

Instant Cowboy: Fat Daisy

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Author's Note: This is a prequel to the short story Instant Cowboy: Just Add Water, which can be found at <http://www.gnorb.net/writing/20070903/instant-cowboy-just-add-water/>. I recommend reading that short story before this, although not doing so should not detract from the overall enjoyment

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After you finish this, go explore their blogs. There's something there for almost everyone.

Chapter 1

“So, the kid falls into the pit of laser vipers, and now he has their laser powers. Isn't that awesome?!” Radley held the copy of *ViperKid* in front of Carlos, telling him the story of the unlikely superhero as the two eight year old boys walked home from the Fat Daisy's comic book shop. They had each gone with five dollars on hand, excited to pick up the new issues of *Ultimate Warlock*, *Condorito 2000*, and *Occam's Razor*. Instead what they found was Fat Daisy, the store's owner, just about giving away a box-full of old comics, fifty of them, for ten dollars. This was a once-in-a-lifetime deal, a box full of collectibles, or so Radley swore.

Radley Cummings was a short, chunky, brown kid whose mother dressed him straight from the pages of the Sears catalog, only three sizes larger, as if she expected him to hurry up and grow into his clothes. Of course, with the way she fed him one would think she was more worried about his girth than his height, and about giving him a size that matched his attitude. He stared at the issue of *ViperKid* with both pride and amazement. This was issue number two, where *ViperKid* first met *SciGuy*, the character who would first become *ViperKid*'s sidekick, and then his archnemesis. He explained this to Carlos like an over excited music teacher would teach pupils not just music, but artistry.

Carlos Andropov, the taller of the two boys, hunched to see what Radely pointed at. He was thin, tall for his age. Cuban and Russian by heritage, he was very light skinned, making the dark Radley look all the darker. Like today, Carlos more often than not wore his older brother's hand-me-downs, usually jeans and hoodies. When he didn't wear those, he

wore their older sister's hand-me-downs, at least those shirts and sweaters he could get away with wearing.

Until today, Carlos hadn't heard of *ViperKid*, or most of the comics Radley had convinced him to combine their money to buy. But, wanting to eventually call himself a true graphic novel connoisseur, and feeling that Radley already was, Carlos let himself be persuaded by the more outwardly excitable of the pair and went along with deal. Only now, he was getting his first real taste of buyer's remorse.

"That's... cool. Yeah, I guess." Carlos wasn't sure what to say. He would have rather been reading this month's edition of *Ultimate Warlock*, where Ulwar the Warlock was about to uncover the true identity of Pugratlion, the villain who killed all of Ulwar students with army of chimeras that attacked Salem School. Rumors were circulating on the Web that Pugratlion was actually Ulwar's brightest pupil, Amethyst Crystala, who Ulwar had expelled from Salem School in issue #73, after she started to create transgenic homunculi in the school's biology lab. Instead, he was about to find out how some ViperKid with laser viper vision would befriend SkyGuy, or whatever his name was.

Already, Carlos had grown bored. He started to walk ahead of Radley when suddenly the boy grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Hey, check this out!" Radley said excitedly. "There's a cuss word in here!"

"Nah ah!" Carlos's eyes snapped back to the comic with sudden renewed interest.

"Yeah, check this out!" Radley pointed pudgy finger at a chat bubble with the words "SciGuy, you fucking fiend!" printed in large, bold lettering.

"Whoa!"

"I told you this was cool!"

"Yeah... Uh... cool..." Then, with unsure voice he added, "You know, I think maybe we shouldn't be reading these..."

Radley stopped, looked at the other boy and raised one eyebrow questioningly.

"Why?"

"Because it has cuss words in it, and my mom says cuss words are bad." Actually, his mom had always told him that cuss words would get him into Hell. Would he go there because he read the word? No, worse, because he bought the comic which contained it?

"They're not that bad. My dad uses them all the time."

"Yeah, and my mom says your dad is a fat drunk." Carlos's eyes went wide and his head snapped towards his friend as his body suddenly tensed. "I'm sorry! I mean, that's what my mom says, but --"

"It's OK," Radley said, shrugging. "My mom says the same thing every time I come back from his house." Radley's father lived almost eight hours away, which is why he only really got to visit every couple of weeks.

Carlos looked at the magazine in Radley's hands then took off his backpack, which held half of what they had bought, put the back on the floor, and opened it. "Let's take these back."

"No way!" Radley grabbed the backpack, closed it, and slung it on his shoulder. He was now carrying the two back packs, one on each shoulder to even him out. "I'll give you five bucks when we get to my house for your half."

"You don't have five dollars," Carlos said.

"I'll get five dollars tomorrow from the tooth fairy, see?" Radley opened his mouth to show off the two missing molars. "They came out this morning, at the same time!"

“But... what if they're sold out by the time you get 'em?”

Radley thought for a second. This was, after all, a very real possibility. It had happened before, last month, in fact, when they missed out on the last copy of *Amey Zing*. Then, it hit him. “Why don't we go back to the store and ask Fat Daisy if she'll save you a copy?”

It sounded like a fair enough idea. Heck, it was a great idea! After all, why wouldn't she hold a copy for a couple of loyal customers? Had they not already spent months' worth of allowance buying comics and game cards from her shop? Carlos agreed, and the boys headed back to Fat Daisy's. He was still a little unsure, but for the most part confident that all this would turn out just fine, and that he wouldn't be sent to Hell -- or worse, be grounded -- for keeping a comic with cuss words in it.

Chapter 2

The outside of the comic book store looked like a roadside newsstand, except this one kept its periodicals in a glass counter, with sample copies lining the back walls. As far as most people cared to know, that's all the place was. Though its actual name was Delirium Tremens, most people just called it Fat Daisy's, the namesake of its charismatic owner, Nancy "Fat Daisy" Dayton. This nickname, originally given to her by her grandfather, had taken such life that the sign above the newsstand now read "Fat Daisy's" in large, cartoony, red letters, and "Delirium Tremens" in smaller letters below that.

Behind the main counter was a door, covered by the latest editions of popular news and gossip magazines. Behind that door was the largest anime and comics store in the city, at least in sales volume, with most of the sales coming from the store's websites. This was due in large part to Fat Daisy's business partner and longtime boyfriend, Peter Langston, a law student at the local university who had a knack for both business and technology. Of course, it wasn't all his doing: collectors made it a point to spread the word due to Fat Daisy's uncanny ability to pick up collectibles no one else seemed able to find. While these were sold both in-house and on the Web, preferential treatment was always given to "folks from meatspace", as Peter sometimes called in-house customers.

Fat Daisy, who was at the moment taking care of the newsstand, saw the two boys walking back. It had only been about an hour since she sold them the stack of comics left to her by Allen Frost's father, who had given his son's comics away as punishment for trying to steal two comics from her shop. Though the value of the unrecoverable merchandise was only five dollars -- the boy wet himself when caught, drenching the two comics hidden in

the front of his pants -- the senior Mr Frost thought this would teach Allen a well deserved lesson. She thought about rummaging through the collection and taking out anything which might actually have some worth, but figured this would likely be just a waste of time. None, after all, were pristine; a quick sale would be best. Nevertheless, he Frost boy had been an avid buyer and the two now walking back had been lucky to grab what they did for as cheap as they had.

Before this year Fat Daisy had been a portly woman, with a round face, and rounder body. Although only in her late twenties, she underwent gastric bypass surgery and had since lost most of the reason for the nickname. To adjust, some people tried calling her Formerly-Fat Daisy, Not-so-Fat Daisy, and even just Daisy. But old habits die hard; nicknames not at all, and the name Fat Daisy stuck. Yet Nancy didn't mind it. In fact, she somewhat enjoyed it, since it often threw people's expectations off, something which usually worked to her advantage.

Despite societal expectations of the lady behind the magazine counter as being rude, dumb and abrasively opinionated, most people were quickly disarmed by Fat Daisy's comforting attitude and a genuine smile which, despite a couple of crooked teeth, was beautiful in a homely sort of way. Her hazel eyes were bright and attentive, and the light brown skin which betrayed her mulatto heritage accented these features all the more. Yet, as anyone who exchanged more than a few words with her would quickly realize, behind those bright eyes and that genial smile was an inquisitive, complicated, and very active mind. Though an initial impression might not reveal it, the woman in charge of Delirium Tremens was nothing short of gifted.

"He won't even eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?" she overheard one of the nearing boys say.

"Who won't eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?" she then asked, grinning widely at them, leaning on the counter, arms crossed under her breasts. "Whoever it is, they sure don't know good food!"

"It's his baby brother," answered Radley, pointing at Carlos. "He won't eat anything and is always crying."

"Oh, I see." Fat Daisy said this with a smile and a nod. "Maybe I should make him one of my special Fruity Peanut Burgers: peanut butter, jelly, banana, and raisins, all inside a toasty croissant."

A laughing "Eww!" came from both boys, each now cringing. Fat Daisy hadn't been joking: she really *did* like the sandwiches. But she made it a point to avoid them, since eating too many as a kid had been one of the causes of her nickname. Still, she just knew these boys didn't know what they were missing: the Fruity Peanut Burger was like eating like trail mix on bread.

"Well then, if not my Fruity Peanut Burgers, what brings you two back?"

The boys explained the situation, how one wanted to keep the comics, but the other really wanted to get the comics he had originally come for, and asked whether she would be willing to hold copies for them.

The graphic novels they wanted her to hold -- specifically *Ultimate Warlock* and *Occam's Razor* -- she knew would sell fast, probably not even lasting the rest of the day. These days, comic book companies were so intensely focused on creating collectibles that they alone determined the number of issues a store was allowed to receive. Any store

found fudging the numbers to get a few extras would lose the right to sell any of that company's titles. This could quickly close a shop down, since other publishers usually followed suit. No inventory, no business. Fat Daisy wasn't about to risk that. For her, waiting a day might mean a day delay in extra shipments, and being two sales short one day because she was holding some for a couple of kids had the potential to snowball into losing twenty sales the next day, since she wouldn't be able to get more until the following day. It didn't help any that this month's issue of *Occam's Razor* was already one of the most sought after in the series, especially because the company which produced them would only do one printing.

"I'm sorry boys, but I can't do that."

As soon as she said this, Carlos looked down, slumped his shoulders, and tried to squeak out an "OK then, thank you," which sounded more like a deflated whimper, while Radley looked at him with guilty surprise. He was about to tell Carlos that he'd get the money today, by this afternoon, when his mom got home. Then Fat Daisy spoke up again.

"But I'll tell you what I can do," she started. The boys snapped their heads up, their faces bright with hope. "I need a few things delivered, and it would really help me out if you boys could do it instead. I'll pay you each a dollar per delivery which you can use to buy the comics you want. That sound good?" The two boys nodded rapidly, each now jumping in jubilant anticipation. "Come inside so we can call your parents and ask them permission, alright?"

The boys walked in the familiar path through the newsstand into the store, past the store's sales counter, and down the center isle of the crowded sales floor. On one side of the

isle were books on learning to read Japanese and on the other were a myriad of mangas. They continued to the back, where the comic book racks for American-style comics were.

Though well lit and mostly modernized, the building's age showed in almost all facets of its design. The building was old, built in the early 1920's, during the height of National Prohibition in the US, and had first served as an illegal drinking and gambling establishment. It was run by the Cassola gangster family from then until the mid-1940's, when the family stopped most of its illegal operations and started business in Las Vegas. Fat Daisy's great-grandfather, Giovanni Innocenti -- who was anything but -- had worked for the Cassolas and worked out a deal to buy the place out when they left town. Though the building housed a few different businesses since then, it had stayed in the family, carrying always the same name.

Carlos and Radley followed Fat Daisy through a door beside the comic book racks labeled "Employees Only", into her small office. In it were a small computer desk and chair, a small maroon couch, and cork board lining along the walls, half of which was covered with papers, pinned and scattered about. The boys, both simultaneously nervous and excited, sat on the couch as Fat Daisy called their parents. Radley crossed his fingers while Carlos closed his eyes and under his breath prayed to God that his mother would let him do this. God, it seemed, came through for both of them.

After getting approval from their parents, Fat Daisy had the two boys go back into the store while she sorted the packages they were to deliver.

When the boys left the office, Fat Daisy pulled the desk away from the wall and opened a door hidden behind it which led to a secret room. The room, which served now as a hiding place for Daisy's miscellaneous items and valuables, had been originally

constructed to hide alcohol and cash in case of a police raid. The walls were thick, and built so that it was impossible for dogs to sniff through at whatever might have been in there. Paolo "The Sheik" Cassola, the building's first owner, had found this a particularly handy addition, as had Nancy "Fat Daisy" Dayton.

Chapter 3

Outside, the boys wandered about, looking through the different comics. Not wanting to spoil his eventual *Ultimate Warlock* experience, Carlos instead started reading a copy of the latest *Battlestar Galactica*, while Radley checked out the issue of *Occam's Razor* he wanted to buy. In this issue, Detective Occam traveled through time so he could discover the whereabouts of a petty criminal who had suddenly become the city's biggest threat -- and Occam's father.

Before long, Peter Langston, who had been restocking calligraphy books on nearby shelves, noticed the boys. "You boys need help?" In-store reading of the comics was discouraged, since it often meant that a sale wasn't made.

The boys turned around, and tried not to laugh as they figured out why this grown man -- a man they had both grown to respect because, after all, he worked at a comic book shop! -- was dressed in a funny hat, white shirt, suspenders, and even funnier looking shorts.

"What," asked Peter in a faux-German accent, "don't you love my lederhosen?" He opened his arms wide, turning slightly to the right, striking a presenter's pose. The boys' only response was to stand there in gawking, awkward silence. Peter relaxed the pose and tried to explain: "In case you're wondering, I'm dressed like this because I'm participating in the Oktoberfest festival tonight. Now, as I said --"

Fat Daisy opened the door to the office more harshly than she had intended, surprising everyone including herself, and walked out carrying a stack of thick, brown

envelopes. She put the envelopes on the ground and said "Alright, boys, here are the packages I need delivered."

Peter looked at her and she nodded, telling him in one look that the boys were doing some work for her then got back to stocking the remaining shelves just as Cherryh and Poul, Delirium Tremens's resident Maine Coon cats, decided the shelves looked better without any pesky books blocking the view. "After all," Peter said, talking to no one in particular and pretending to read the cats' minds, "why would people look at a book when they could instead look at us?"

Radley picked up one of the packages, squeezed it a bit, tried to weigh it with his arms. After a few seconds, he said excitedly, "I know what this is!"

"You do, now?" Fat Daisy gave the boy a look that was both quizzical and intense.

Both boys took a step back, and Radley continued, less excitedly than before. "Yeah... uh... My dad gets these all the time. They're magazines of..." and he added with a hushed tone, "naked ladies." The boy noticed the lady's face relaxing a bit. "He doesn't think I know, but I found a bunch of them one day in his closet."

"Well now, you know you shouldn't be looking at those. And you definitely," she said this with special emphasis, "definitely shouldn't be looking at what's in these."

Fat Daisy gave each boy one package. As she did, she said "Now, when you're walking through town, you'll each have to go your own way. No one should see you boys together, not while you're each carrying a package. Drop the package in the mail slot or in the mailbox. Don't knock at the door. It's fine if they see you, but try not to be seen. If they don't have a mail slot or mail box, or if the package doesn't fit, leave it on the front door, unless there are people around. Then just bring the package back."

She showed each where he needed to go on a map, then each started off.

Within twenty minutes both boys had returned, each panting, after running to and from their destinations. Although Radley was a pudgy, he was still faster as the slimmer Carlos, and picked the further addresses for that reason; Carlos was just happy to do be making money. Every time they came back, Fat Daisy would give them something small to eat, usually a German food or snack with an unpronounceable name and a bit of drink. After a few minutes rest, they would go on to their delivery.

Chapter 4

In four hours, the boys had delivered all but one of the packages. Radley had earned seven dollars while Carlos earned eight, since his addresses were closer and usually easier to find. Fat Daisy said it was alright if they wanted to call it a day, but the boys decided to try again to deliver the last package, this time together. Fat Daisy was at first apprehensive, but was then fine with it: her biggest concern had been to make sure no clients would know who the other clients were.

Radley had tried to deliver this last package a couple of hours ago, but the guy -- Mr Funland, the package said, though the boy thought that no one could possibly have a name like "Funland" -- didn't have a mail slot or a mail box, at least not one he could see, and his next door neighbors were apparently having some sort of party. Mr Funland was the only person on the deliveries list who lived in a house, and was just a few blocks from where Radley and his mother lived. Radley remembered seeing the man on occasion and on the way to his house described him to Carlos as "an old, rich guy with a nice car." He was sure the man had never seen him, but the boy had a presentiment that he shouldn't let Funland know he was now the man's delivery boy.

"I need to stop by my house before we go on," said Radley as they neared both his and Funland's house. "I really have to take a pee." Carlos felt the same, so he agreed.

Once at Radley's place, they saw that his mom wasn't home. Radley told Carlos to go to the bathroom first, he could wait.

While Carlos was in the bathroom, Radley looked at the package. It certainly looked like there should be magazines in there, but like all the others, it felt different than

magazines, lighter, like a book with thick pages. Earlier he had tried opening Mr Mortimer Mouse's package, but stopped when the tape started to rip the packaging. This time he would be more careful, and had access to tape, just in case.

Carlos stepped out of the bathroom, he started to tell Radley it was his turn, but stopped when he saw the other boy hunched over the other package.

"What are you doing?" asked Carlos.

The other boy glanced at him then focused his attention back on the package.

"Finding out what's in here," he finally answered.

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

"I mean, didn't you already know what was in here? Doesn't your dad already get these types of magazines?"

"I don't think these are magazines." Radley picked up the package and shook it. It didn't bend like magazines, and it seemed too light to be this bulky. After a few shakes, a light rattling came from within.

"That's weird." Carlos said.

"Yeah, none of the others rattled."

"Wait... you checked out the others?"

"Just one, but I didn't open it." Radley put the package down and unwrapped it. At first, it just looked like a couple of hardcover books, each decorated with drawings of bears and titled *Bears Across the World*. The boy opened one of the books. Surely enough, the book was about bears: pictures of bears, information about bears, and about what bears could be found where. He flipped the pages. "It's just a book about --"

Before he could finish the sentence, the book opened to a section where a large hole had been cut in the middle, and now had a clear, plastic box jammed in it. Inside the box were what looked like six small, clear plastic containers, none thicker than a pen, and something that looked like a cigarette.

Carlos knelt next to Radley to get a closer look. "What do you think this is?" he asked, forgetting how much trouble they would get in if Fat Daisy found out they had opened Mr Funland's package.

"I don't know." Radley looked at the box curiously. Although he was afraid now he didn't want to show it. He opened the box, picked up the cigarette, and trying to lighten the mood, he held it between his index and middle finger. He brought it to his lips, pretending to smoke it.

"What are you supposed to do with this?" asked Carlos. He was now more curious than afraid.

"Smoke it, I guess." He felt the plastic around his fingers. Weren't these usually made of paper? Then, with sudden life he added, "Hey, you know what? This one time I saw this movie where a guy had another strapped down to a chair and took a cigarette and burned him with it." As if to reenact the movie scene, he grabbed the other boy's arm and pressed the tobacco end of the cigarette to his arm. "Answer me!" he yelled, in mock-seriousness.

As soon as the cigarette had touched Carlos's arm, something in the thing stung him. "Ouch!" he yelled, pulling his arm away and grabbing at it. He pulled up his hand, and saw a small bit of blood on both the arm and his palm. "Why'd you do that for, you jerk?!"

"Are you OK?" Radley dropped the cigarette and moved towards the other boy. The cigarette was broken by the impact of the fall.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Let's just pack this stuff up and drop it off at the fat guy's place.”

The boys quickly packed the broken cigarette back into the book, carefully re-wrapped the package, and ran to Funland's place. Both were surprised when Carlos outran the usually faster Radley, especially since the boy didn't look winded when they got there.

Chapter 5

Walking back to Delirium Tremens, Radley asked Carlos how he felt. An emphatic "Great!" was his reply. "My arm doesn't hurt anymore." With wide eyed excitement, he turned to the other boy and grabbed his shoulders. "And I'm gonna get a bunch of comics! I'm getting *Ultimate Warlock*, and *Condorito 2000*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Nemesis*, and *Occam's Razor*!"

"But wait, you only have eight dollars."

"No, you still owe me those five bucks, remember?"

Radley looked at Carlos as if he had just slapped him. Sure, he remembered. When they started, all Radley could think about was how many packages he could deliver. Now that he had eight dollars, now that he had worked all day to earn *his* money, he didn't want to give it up. "Hey, if I hadn't told you to come back we wouldn't have made any extra money."

"Well yeah, but the other comics are pretty much yours anyway. I mean, I don't really like *ViperKid*. I just wanted to get *Ultimate Warlock* and *Occam's Razor*."

"So, then, just get those. Besides, you bought the other comics, too, you know."

"Yeah, because you forced me --"

"I didn't force you!"

"-- and I can't keep them because they have cuss words in them."

"So what, your mom will never find out --"

"It's not just about my mom..."

"--you stupid momma's boy."

In an instant, Carlos's face went from beige to bright red. Faster than he could realize, his hand balled into a fist and flew straight onto Radley's fat cheek. Within seconds, both boys were on the ground, and Carlos had Radley pinned between his legs, delivering punch after punch at his head. Then, in a moment of blind rage, Carlos picked up a nearby rock that must have been about the size of his hand, and was about to hit the bleeding boy under him with it. Radley put his arms up over his face and yelled, "I'm sorry! Please don't kill me!"

Carlos stopped, rock above his head, as if thinking whether or not he should continue the act. But then how would he explain to anyone what happened to Radley? What would he do with his body? Could he just leave him in the street and run back to Fat Daisy's? Wouldn't Fat Daisy ask about him? But if he told her that Radley went home, and that he would pick up the money for both, then he could hide him, get his money, and might not even get in trouble.

As a background to his thoughts, Carlos heard Radley crying, rambling away, saying anything he could to stop the beating. "I'm sorry I called you a momma's boy... I'm sorry I stung you with the cigarette...You can have all the money, I don't care! Just please don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

Carlos suddenly felt dizzy. He threw the rock behind Radley's head, got up, and again started walking towards Fat Daisy's.

Radley got up slowly, first on his elbows, then rolling over on to his hands and knees. Buttons had been torn from his shirt, and blood dripped from his mouth to the floor, his teeth having done most of the damage. He finally got up, opened his mouth to speak, and saw the other boy fall.

After a second of hesitation, he ran over to Carlos, but then stopped a few feet from him, not wanting to get too close.

"Hey, you OK?" he asked. "Carlos?"

No answer.

He looked around to see if anyone was near. No one was, so he tore a branch from a small, nearby tree and tried poking at the now unconscious boy. He wanted to make sure Carlos wasn't dead, but wanted to be able to run if he suddenly went crazy again.

Still no answer.

Radely dropped the stick, moved towards the boy, and shoved at him to wake him.

Chapter 6

“Directory not found, please try again,” Peter said in a mocking voice, hanging up the phone. He had tried futilely for the past half hour to find the phone number of the Oktoberfest Shelter. Even the 411 directory services couldn't find the information line.

Fat Daisy walked out of her office, hands-free set attached to one ear. She was laughing and speaking loudly. “Yes, and remember when her husband tried to tell us 'She prefers the taste of beer to beets' ... Yeah, well, he likes his ham sliced thinly!” More laughter. “Oh, I remember, alright. I was, like, how could he fit that all on one fork?!” Fat Daisy's laughter grew even more ruckus, enough so she didn't hear the frantic Radley until he was already inside Delirium Tremens.

“Miss Daisy, Miss Daisy!” the boy yelled. “We need help! Miss Daisy!”

Immediately, Fat Daisy cut off the phone call with a quick “I'll call you back,” and ran to the frantic boy now standing at the door. “What happened?” she asked. She was now joined by Peter, who said something about it being good that there were no customers at the moment. “And what happened to you. My God, you're all bloody--”

“Carlos fell and I can't wake him up!” The boy was wide eyed, panting and in tears.

“Where?” Peter asked.

“On the way back here from Mr Funland's house.”

“Mr Funland?” Peter looked at Fat Daisy, as if to ask her who Mr Funland was.

“Never mind that,” she answered him. She turned to Radley and said, “Take me to him,” as she grabbed the boy's arm, and ran into the car. Peter grabbed and moistened some paper towels then joined them.

A few minutes later, they found the boy at about the same place Radley had left him. He wasn't lying down on the sidewalk anymore, but sitting on the curb, with his head between his knees and his arms crossed over his head. Daisy quickly parked the car near the boy. All three got out and ran towards him.

"Carlos, are you OK?" She tried to sound calm.

"Yeah," Carlos said. His voice was barely more than a grunt.

"Let me take a look at you," she said.

The boy raised his head. No marks. She was already suspecting the boys had fought, but if that was the case, then why wasn't Carlos more hurt?

"Let's get you over to my place to check you out. Can you walk?"

The boy stood up with a bit of help from Peter, who then started walking him towards the car. Radley stood back. Fat Daisy noticed then asked, "Did you two get into a fight?"

"No... well, yeah. I mean, he just got crazy and started hitting me."

She knew the boys well enough to know that if someone were to start a fight, it would have been Radley, not Carlos. But then maybe she hadn't known the boys as well as she thought. "It's always the quiet ones," she said to herself. Then, to Radley she said, "We'll talk more about that later. Now come on, get in the car."

Chapter 7

Once back at Delirium Tremens, Fat Daisy took Carlos to the back office. Peter stayed in the front of the store, watching out for customers and cleaning up Radley behind the shop's sales counter.

In the office, Fat Daisy laid the boy down on the couch. "Now, I want you to rest here. Here's some water and a few snacks for you if you're hungry. Eat and drink as much as you feel like, alright?"

The boy nodded then closed his eyes, and Fat Daisy stepped out of the office.

"How's it looking?" she asked Peter, walking towards the sales counter.

"Looks OK, though he looks like he got into a fight." Peter said. Then he added, "And I'm out of peroxide, so I'll have to run to the store and get some." He walked out of the store and into the newsstand, just in time to greet a customer.

"Go, I'll take it from here." She told him, and then turned to the boy. "Did you two get into a fight?"

"Sort of... yeah," Radley answered.

"Tell me the whole story."

Radley explained to her how they first went to his house to use the bathroom. Then he told her about how they opened the package, though he omitted why exactly the package had been opened in the first place, or that it had been his idea. He then told her about the fight, about how Carlos wanted his money and how he had beat him up to get it.

Fat Daisy went pale. Her next words were slow, deliberate. "Did Carlos swallow any of the plastic containers, or did he play with the... uh, cigarette?"

“He didn’t swallow anything... but I sort of...” the boy’s answer halted, then started again. “Actually, I... I saw this movie once where a guy put a cigarette on another guy and I thought it'd be funny to do it on him. I didn't think it would hurt him, though, because it wasn't on. We didn't smoke or nothing, I promise! But after I poked him he started to bleed.”

Fat Daisy's eyes grew wide as she drew a deep, nasal breath. She was afraid, and Radley could tell.

“Will he be OK?” the boy finally asked.

“Fine,” she said uncomfortably. “He'll be fine.” She tried to put on a smile for him, but it didn't last long. She got up and headed quickly towards the office. “Just wait there until Peter gets back, alright?”

“Alright,” the boy answered, though by then she was almost in the other side of the store, her mind already on what she would need to do. The boys didn't know much, that much was certain. Still, they knew enough. What if they told anyone what happened?

In the office, she noticed that Carlos was still lying down. He had drunk some water, which was good, but hadn't touched the snacks. She pulled the desk back and opened the hidden door. From a small cubicle locker inside it, she pulled out a syringe and a blood sampling kit.

“Alright now, Carlos, I'm going to make sure you're OK. But I'm going to have to draw some blood, alright?”

The boy, still lying on the couch with eyes closed, mumbled something, which she took to mean he understood. Not really, but it didn't help to think otherwise.

Her heart raced and her hands became cold. She wrapped the boys arm with a rubber band just above the elbow, cleaned the skin on the crook of the arm with a small alcohol pad then drew a bit of the boy's blood. She looked down and noticed a small scab on the bottom of his forearm. She guessed this was where the other boy had pricked him with the stint injector, what they, like the kids called "the cigarette", since that's what the injector had been camouflaged to look like.

After she finished drawing the blood, she put a sample of it onto a tester strip and waited. If it turned white, stints were present.

Stints, Fat Daisy had always thought, were an interesting drug. They were the drug of choice for white collar professionals and people in high-demand jobs: doctors, lawyers, and -- luckily for her -- police officers. On the street -- or rather, in the offices -- it was sometimes called "caffeine-plus", but most people knew it as "Instant Cowboy." The drug gave users the ability to work at maximum performance for days -- a long stint -- without the need for sleep. In addition, stints increased the user's intelligence, which is one of the reasons professionals in intellectually demanding positions were so attracted to it. The intelligence gains only lasted until the user started to abuse them, however. After that, the user would lose the intelligence gains, as well the ability to sleep. The fact that stints were highly addictive usually meant that occasional users became junkies, fast. Good for business, bad for them. Once a user became a junkie, stopping stints cold turkey would result in one hell of a crash, usually a coma. Users, especially first time users, also sometimes became overtly violent, one of the reasons the drug was popular with folks at fight clubs.

Although Fat Daisy was a small-time stint dealer -- she had only done a couple of million in sales since she started a few years back -- she was the biggest connection the Cassola family had in town. Stint was the only drug she really bothered with, since the fact that she had managed to stay well under the radar was in no small part due to its prevalence in law enforcement, an issue everyone knew about but no one wanted to tackle. And she did her part to make sure the right people never looked, at least not at her.

Even then, she was extraordinarily good at covering her tracks. Still, she got all the help she could get. And it helped that no one in town knew the supplier. She had always used third parties to do her work, which in large part contributed to her being as backed up as she was. This is why she had decided -- without prior planning, really -- to enlist the help of the two young boys now at the shop.

But now, with one of the boys sick and the other looking like he had been hit by a ton of bricks, she wondered whether she would be able to keep this all quiet. The cops would bust her for this, sure. But it wasn't the cops she was worried about, since her biggest customers wouldn't be too keen at cutting their source off. It was her suppliers, the Cassolas, she really feared. If she were caught, she wouldn't even make it to trial before she was offed.

She waited for a long minute then saw a white dot. She knew that wasn't much, and let out a sigh of relief. Yeah, stint was present, but in small enough quantity that the body shouldn't have a problem getting rid of them. This boy had gotten a small dose, though. It was just large enough to mess him up a bit, but not enough to do any real damage. After some sleep, and a couple of days' worth of headaches, he would be fine. In fact, it's likely he

wouldn't remember any of this incident: first time users often forgot their first experience, though the results of it would usually bring them back for more.

It was the other boy, Radley, who now concerned her. How much did he really know? Could she count on him not to tell what he saw? For how long? She thought about the other boy, Carlos, and wondered whether she could do the same to Radley, inject him so that maybe he'd forget what happened. But no, it was too risky. Too little and he'd remember everything, as the kid now in her office still might. Too much and he'd be dead, something she certainly didn't need.

She thought for a minute about what she could do.

Peter walked back into the shop, put the peroxide and some bandages next to Radley then headed back out to the newsstand. "Hey, Nance!" he yelled. "I got the stuff and put it next to the kid. Going out to take care of customers." Rush hour, their second busiest time of day for the newsstand, was on. Being busy with the boys was no reason to close.

As Peter left, Daisy walked out of her office and towards the boy. "Alright, I'll finish up here then," she said to Peter. She grabbed the peroxide, put some on a clean napkin and began dabbing at the boy's wounds, most of which had already started to scab. She knelt next to him and asked, "You feeling better?"

"Yeah," Radley said.

"Good. Tell you what: I've been thinking that instead of just paying you boys cash, how about I give you two free comics a week from now on for the work you did today."

"Really?" the boy asked, eyes wide and unbelieving.

"Really. Except for the fight, you two did good today. But you have to make me a promise."

“What?”

“You have to promise me you won't tell anyone about what happened today with Mr Funland's package, alright? That stuff was private. It was his medicine. You boys shouldn't have opened it. And because it's private, you shouldn't tell anyone about it. But because you told me what you did, and because you did such a good job today, I'll give you boys two free comic books a week from now on. But you have to promise you won't tell anyone what was in Mr Funland's package, alright? If you do, no more comics.”

The boy nodded with full understanding. She wasn't giving him comics for just the job, she was also giving him comics to stay quiet. The package was private, after all. So what if Mr Funland smoked? It wasn't like it was illegal or anything. And the other stuff was just medicine.

But then he thought of Carlos, and the fight. He couldn't talk about the fight, could he? His mom might understand, but his dad would wonder why he hadn't fought back and won? What about all those karate classes he had taken? And could they talk about stopping home? What about --

“Will Carlos be alright?” Radley asked in a sudden, electrified realization.

“He'll be alright,” Fat Daisy answered him in a slow, reassuring voice. “He just needs some sleep. He was just tired after all that running around you boys did. That's why he started to get angry at you. He was just tired.” She nodded as she said this.

Radley wasn't so sure he believed that, but he got the message. Carlos didn't exactly look tired when he was about to kill him for five dollars. But then he had passed out, so maybe Fat Daisy was right, maybe he was just tired. Or maybe it was Mr Funland's

medicine that made him tired. Still, he knew he probably shouldn't be hanging around Carlos much anymore, not if he got like this.

After a few minutes, Radley decided to head home. Fat Daisy gave him his money -- eight dollars, though he insisted that five of it go to the still sleeping Carlos -- and allowed him to take two comics. He put these into one of the backpacks and left, taking both backpacks with him.

Half an hour later, Carlos came to. He couldn't remember much about what had happened after he left the shop the last time, and he had a slight headache. Fat Daisy told the boy he had gotten tired and into a small fight with Radley, but then took a bump on the head. A few minutes later, she told him he should go home. She gave him the thirteen dollars -- five of which had come from Radley, she told him -- and allowed him to pick up a couple of comics, after making the same promise Radley had. Carlos then took the last copy of *Ultimate Warlock* and a copy of *Condorito 2000*, and asked if he could get a ride home. Peter, who had just closed up the magazine stand portion of *Delirium Tremens*, offered to take him.

After Peter and Carlos left, Fat Daisy sat and thought for a while about the deal she had made with the boys. She knew that kids couldn't be trusted to keep secrets for too long, which is why she felt at peace with what she would do next. When something went wrong, after all, someone had to take the fall, and she had made a career out of making sure it wasn't her.

Chapter 8

It had been a month since Fat Daisy started giving Carlos and Radley free comics for their delivery work that day. Although Radley didn't know it, Carlos had since been making deliveries for Fat Daisy on weekends and after half-days at school, all of which he did with the understanding that he would be paid in either money or comics, whatever he felt like, at the end of the month. This was in addition to the two-a-week bonus he got for not telling anyone he was delivering medicine for Fat Daisy. Even his mother, who only knew he was doing some odds-and-ends work at Fat Daisy's. (His mother, of course, had been beaming with pride after she found out her son got a job.)

"Hey, Nance, check this out!" Peter bellowed. He had spent most of the day at the newsstand sales counter, reading the newspaper. After about 9:30 A.M. things usually quieted down enough for him to catch up on the news. Today's paper left him wide-eyed.

"What is it?" Fat Daisy yelled back. Nancy Dayton, who now wore a ring which told the world she would soon become Mrs Nancy Langston, had spent the entire morning putting together packages for the Internet orders which were supposed to be by five o'clock. "Shipped by the end of business day," was one of her promises. Doing this not only pleased their customers, it also cut down on the number of cancellations.

Peter walked in, newspaper folded to feature a small story on page B-3. He put the paper in front of her and started reading: "Police have arrested Plantation resident Rhea Cummings on narcotics possession and distribution charges following an investigation which revealed her to be at the center of a massive drug ring. Police first began investigating Ms Cummings following an investigation into the dealings of convicted child

pornographer Uriel "Mr Funland" Franco." He pulled the paper back and asked, "Isn't that Radley's mom?"

"She sure is," Fat Daisy said in a disbelieving tone. She grabbed the paper and continued reading. Peter said something to her just as he returned to the newsstand, but she didn't catch it. She only stared at the paper. And then she smiled.

Chapter 9

Later that day, Carlos came into the shop to tell Fat Daisy the news that Radley was going to be moving with his dad.

"I heard," she said. "How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know. Sad, I guess, though we really haven't hung out much since after that day."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"That's OK. I think he'll like living with his dad, even though my mom says his dad is a fat drunk. Still, he said he likes it over there. His dad lets him do pretty much whatever he wants."

"Is that so? Well, I'll tell you what: I won't let you do whatever you want, but I'll let you grab whatever ten comics you want. That is what you're here to do, right? Not just here to give me bad news, I hope." She tipped her head towards the boy and stared at him from the top of her eyes, finishing the statement with a smile.

Carlos nodded and ran to the back of the store to pick what he wanted. So long as the boy didn't go around poking into the packages, everything would be just fine.

To be continued...