slowly drove up the driveway then abruptly shut itself off once the front bumper reached the perimeter of the home.

"Destination Complete, " rang the lifeless naviguide voice.

The motion sensor lights were activated by the home revealing the entire property. I took a moment to look around the premises before I stepped out of my vehicle. Their grass was manicured perfectly as if some obsessive-compulsive lawn-mowing automaton cut each blade individually. The rose bushes were no different. It looked almost as if the blood red petals were painted by hand. This place simply reeked of pretentiousness.

The exterior of home was quite large; easily 3 stories tall. The windows were perfectly symmetrical, spaced evenly around the front of the home itself. The roof had state-of-the art solar powered electric generator tiles. The paint on the exterior of the house was just as ostentatious as everything else: unspoiled and unblemished.

Clearly, the owners made plenty of credits to be able to afford this Happy Style Home. The television ads claimed the newer models were quite impressive and had everything a person could want. The slogan from their latest commercial echoed in my mind. Simply . . . the best!

It was nearly flawless. Nearly. Strangely enough, the exterior pathway was completely covered in some sort of hyper-florescent chalk designs. The strange thing was that these designs were not all rainbows and sunshine. These were quite the opposite. The walkway contained gruesome scenes of lions eating . . . something.

I needed to get a closer look.

I stepped out of my patrol car and what I witnessed was disturbing. The pavement was covered in glowing designs that were horrific in nature: graphic depictions of wild animals tearing at bloody limbs of their prey. These ghastly scenes of death and gore were freshly painted on the walkway leading to the house. These children need a psychologist, I laughed to myself shaking my head in disgust. I stood over the disgusting chalk art bemused when suddenly, a high-pitched giggle emanated from the *Happylife Home*.

I glanced toward the home apprehensively.

Without warning, the front door began to slowly swing open as if to invite me inside. I stood staring in disbelief as suspicion began to take hold of my gut.

Readying myself, I took a step toward the open door with my chest puffed out. My right hand hovered slightly over my pulse gun as a precautionary measure. Each step was slow, purposeful. During my approach, my mind began to hypothesize the worst images a cop could muster: death, blood, and unspeakable gore. My hand tightened around my pulse gun; a small patch of perspiration began to form in the small of my back.

I stood apprehensively on the porch as I glanced inside the house. I craned my neck forward placing my left hand on my brow to shield my eyes from the motion sensor lights outside. My eyes tried to adjust to the shadowy interior.

**Part 2- Rise in Action (The Interior)**

The foyer was completely pitch black (except for the sliver of light coming from the outdoor motion lights). But why are all the lights off inside the house? Something wasn’t right.

I called for back-up.

*“Zzzzzztt . . .* precinct *. . . zzztt,”* echoed the holo-guide communicator.

There was no clear reply. Just garbled words and static*. Great, looks like I’m on my own for this house call*, I shook my head sarcastically.

 *Technology could never be trusted.*

Speaking of which, looks like the interior motion lights in the house must be broken as well. I grabbed my flashlight and pointed its beams against the inner walls of the hallway. I sought some sort of manual light switch. Nothing. Maybe the light sensors responded to voice activation.

“Lights. On!” I shouted hopefully.

Still nothing.

So why in the world were the outdoor lights working? I wondered to myself. And where in the heck is everybody?

Frustrated, I took my anger out on the house.

“This house is useless,” I taunted under my breath.

But this time, something did happen. My flashlight began to flicker and then fade until the bulb went completely dark. My battery chose a perfect time to go dead.

Somehow, the house must have an issue with its audio sensors.

I stood there in the bitter darkness feeling dumbfounded. I closed my eyes and began to think of what to do next. There had to be some sort of nucleus or control hub to reboot this place.

I shook my head in disbelief and pressed on going deeper into the bowels of this high-tech mansion. I was completely blind. My eyes were struggling to adjust to the light or lack thereof.

Slowly, I inched forward toward the center of the house until my left leg bumped squarely something solid. I reached out to feel what I had just rammed into. My fingers grazed something leathery and cold.

*A couch*! I thought I must be in the living room. I took a deep breath and tried to adjust my eyes to the blackness once more.

Wait. What is that horrible smell?

My nose was being hijacked by the odor of festering garbage. Curiously, I slid my hand toward the middle of the couch, toward the smell. The cool leather upholstery felt worn beneath my fingertips as I searched for the source. My pinky suddenly grazed something warm and wet; I yanked my hand back with trepidation. Steadying myself, I swallowed my fear and reached further this time.

Without warning, a taunting laughter echoed right behind me. Instinctively, I quickly turned, grabbed my pulse gun, and stood at the ready to demolish whoever or whatever made that hideous little squeal. As if on cue, the house lights came to life. A flicker of light rose from the ceiling of the living room to unveil the source of the sound.

Shortly thereafter, I could see a rosy-cheeked little girl with sandy blonde hair that curled past her shoulders. She wore a disheveled pink dress; her knee-high socks and shoes were splattered with dark red liquid. Her face, what I could see of it, was wrong. It was somehow frozen in ecstasy. Her eyes looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks. They were bloodshot and dark. Even more disturbing, she had a smile that was simply false. Her teeth were massive, almost animal like.

The lights flickered off and on once more.

Abruptly, the girl was gone. A boy stood in her place with the same evil smile. His shirt was smattered in something grotesque; congealed blood and dirt painted the sleeves of his white, button-up t-shirt. His brown hair was parted perfectly down the middle and slicked tightly against his scalp with sweat. He stood silently; smiling right through me just like the little girl had done seconds before.

He looked hungry.

**Part 3- Climax and Resolution (The Escape?)**

Confused and unsure, my fear seemed to freeze my instincts. Should I tackle the kid and get to the bottom of this? Maybe I should try to stun him with a quick pulse from my gun, I thought.

But he is just a child! I argued back in my head.

During that brief moment of hesitation, the boy raised his right hand and pointed to the couch behind me. He was trying to show me something.

Before I could turn around to see what he was pointing at, a deep, evil laughter exuded from the boy’s mouth and reverberated off the walls of the living room. It sounded like every appliance in the house was suddenly turned on.

Slowly, I turned around to see what he was trying to show me. Three lifeless bodies were propped on the couch staring me with unblinking eyes. Their mouths were silently frozen in a state of agony as if their last words hadn’t been words at all.

Those poor victims last words were screams.

I turned back to face that demented little boy with my stun gun at the ready, but he had disappeared. Gone.

Suddenly, darkness surrounded me and the ominous laughter returned once more. *I had to get out of this place.*

At that very thought, the front door suddenly slammed shut. Can this house read my mind?!

I instinctively ran in the opposite direction in hopes of finding a backdoor. Anything to escape the ghastly scene I had just witnessed in the living room. I bumped into several tables and cabinets as I stumbled through the hallways of this horrific place. My hands reached out and smashed pictures and vases as I yearned desperately for some sort of doorway outside into the evening air. The only thing I could hear was my heavy breathing and the faint resonance of laughter behind me.

Unexpectedly, my hands were able to grasp something cool and metallic. A door! I screamed in my mind. I hurriedly yanked it open, dove inside and closed the door behind me.

To my surprise, the room was well lit. Warm too. It smelled of dry grass. I took a moment to wipe my brow with the back of my hand as observed my new surroundings.

I was clearly in a child’s nursery of sorts. The walls weren’t really walls at all; they were crystalline panels radiating 3-D images of the African Veldt. Even more, the state-of-the-art odorphonics were releasing strong scents of dry grass. I’ve never been to Africa before, but if I did, it would probably look and smell exactly like this nursery. I looked up. The virtual sun blasted my forehead causing me to sweat as three very realistic looking vultures circled overhead.

*So real*, I thought in awe. This was certainly a nursery for very, very spoiled children. With that thought, I turned back and checked to make sure the door was still locked.

It was, but the lock was on the outside of the room.

Abruptly, a low rumble echoed behind me. I slowly turned around. Somehow, a massive lion stared hungrily before me with an oddly familiar smile. Taking one step backward, I carelessly bumped into the locked door. I grasped at handle in vain.

The lion growled again as he inched his way forward.

I turned and faced the door once more, banging as loud as I could. “Please! Let me out!” I cried. Tears were streaming down my face.

A chorus of laughter rang outside of the nursery door.

I looked back at the lion. He seemed to be grinning too. His massive jaws were slick with viscera and blood.

Panicked, I turned around and yanked the door with all my strength. Nothing. I tried again. Completely jammed! The laughter was getting louder now.

"Open! Please open!" I yelped. “Please let me go!” I begged. I gave the door handle one final turn to no avail. It was not going to budge.

I was trapped and the house knew it. The children knew it too.

Instantly, the laughter abruptly stopped.

I helplessly moaned and released the handle. My fate was standing right behind me now. I wiped the tears from the corner of my face with the back of my sleeve and deeply inhaled one, final breath. A sense of calm, maybe even acceptance, pervaded my conscious. I didn’t even bother to turn around; I just closed my eyes as an ominous warm breath hungrily licked the back of my neck.