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ISSUE 4 OF 6

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Previously...

After a local man brutally massacres his family, realtor Richard Ashwalt receives the unenviable task of putting the house back on the market. With his career and marriage on the rocks, this couldn't come at a worse time for Rich. Before the house is even cleaned, a mysterious man named Jebediah Crone offers to purchase it. Something seems off about the old man and Rich refuses. Things go from bad to worse.

Richard's boss sells the house to Crone and Richard finds himself a person of interest in a second murder investigation, forcing him to go on the lam. Unable to figure out why he's been set up, Richard returns to the house Crone wanted and finds a rune-covered mirror in the wall. He sees something horrible and smashes the mirror, but his attempts to piece it back together threaten his sanity.

Attempting to stay two steps ahead of his old friend, Detective Al Sperry, Richard and his co-worker, Patrick Jones, investigate Crone's past and keep turning up bizarre stories. Crone seems to have a penchant for houses linked to the macabre. Richard is told one such story by Newt Washington, who then finds himself visited by an acolyte of Crone's... Patrick, Richard's supposed friend.



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8 YEARS AGO

YOU CAN DO THIS, VANESSA, JUST KEEP BREATHING AND--

AAAAAGGGHHH!

DON'T TELL ME TO FUCKING BREATHE!

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW BIG A FUCKING BABY IS?!

OH, DEAR...

WHAT "OH?"

RICHARD, WHAT'S HAPPENING? SOMEONE PLEASE TALK TO--
AAAGGGH!

IT'S OKAY. WE'RE ALL GONNA BE OKAY.

YOU, ME AND OUR LITTLE GIRL.

YOU PROMISE?

I PROMISE. YOU KNOW I DON'T BREAK MY PROMISES.

NOW STOP SCREAMING... THE NEIGHBORS'LL THINK I'M TRYING TO KILL YOU.

NOW

YOUR FEAR REMINDS ME OF A QUOTE I ALWAYS ENJOYED:

"WE ARE NO LONGER SUPPLICATING WEAKLINGS TREMBLING BEFORE AN UNMERCIFUL 'GOD' WHO CARES NOT WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE. WE ARE SELF-RESPECTING, PRIDEFUL PEOPLE--"



SAVE YOUR NONSENSE, BOY! YOUR SATAN TALK DON'T MEAN NOTHING TO ME! YOU AND THAT SICK OLD MAN YOU WORK FOR ARE GONNA ROT IN HELL!

SATAN...? YOU HAVE NO IDEA, MR. WASHINGTON.

THERE ARE THINGS FAR WORSE THAN HELL.





WHAT THE HELL ARE WE DOING HERE, RICH?

AL WANTED TO BELIEVE ME. I KNEW THAT.

I WAS WILLING TO BELIEVE ANYTHING AT THAT POINT, AND SO I DID.



I'M TRYING TO HELP, MAN. I'LL FOLLOW ANY LEAD I CAN ON CRONE TO CLEAR YOUR NAME, BUT...

TO SAY YOU'RE GRASPING AT STRAWS WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT.

THIS HARTMAN WOMAN, AL... SHE HAS A RESTRAINING ORDER AGAINST CRONE. THAT DOESN'T STRIKE YOU AS WEIRD?

IT'S S.O.P. PEOPLE GET THEM ALL THE TIME.



THIS GUY BARELY EXISTS ON PAPER AND YOU HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO FIND HIM. THIS IS ALL WE'VE GOT.

COME ON, THIS COULD BE WHAT WE NEED TO SOLVE MY CASE.

YOUR CASE? RICH, IT'S LATE...

I WASN'T MAKING IT ANY EASIER ON AL.



LOOK AROUND, THIS WOMAN IS CLEARLY CRAZY.

CRAZY PEOPLE DON'T SLEEP.



WHADDAYA WANT? IT'S THE MIDDLE OF THE GOSH DARN NIGHT!

THAT'S WHAT I'M SAYING.



SORRY, MA'AM. POLICE DEPARTMENT. WE'RE HERE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT A GENTLEMAN YOU FILED A RESTRAINING ORDER AGAINST.



I SUPPOSE YOU CAN COME ON IN.



SO WHAT,
THAT SPOOKY
SONUVABITCH
FINALLY KILL
SOMEBODY?



WHO WOULD
THAT BE, MRS.
HARTMAN?



YA THINK I
FORGOT THE MAN OR
WHAT HE DONE? I KNOW
YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT
THAT OLD BASTARD
JEREMIAH CRONE.



JEBEDIAH CRONE,
YES, MA'AM. WE'RE
REVIEWING WHY YOU
HAD THE RESTRAINING
ORDER FILED
AGAINST HIM.



DIDN'T
LIKE HIM. FELLA
DOESN'T HAVE TO
DO WRONG FOR ME
TO KNOW HE IS
WRONG.

'SIDES I
DIDN'T WANT HIM
SNIFFING AROUND
MY HOUSE LIKE
HE DID THE
GORHAM'S.

"HOUSE ACROSS THE WAY USED TO BELONG TO THE GORHAMS. NOTHING REMARKABLE ABOUT 'EM 'CEPT FOR THE OLDEST BOY BEING DUMBER 'N A BAG O' HAMMERS."



"THE PARENTS WEREN'T HOME MUCH AND THE KIDS WOULD DRINK AND CAVORT 'TIL ALL HOURS. THE COPS NEVER CARED 'BOUT IT, BUT THIS TIME..."



"...ONE OF THE BOYS GOT IN HIS TRUCK AND JUST WENT BARRELIN' RIGHT FOR THE GORHAM BOY."



"YOU CAN GUESS WHAT HAPPENED NEXT."





"ONE MINUTE
THEY WAS
FRIENDS, THE
NEXT THE
GORHAM BOY,
CHARLIE, WAS
PRACTICALLY
IN TWO."

"THE KID IN THE TRUCK
TOOK OFF, NEVER CAME
BACK FAR AS I KNOW."




"'FORE THEY EVEN
HAD A CHANCE TO
CLEAN UP, OLD
MAN SHOWS UP."



"THEN AND THERE I KNEW HE WERE
WRONG. I COULDN'T IMAGINE *WHAT* IN
THE WORLD *ANYONE* WOULD BE SMILING
ABOUT IN A SCENE LIKE THAT."






"I FELT SUCH A
CHILL GO 'CROSS
ME, LIKE
SOMEONE DANCIN'
ON MY GRAVE."




NEXT THING
YA KNOW HE
UP AND TAKES
THE WHOLE
DRIVEWAY.


I'M
SORRY, THE
DRIVEWAY?



HE
BOUGHT THE
HOUSE, THEN
HE TOOK THE
DRIVEWAY.



"HE DIDN'T OWN THE
HOUSE LONG, JUST
ENOUGH TIME TO TAKE
THAT DRIVEWAY. PULLED
IT UP IN ONE BIG PIECE
LIKE ONE'A THEM
INDIANA JONES-OLOGISTS
WITH THEM FOSSILS."



NEVER SEEN HIM AGAIN
AFTER THE NEW FOLKS
BOUGHT IT, BUT THAT
LOOK OF HIS...

IT'S WHY
I GOT THE 'STRAININ'
ORDER THINKING 'BOUT
IT KEEPS ME UP NIGHTS.



MY GUESS. IT WAS LESS TROUBLE TO GRANT HER A "STRAININ'" ORDER THAN TO DEAL WITH HER. YOU FIND YOUR ANSWERS, COLUMBO?

SAME M.O. AS THE MITCHELL MURDERS... THAT DOESN'T STRIKE YOU AS ODD?

I'LL GRANT YOU THAT, BUT HE'S NOT BREAKING THE LAW. THIS AND THE OTHER STORIES PAINT HIM AS A FREAK, BUT ALL HIS DEALINGS SEEM TO BE ABOVE BOARD.

EXCEPT FRAMING ME FOR MURDER.



THERE IS THAT... BUT WE DON'T KNOW FOR SURE CRONE HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT.



I KNOW! I DIDN'T DO IT, AL. THIS ALL STARTED WHEN HE SHOWED UP. HE--

I CAN'T PROVE HOW, AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY... BUT I KNOW THIS IS HIM, AND THE MIRROR AND WHAT NEWT SAID ABOUT HIS AGE, AND THE DRIVEWAY AND--



HEY. I'LL TAKE A PERSONAL TOMORROW AND WE'LL GIVE A LAST SHOT AT TYING JEBEDIAH TO ANY OF THIS. IF NOT--

LOOK, CAN YOU DO ME A FAVOR? YOU'RE NO GOOD TO ME LIKE THIS...

"...GET YOURSELF SOME DAMNED REST. YOU LOOK LIKE SOMETHING DEATH BROUGHT WITH HIM IN HIS SUITCASE."



REST. I COULD BARELY REMEMBER WHAT THE WORD MEANT.

MAYBE THE MIRROR WAS A TRICK CRONE WAS PLAYING, LIKE WHAT I'D SEEN IN IT.

MAYBE IT WAS A TRAP.



THE WORDS ECHOED IN MY HEAD, CLOUDING MY SEARCH: WHY ME?

I IMAGINED I WASN'T THE FIRST. WITH LUCK, I'D BE THE LAST.



I COULD STOP HIM IF ONLY I FIGURED OUT...

WHY?





AAAAHHH!

WHAT'S HAPPENING?!

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME, CRONE?!








RICHARD
ASHWALT. I'M
GLAD YOU
ARE WITNESS
TO THIS.



I DON'T
UNDERSTAND.



WHAT ARE YOU
BUILDING?



SHEETT...



THANK YOU, AL. FOR TRUSTING ME.

AND THANK YOU FOR LOOKING LIKE A SCARY, HOMELESS PERSON. MAYBE YOU MISHEARD ME AND THOUGHT I SAID, "NEVER GET ANY REST."



I DON'T SLEEP WELL. NOT LATELY.

YOU DO REALIZE, THE WAY YOU LOOK RIGHT NOW, ANY OTHER COP PICKS YOU UP AND VANESSA AND CLAIRE NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN.

THERE'S AN OVERNIGHT BAG AND A SPARE UNIFORM IN THE TRUNK. I THINK OF EVERYTHING.



GET IT TOGETHER, RICH. WE GOT WORK TO DO.

I DIDN'T FIND ANYTHING THE LAST TIME I WAS AT THE HALL OF RECORDS.

YEAH? IT HELPS TO BE WEARING BLUE AND HAVE A SHIELD.

LATER...

I HATE TO SAY IT BUT THIS COULD TAKE FOREVER. I THINK I'VE LOOKED AT THE PAST FIFTY YEARS WORTH OF RECORDS, LEASES, LAND DEEDS, EVEN BUSINESS LOANS.

IT'D HELP IF WE KNEW **WHAT** WE WERE LOOKING FOR. OR WHAT THE HELL HIS ENDCAME IS.

WHAT WHAT WHAT... HE GUTS THE MITCHELL HOUSE. BYE BYE, CRAWLSPACE.

THE GORHAMS, A DRIVEWAY.

ANTAGONIZING NEWT WASHINGTON'S FAMILY FOR YEARS FOR WHAT? A CHIMNEY...? DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.

GO BACK FURTHER. NEWT WASHINGTON SAID HE LOOKED LIKE DEATH FIFTY YEARS AGO.

MAYBE HE'S NOT SEVENTY. MAYBE HE'S A HUNDRED.

TO AL IT MIGHT HAVE SOUNDED CRAZY. TO ME... IT WAS DUE DILIGENCE.

NONE OF THIS MAKES SENSE. FORGET WHAT HE'D WANT WITH ALL THAT STUFF. WHAT WOULD HE DO WITH IT?

UNLESS...





"BARNs KEPT BURNING TO THE GROUND. SAYS HERE THE FIRES DATE BACK DECADES BEFORE THIS EVEN.

"THE WHOLE COMMUNITY WAS ROCKED BY THIS FIRE. A DOZEN DIED... WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

"HEH. PEOPLE THOUGHT THE LAND WAS 'CURSED,' THAT'S WHY THE BARNs KEPT BURNING."







I WAS THINKING CLEARLY FOR THE FIRST TIME IN DAYS. EVERYTHING MADE SENSE ALL AT ONCE, EVEN IF IT DIDN'T.

IT WAS A RISKY MOVE. I COULD HAVE TAKEN AL'S GUN WITH HIS KEYS, BUT I DIDN'T WANT TO WORRY ABOUT HOW HE'D EXPLAIN THAT.

MY DAD LOST HIS GUN ONCE... IT'S BAD FORM FOR A POLICE.



AFTERNOON. MY SARGE SENT ME OVER, SAID YOU COULD TAKE OFF EARLY.



ISN'T THIS OUTSIDE YOUR JURISDICTION, PARNELL?

YOU GUYS ARE USING UP TOO MUCH O.T. BABYSITTING THIS PRICK'S HOUSE, SO I'M ON ASSIGNMENT.

FAIR ENOUGH. I'M TIRED OF MY GIRL BITCHING ABOUT NOT SEEING ME.



MOST OF THE LOCALS JUST JOINED THE FORCE TO SHOOT GUNS AND LORD POWER OVER THE OTHER LOCALS. THEY DON'T PAY ATTENTION TO THE BUREAUCRACY BEHIND IT ALL.



IT HAD ONLY BEEN A FEW DAYS SINCE I LEFT, BUT I FELT LIKE A STRANGER IN MY OWN HOUSE.



VANESSA?
CLAIRE
BEAR?

I MISSED MY FAMILY MORE THAN ANYTHING. I WAS DOING ALL OF THIS FOR THEM...




AFTER MY FATHER DIED, MY MOM THREW OUT EVERYTHING WHEN WE MOVED.

ALMOST EVERYTHING.




SHE COULDN'T BEAR THE THOUGHT OF PARTING WITH IT.


I KEPT IT IN THE FAMILY, BUT THAT WASN'T ALL.



MY DAD ALWAYS
KEPT A BACK-UP
PIECE ON HIM WHEN
HE WAS ON THE JOB.



HE TRIED NOT TO
LET ANYONE SEE,
BUT I ALWAYS KNEW
WHERE HE HID IT.




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NOSE, .38 SPECIAL.

SPECIAL
ENOUGH
TO KILL
CRONE...



I THOUGHT I WAS
CLEAR, THAT THE NOISE
IN MY HEAD AND GAUZE
OVER MY EYES HAD
BEEN LIFTED...



...BUT I STILL COULDN'T
TELL YOU EVERYTHING
THAT HAPPENED NEXT.



I FOUGHT
BACK. I WASN'T
DONE YET.

THUD



NOT BY A
LONG SHOT.

WHACK



I KNEW WHERE I WAS
GOING. I KNEW WHAT
I NEEDED TO DO.

CRONE HAD
TRIED TO
KILL ME.



IT WAS TIME
TO RETURN
THE FAVOR.



TO BE CONTINUED!

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May 2011

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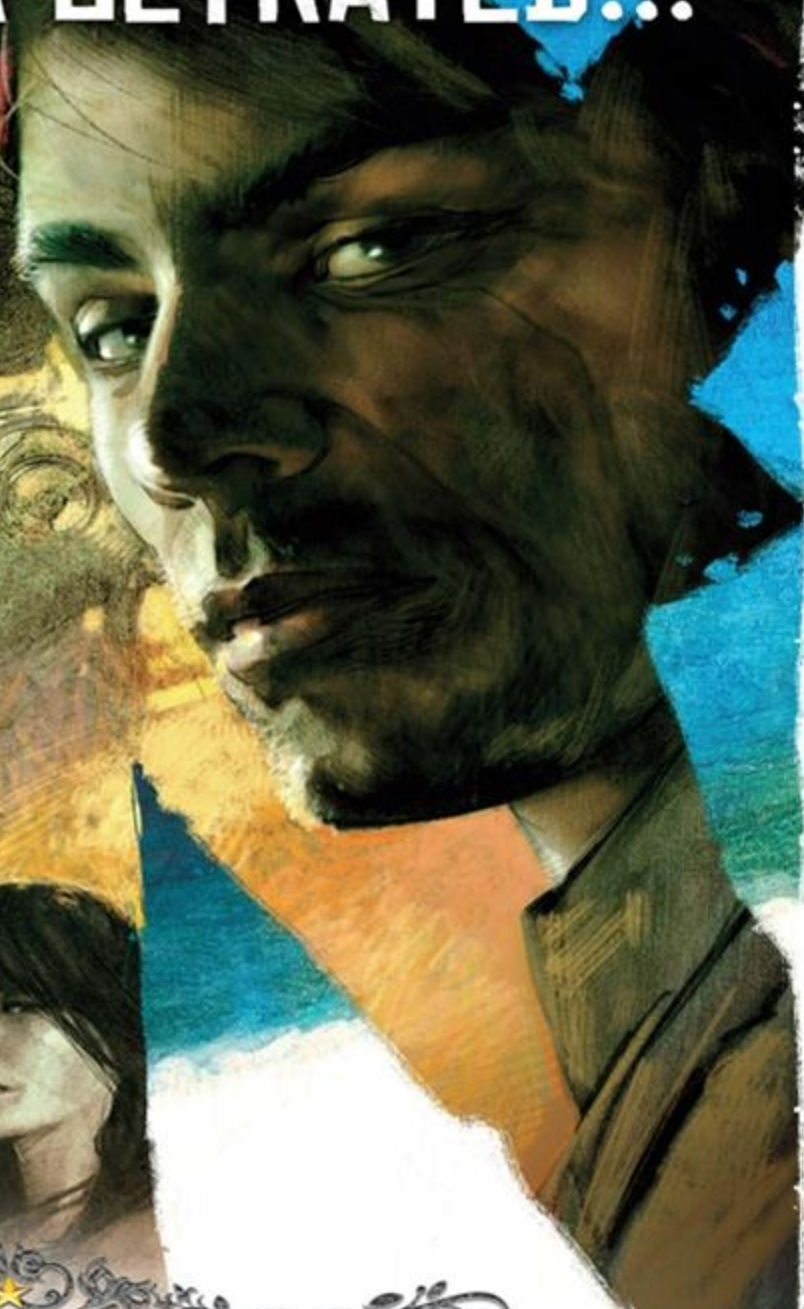


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ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

RYDER ON THE STORM

ISSUE 3

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